Anthropology 350: Language, Ethnicity & Social Stratification

[Man]: Different languages, different worlds.

[Professor Nancy McKee]: Well, hello again. This is segment number eight and it’s a Friday where I am. Who knows where it is where you are, so I’m feeling very chipper, very glad to be doing this. So let’s take a look at our contents for today and what we’re going to be talking about. Okay, were going to be talking about societal segmentation. That is, different groupings within society and how they relate to language. Usually, this kind of topic is referred to as language, ethnicity, and social stratification. We already know what language is. Ethnicity has to do with the specific cultural or geographical or racial group you belong to, and social stratification has to do with the way an individual society breaks people up. And I’ll talk about that here in just a minute. We’re also going to talk about Black English. We’re going to talk about what it is, how it got to be the way it is, and I’ll mention a few things about its structure, but I think your textbook’s very good on that topic. And then I want to talk about pidgins and creoles, which if you don’t know anything about them, just look like—just collections of sounds. But they’re interesting kinds of languages, and I want to talk about how they get to be what they are, and all this will lead us into our next video in which we’ll talk about the two articles that are assigned for this section. One of those two articles is pretty tough to read, and I think it’ll be helpful if you have me going through it not only in your course guide but also on the video.

Alright, so let’s start—let’s just begin—let’s just take a look at the first thing that chapter six shows you. As I remember, the first specific data in that chapter have to do with pronunciation of particular phones in North India—in Caliper in North India. What your author is showing you is the same kind of stuff that we were looking at ourselves when we were taking a look at Labov’s work in New York City. She’s showing us how the pronunciations of particular phones and particular words distinguishes untouchables. Untouchables are people in India who are below—who are outside of the cast system. The term itself, and the treatment of untouchables, has been greatly altered by government regulations. Well, at least the regulations alter the way people are supposed to behave toward untouchables, but in the countryside, in fact, untouchables still have pretty terrible lives and are cut off from a great many of the services, like well water, that other people in the community may take for granted. So even though this is an exotic culture to us, we’re looking at exactly the same phenomenon we’ve looked at before, except that this time, it looks crazy. We look at those collection of words. We have the pronunciation of sweepers. Sweepers are a group within the larger untouchable cast. We look at sweepers and we look at other people and we see that sweepers pronounce certain words somewhat differently. And really, we’re just talking about one vowel. And we say to ourselves, “So? So what? So they pronounce one vowel a tiny bit differently. So what, who cares?” The reason that I think this is such a great example is that when we look at a system that we don’t know anything about, and we look at the pronunciation of one tiny little speech sound, and we see that it’s considered an indicator of extraordinarily low social status, it seems crazy to us. On the other hand, if we look at the pronunciation of some other insignificant phone within our own system, then we can understand that. That makes perfect sense to us. And if we compare our system to the Indian system, we realize how completely insignificant all of this is, and yet they’re tremendously
important for assigning social status. When you were a child, you may remember your mother or your father hassling you not to drop your Gs, and they may have said, “Oh, it makes you sound trashy,” or something like that, to say goin’. “I’m goin’ out now, ma,” instead of, “I’m going out.” Is that a big deal, whether you pronounce one phone or another one very much like it? It seems important to us, it seems to us an indicator of undesirable status. But when we look at the same phenomenon in another culture, we see—not that it’s not powerful, but we see how trivial the considerations are on which the notion of trashy or low status are based. That’s why I really like that example, and that’s one of the things I like best about this book, is that your author always remembers to give us plenty of examples from languages and cultures other than English.

Okay, now, in order to understand what is going on here—maybe I should’ve talked about this first—we need to know the difference between class and cast. They’re really pretty similar, except one’s a lot tighter than the other. All state level societies, like the one we live in, like India—like India four, five thousand years. Any state level society has what anthropologists call social stratification. That’s, society is ranked or graded according to several different criteria. Originally, probably, the one criterion was occupation and in India, cast is still primarily based on occupation. What a social stratum, a social level, is is a grouping of people who are set off from other people in society in some ways, but not in others, and whose access to the good stuff in society has to do with their particular place in it. Okay, so people who belong to a high social stratum, a high social level—that’s all stratum is, is Latin for level—people who belong to a high social level have enormous access to the good stuff, to goods, services, you know, food, shelter, fancy china, whatever it is you think is important in your society. People at the bottom have very restricted access to the good things in society. Originally, as I said, the basis for this was probably occupation. In India, it’s still primarily occupation, and those different ranks, those different strata are named and they’re called casts. Casts—there are four named casts and under that, under those named casts, a whole mass of people who do the least desirable things that society wants done, and they’re to a great extent beyond the cast system all together. Now, this might sound to you a lot like the social class system, and it is, in fact, the social class system probably derives from a dead cast system. The difference—I guess there are two big differences—the first is that a cast is named and acknowledged and everybody says, “Oh yeah, he’s a member of the x cast.” People might jockey a little bit within those casts—there actually—within those four, there are actually hundreds of kind of sub casts, and people might jockey around within them. But casts are named and identified by everybody. It’s very clear what cast someone belongs to. The other big thing about cast is that you can’t get out of it. You can never get out of it. No matter how rich you are or poor you are, no matter how rich you become or how poor you become, you can never leave. You can never join a higher cast, you can never sink to a lower cast. Unless you do something so horrible that they throw you out of the system altogether, and then you become untouchable. Okay, so that’s how casts differ from classes. Classes are much more—well they’re much mushier. They’re much less clearly defined and they’re not clearly named. I couldn’t say to you, “Hi, my name is Nancy McKee. I’m a member of the x class,” because, oh, well, it’s hard to say. You may disagree with me. By income, I might belong to the very bottom of the middle class, maybe the top of the lower class. By education, I might be somewhat higher. But classes are just kind of a bigger mess. We’ve got them and we have criteria by which we judge them, but people just never agree very well about
what a social class is. So that’s one way in which class differ from cast. The other thing is that class mobility is possible. We like to believe class mobility is very common. It isn’t. Mostly people marry within the same social class they’re born into and they die there too, but it certainly is possible. So that’s the other big difference. One of the things we’re going to be talking about in this segment and the next segment, or this episode and the next episode—it makes me feel as though we’re running some kind of adventure film if I talk about episodes—is social class and how it reflects language use and also how language use helps to perpetuate social class, which is something you might not think too much about.

Okay. The other thing we’re going to talk about is ethnicity. That is, how the ethnic group you belong to is reflected in the way you talk. And also how you talk maintains ethnic boundaries. I think your book does a pretty wonderful job talking about social class variation among European groups. Basically what it points out is that syntactic elaboration, that is, syntactic complexity, grammatical complexity, of language is greater among higher social classes. It’s simpler among lower social classes. And also that there is more difference in the speech of upper class speakers than lower class speakers according to the situations they find themselves in. That’s, upper—and upper middle class speakers—are inclined to vary the complexity of the way they’re talking according to the situations they find themselves in and according to the people they’re talking to, much more than lower class speakers do. You can think about why that might be the case. I don’t think there’s a lot of explanation. I don’t think people have thought carefully about why that’s likely to be the case. You can think yourself about what reasons might cause that kind of thing. You also might try to think about your own social class and the way you use language. As I said before, Americans, and other people as well, tend to overestimate the height of their social class. That is, people tend to feel they belong to a higher social class than other observers do. So you can guess what social class you belong to, not that there’s any divinely correct answer, but think about it. Think about the extent to which you vary the complexity of what you’re saying yourself. Think about other people you know, make a guess as to their social class, and then see if you can gauge the extent to which they alter the complexity of the way they talk. When you’re thinking about social class, what kinds of issues, what kind of phenomena are you going to consider? Income? That’s a good one, especially in the United States. Occupation? What if you’re a garage mechanic and you own your own shop and you’re the best for miles around and people come to you with all their complex automotive problems and you make a pile of money? And then think about—in fact, I know a guy—I don’t know him, I have an uncle who worked for a guy like that. He actually invented some magical kind of automotive repair element and became a multimillionaire and hired all kinds of domestic servants to take care of his grounds, to protect him. He actually had a body guard. His body guard was my uncle. He had housekeepers and cooks and nannies for his children. Did he belong to the upper class? Well, I don’t know. What about my friend Jocelyne’s aunt? She was born into a very, very, very rich New England family, but unfortunately the very rich New England family forgot to protect its investments and pretty soon, they were a formerly very rich New England family, now scraping along on about, I don’t know, fifty thousand dollars a year. And it’s hard to pay private school bills on fifty thou a year. Were they members of the upper class? Their income certainly didn’t qualify them. So, there’s more involved than income. There’s also occupation. There’s also education. There’s also family history. Think about all of those things before you assume that everybody who can pay
the mortgage and keep ahead of the bills belongs to the middle class. And then think about language use. Ask yourself if you can detect differences in language use among your friends that you could say has something to do with social class, and would you find that part of that difference might have something to do with syntactic complexity—that’s, how complex the grammar of people’s speech is. Another thing, of course, you can think about is the issue of lexicon or vocabulary. I don’t know why linguists always say lexicon and never say vocabulary, but they do. Do you notice when you talk to people that you change your vocabulary according to the situation you’re in? Well, that’s all nifty little things that you can do while you’re doing your daily chores. The wonderful thing about linguistics, you can take it anywhere.

I guess what I’d really like to do now is to talk about an issue that has something to do with class and cast. Some people argue that in the United States, race acts as a cast. That’s, that there are very, very few situations in which people move beyond the limits of their race. That’s, they marry within their race, they die within their race, that it’s in an unbridgeable gulf, an unbridgeable barrier. But we don’t need to worry about that right now. I want to move from class and cast, except that you want to keep this in the back of your heads, to the issue of race. Anthropologist don’t like to use the word race, it makes them very tense. They don’t mind talking about the race of non-human animals, but when people start talking about race with respect to human beings, people quit really talking about something that has a biological basis. All a race is is a group of organisms that customarily mate within that group, so that’s all a race is. But it gets very mixed up in most modern countries, and certainly in the United States. It gets all kinds of mixed up with social and cultural issues. So does it seem odd to you that if you have one great-grandparent who came from Africa, and all the rest who came from Europe, that people consider you black? And people say, “Well, it’s a racial issue.” Anyway, you see why it’s such a messy term and why anthropologists are very leery of using it and in general just don’t. Anthropologists in the kind of conversation we’re about to have now are in general more inclined to talk about an ethnic group than a racial group.

So I want to talk about Black English, but in order to talk about Black English, I have to start way back, before there were any Africans in the New World—the New World being North and South America. And what I really need to do first is to talk about two kinds of linguistic systems. We will end up with Black English. This is a long run, but the slide’s pretty good, so it’s not a short slide. It’s a wonderful slide. I want to talk about these two kinds of language groups, okay? One of them is called a pidgin, okay? And the other one’s called a creole. First, I’m going to tell you how you get a pidgin. Alright, now there are lots and lots of situation in the world where people who speak different languages come together for particular purposes. And this has been true presumably since the beginning of time, since the beginning of humans who talked. You might come together—actually, the most common reason for coming together would be to trade. Unfortunately, as time went on and there got to be big differences between the technological power of one group and the technological power of another, one of the reasons that different groups of people would come together was so that one group could basically dominate and control another group. But in any case, you get the basic situation here. Groups of people speaking different languages coming together for a particular purpose initially primarily trade. Now, you got to have at least three language groups represented. If you don’t have three
language groups represented, you won’t get a pidgin language. Instead, you’ll get something that won’t have a name. I always call it a two language mix and most people call it something similar. I worked with language systems like that on the Texas-Mexican border. They’re pretty neat, actually, they’re pretty much fun to work with, but they’re nowhere near so interesting as pidgin languages. In order to get a pidgin language, you need to learn this like an article of faith. Learn it as though you were learning a cataclysm. To get a pidgin language developed, you got to have three or more languages involved. If there are only two, you won’t get it. Okay, so let’s say people speaking several different unrelated Native American languages are getting together and they’re also getting together with Russians, people who speak Russian, people who speak French, people who speak English, and they’re meeting along the Columbia River and they’re trading. Indians are mostly trading furs and they’re getting all kinds of manufactured goods in return. You need to—there needs to be some sort of communicative system that people can use in order to make this trading deal work. What are they going to use? Well, they could all learn one language, but that would be a giant hassle, especially because there are so many different languages represented. So what they do is they kind of develop first informally, and more and more it becomes—the longer and longer it’s used, the more formalized it becomes. They develop a trade language—it’s nobody’s native language. It’s a second language, or a third, or a fourth, or a fifth for everybody involved and it’s not really a complete language. It’s not very flexible. It doesn’t do all the stuff that normal, natural languages do, but it’s very useful for talking to people who don’t speak your language. This is a pidgin language. Pidgin languages are no one’s first language, they are not complete languages, they’re extremely variable. Of course they’re extremely variable because each person who speaks a pidgin has a heavy accent, you could call it heavy interference from his own, or her own, native language. That’s a pidgin. What would this pidgin language be called that we’re talking about on the shores of the Columbia River where all of these Native American, European speakers of different languages are coming together? What we call it? It’s a real pidgin language and it has a name, and the name is—I’m going to write it down for you so that you never forget it—it’s called Chinook Jargon. In fact, this term jargon is often appended, often added to the name of a pidgin language to set it off as some kind of incomplete system. And pidgin is often incomplete. Chinook Jargon is actually still spoken. It’s not useful any longer, but there are still living humans who can speak it, and I once spent some happy hours in the Washington State University library messing around with old handbooks that were put out by trading companies. Handbooks of Chinook jargon. They’re little—like little vest pocket calendars. I mean, they’re that size and they were intended for people who weren’t fluent speakers of Chinook Jargon to be able to make themselves understood. It’s pretty neat. There are many, many, many pidgin languages that have developed in the world and most of them had faded away after there was no longer any need for them. The first linguistics professor I ever had, his name was Manuel Drexel and teaches at the University of Hawaii, in case anyone ever runs into him. He taught me to love linguistics. And he was a specialist in a Native American—another Native American pidgin language called modillion jargon, which was spoken in the southeastern United States, contained many Native American languages, some Portuguese, English, Spanish as well. The only word I remember from modillion jargon was shashaw, which means fish. Anyway, that’s not going to get us too far, is it? So you get the basic message of what a pidgin language is. Where does the word pidgin come from? It comes from a pidgin
language, an English, Chinese, Malay based pidgin language. Actually used many other languages that was used in what’s usually called the China trade, particularly by British and later by American traders and the word pidgin itself was business English. Pidgin is said to be derived from the English word business. So that’s what a pidgin is. Now sometimes people say, “Oh yeah, what about Hawaiian pidgin?” There is a language called Hawaiian pidgin, but it isn’t a pidgin language, although it once was. But who cares? Nobody cares but a linguist. No reason to start walking up to people and saying, “Oh, you think you speak pidgin? No, you speaking creole.” Hawaiian pidgin—perfectly reasonable to call it Hawaiian pidgin ‘cause it once was—but from the point of view of a linguist, it isn’t. Now it’s a creole. A creole is a pidgin language that has become entrenched as the first language of a generation of people. And linguists argue about how long it takes for a pidgin language to become a completely developed language like any other language. But let’s just say one generation. How would that happen? How would a pidgin language become a creole? How would it become the first language of a generation of people? Well, let’s say that you lived in New Guinea. New Guinea is the place on earth that has the highest concentration of different languages in the smallest geographical space. The reason for that is that New Guinea is extremely mountainous. And if you don’t have airplanes—and you didn’t have them until quite recently—it’s very tough to get around. So people, little tribal groups—actually, they’re not so tiny, they have multiple, thousands of people—live in valleys, or on hillsides, and because it’s so difficult to get from one place to another, they stay there and they develop a language of their own which is mutually incomprehensible with languages in the valley, say over the mountain. So here they are in New Guinea and along come Europeans, primarily British, and they say to themselves, “Well you don’t want to pass up anything looking like a colony,” and they establish a presence on the sea cost. And of course, it’s not good enough. Like all colonial peoples, they want cheap labor. They don’t want just the territory, they want the cheap labor. So they begin rounding people up to work in copra plantations. They round people up to work in coffee plantations. They round people up to do all kinds of menial work. That’s what the British or any other colonial powers are always looking for and what they end up is a lot of people who are perfectly able to work, but they can’t talk to each other. And the British can’t talk to them. Nobody speaks the same language. Many different tribal languages represented, English, and probably some others lurking around in those settled seacoast areas where the British are establishing their settlements. Well they got to talk to each other. How are they going to talk? Well they develop a pidgin language, and it goes on for a long time, and then the British decide that, like all other colonial forces—and we’ve mentioned this before—it’s not hip to be colonial after World War II, and they take off and they leave behind settled—a settled people on the seacoast whose ancestry is very different, whose native languages are still very different. And they’re using this pidgin language to talk to each other in, but now they’re charged with running their own country. They’re going to have their own parliament, Papua New Guinea, which is the eastern half of New Guinea—I’m not good on direction, it’s the right half. That’s got to be east. Papua New Guinea is an independent country. It has its own parliament, it has its own schools. It has its own ambassadors. What kind of language are they going to use? Well they could always use English. And we’ll talk about this probably a little bit more when we talk about bilingual nations. They could always use English. It’s already there. People with high status positions in the new government know it. They’ve been to school and the schools have all
been taught in English—at least, certainly above the lowest primary levels, they’ve always been taught in English. But there’s a bad flavor associated with English. It’s the language of colonial oppressors. That’s not a sarcastic statement, that’s literally true. It is the language of colonial oppressors. Anytime you want to think about the benefits of colonial powers, you want to think again. The benefits are grossly outweighed by the drawbacks.

So you might not want to use English, you might want to use something else. There are hundreds of tribal languages. Anytime you pick one of those, you alienate all the people whose native language is something else. There’s another possibility. In these coastal settlements, with immigrants from the highlands, immigrants from all over New Guinea, the pidgin language has been developing and developing and developing, and mothers and fathers who didn’t speak the same language have been teaching this pidgin language to their kids because it was the only language the parents shared, and so it seemed like a natural, logical thing to teach to a new generation of kids. There’s been a new language growing in Papua New Guinea. It’s an old, former pidgin language, and in general, it’s now referred to as Neo-Melanesian. And it’s a creole language. I’ve seen newspapers printed in Neo-Melanesian. I’ve seen people speaking Neo-Melanesian in ethnographic films. At first, it sounds very, very much like English, and you think you ought to be able to understand it, but you can understand some words, but you can’t understand the language because it’s a completely separate language. It’s very clear that it has its roots in English as well as some New Guinea tribal languages, which I don’t know so I don’t recognize. But it’s also very clear that it’s a completely separate language. And it turns out that Neo-Melanesian is now one of the official languages of Papua New Guinea. It doesn’t have the same taint of belonging to colonial powers that English does. And it’s a language that doesn’t belong to only one tribal group. Okay, so you see how that could happen. Well now, let me tell you a little true life adventure. One day, many years ago, when I was eleven years old, I was staying in my grandparents’ house in New York. And my grandparents’ house was very much bigger than the house I grew up in, and you could—they would just forget about you, you know, so you could stay up as late as you wanted, which I did every night. And I was in a room on the third floor and my grandmother was certainly not going to climb up to the third floor to make sure my light was off, so I’d read until maybe two o’clock in the morning. And then I would come down—they didn’t care if I came down to breakfast—I’d come down late and the household would already be going. One day, I came down very late and I came down the back stairs into the kitchen, and as I was coming down the backstairs, I heard Pearl. Pearl was the housekeeper on the phone with her daughter, Beryl. People in her household had gems for names. Well, I was very impressed with Pearl because she had an accent and I was always impressed by people with accents. She came from Jamaica and so I thought her speech was very elegant, and she was on the telephone and she’s very angry and she’s yelling at Beryl. And I couldn’t understand what Pearl was saying. I understood the words, I thought, but they didn’t make any sense to me. I was eleven and I thought I’d had a stroke. I mean, I knew that when you had strokes, you had trouble with language. And I knew eleven was young for a stroke, but I was a terrible hypochondriac, still am, and I was sure I’d had a stroke. But I never told anybody, even though if you have a stroke, you should probably mention it to somebody. Usually, they can probably figure it out. But I was of course embarrassed because A, I was getting up too late, and
B, because I was eavesdropping on Pearl having a private conversation on the phone and I knew you weren’t supposed to listen in on other people’s phone conversations.

So from the time I was eleven until the time I was about thirty six, I never mentioned that to anybody. I didn’t know what had happened. I thought a stroke was most likely, as I got a little older, thought maybe I’d imagined it. And then, when I met Emanuel Drexel and he told me about pidgins and creoles, I realized what had been going on. I’d been listening to a woman who came from Jamaica who spoke standard—fairly standard British-English to me but who also spoke Jamaican creole. Well, when I realized that, I took this up with my aunts, the daughters of the house in which Pearl worked for forty years. And I said to my aunts that Pearl spoke a creole language? “Oh no,” they said, “that’s ridiculous. Pearl always spoke English.” Yep. When she was around white folks, she always spoke English, but when she was with her own family, she spoke Jamaican creole. How did creole language develop in Jamaica? Where are we going with this? Will we ever get to Black English? Oh yeah, we are. Jamaica. That’s going to lead us to Black English. Ever go to Jamaica? You know Jamaican—God, what are they called—reggae singers. They’re black, right? There aren’t any black people native to the new world. Where did they all come from? They all came from the west coast of Africa and they all got to Jamaica because their ancestors were slaves. What’s that going to tell us about a creole language? All along the west coast of Africa were various, different African populations who spoke different African languages. Sometimes I have students who feel that, you know, Africa is a country and like, all Africans are alike, and like, don’t they all speak African? That’s like all Europeans are alike and Finnish is the same as Spanish. African populations are extremely different and their languages belong to different language families. So we got different groups of Africans speaking different languages. We also have along the coast of Africa, chronic but temporary presence of Europeans. Especially Portuguese, but then increasingly Spaniards, Dutch, French, English, who are cruising along the west coast of Africa trading and spewing language. What are they trading? Well, they’re trading primarily for ivory, gold, and slaves. And different African populations on the coast of Africa are collecting slaves to be wholesaled to the European slavers. Sometimes people become very agitated at the idea that Africans would sell other Africans into slavery, but I see nothing peculiar about that because Europeans for thousands of years sold other Europeans. Asians sold other Asians into slavery. It hasn’t bothered people on any other continent. It’s not surprising that it didn’t bother Africans. So we have multiple African languages represented and we have multiple European languages represented. In addition to that, there’s already a pidgin language that European sailors all around the Mediterranean seacoast, including the coast of North Africa and down the coast of West Africa used. It was called Sabir, which is Portuguese—and also Spanish. It’s the name of a pidgin language used by—what would we call them—probably the merchant marine, merchant sailors, who came from all different European nations and North Africa, and who had to develop some way of talking to each other while they were aboard ship, and they did. And that was this pidgin language. This pidgin language was carried down the west coast of Africa by these slavers, by these commercial slaving—trading ships. And it gets mixed up by all the African languages used along the shore—the shore, it’s not a shore, it’s a coast. Okay, so then we have to start dealing with the realities of the slave trade. People from many different language groups—and in fact slave traders took great pains to mix them up so that they would not be with people who spoke their own language so they couldn’t ferment
rebellion and revolution and escape or cause trouble. There are people from various African languages being transported to various places in the new world that needed cheap labor and was not having good luck with the native population because they had not been exposed to European disease as many Africans had in fact been. Because many African populations, not only had encountered Europeans before, but the same diseases had gone up and down the coast of Africa and into Europe back and forth. But the native population of the new world was dying off very fast and they needed to be replaced. Well, why not find some slaves to replace them? Which is exactly what the Europeans did. And so there was a huge need for slave labor in the new world, particularly on the Atlantic coast, both in South America and in North America and in Central America. Also on the sugar islands, they used to be referred to as the sugar islands, the Caribbean islands, where sugar was being produced, which Europeans turned into molasses and rum. Okay, on these Caribbean islands there were various—I guess you could think of them primarily as maybe wholesale warehouses for slaves. I don’t mean to trivialize the human tragedy of what the slave trade entailed, I’m just trying to explain to you the structure of how this worked. So there they are, they’re all held there. Some of them are retained on these islands. It’s hard for us to realize how tremendously important these Caribbean islands were, especially to Britain at the time because of the sugar trade. So many of them were retained there and lived out their lives there. Others were sent out to other agricultural areas of the new world, North, Central, and South America, including what is now the United States. And along with them, they took their language. Well, remember they’d been ripped out of Africa. They’d been mixed up with other people speaking African languages they can’t understand any better than you and I can understand them. But they have to figure out a way to talk to each other. Naturally, they developed a pidgin language. The pidgin language, in many cases, has a base of this preexisting pidgin language Sabir. But as they stay in one place or another, as they go to one place or another, the way they talk, after all some of them at least, have to talk to powerful white guys. The language they talk becomes more and more influenced by the dominate language of the area they come to live in. If it’s an area controlled by English speakers, then the pidgin they developed becomes more and more like English. If they go to a place where Spanish is spoken, it becomes more and more like Spanish. If they go to a place like Brazil, where Portuguese is spoken, more and more like Portuguese. Go to a place where French is spoken—where would that be? Haiti! Then the pidgin becomes more and more like French. In fact, there’s a term for this. Linguists say that these pidgin languages become creolized as they become the first language of a generation, right? And then they decreolize. Ooh, yucky jargon, right? Ugly. All that means is that a creole language will become more and more like the dominate language of the area in which the creole speakers find themselves. There’s Jamaican creole, and there’s U.S. creole, and what would that be? Well, that would be Black English. See, I told you we would get their eventually. I told you. Black English. If you look at the Black English that some of you watching me probably speak, that some of you watching me don’t speak, but have heard, you might say to yourself, “Yeah, big deal, I don’t believe that. It sounds a lot to me—just sounds a lot like American English.” Yeah, but aren’t there some distinctive differences? “Yeah, but they’re not that big a deal.”

Well, let me suggest two things to you. One, that you see if you can listen to a speaker of the dialect of black English that’s spoken in the Sea Islands, off the coast of Georgia. This is a
named dialect. It’s called Gullah. I’ll write it down for you. And if you listen to Gullah, you’ll be able to tell that it’s very closely related to Caribbean creoles like Jamaican or Guianese creoles. Well, why that would be? Because Gullah is less decreolized than the Black English spoken by many, but certainly not all African Americans in the United States. I remember the first time I ever became involved with the whole idea of pidgin and creoles, and I was at a seminar, I guess, a lecture in which a scholar of Black English was talking about the creole routes of English, and an old linguistics professor who was soon to retire, was kind of nodding off as the speaker was talking and all of a sudden he woke up and flipped his eyeballs into focus and he said, “Does anybody believe that?” And, unfortunately for him, pretty much everybody believed it. It’s difficult, I think, for many people to accept the idea that Black English has some kind of history of its own that accounts for its distinctive structure. That essentially legitimizes, if we really even need to talk about legitimizing one language or dialect over another. But it does seem to make people nervous often to talk about this specific history of Black English. It kind of makes Black English like as legitimate as any other way of talking, doesn’t it? And that, I think, was what this old linguistics professor was bothered by.

Okay, now is that the whole story of Black English? That it’s a decreolized creole based on a number of European languages and a number of West African languages, is that the whole thing? That’s not the whole thing. Other things were going on too, with Black English as it’s spoken in the United States. And one big—one big aspect, kind of indigenous aspect or local aspect of black American English is the influence that the speech of white southerners had on it. And many of these white southerners were immigrants to the United States from—not only from Britain, but also from Ireland, although they hadn’t been in Ireland very long. And my own ancestors were part of this very population. The Scotch Irish, they’re people from lowland Scotland who weren’t doing at all well where they were, the British wanted some Protestants to kind of stock Ireland, so they imported a lot of lowland Scotts to the north of Ireland. Some of them—a lot of them were still there, but many others didn’t find the going very rewarding there, so they left, among them my own ancestors, and came very often to the southeastern United States. My own ancestors went to Kentucky where they formed a bulk of the rural population, and their English speech had a real impact on the speech of black Americans who at the time of course were slaves. So that’s another aspect of the Black English story. It might be interesting to consider some particular elements of Black English and see where they came from. What about—I’ll pick a word you don’t normally hear on—well you don’t normally hear it on television. You certainly don’t normally hear it on educational television, and it’s almost kind of embarrassing to say it, but it has a legitimate linguistic origin so I’ll pick it anyway. How about the word pickaninny? Well it’s just not a word people use anymore. It used to be a racist term used by white Americans to talk about small black children. But where did it come from and why would I even want to bring it up? I would bring it up because it’s a word that came through Black English into white English. And it came into Black English from this old Caribbean—sorry, not Caribbean—this old Mediterranean Portuguese based pidgin. The word pickaninny shows up in lots and lots of pidgin and creole languages all over the world. Pickaninny shows up in Neo-Melanesian. It means exists in Neo-Melanesian, it’s a word in Neo-Melanesian. It means child. How could it mean that? It has nothing to do with the southeastern United States. Well no it doesn’t, but it has to do with Portuguese and it’s derived from the Portuguese word *pequenino,*
which means small. That’s one of those kind of ubiquitous words that shows up in so many pidgin and creole languages that have any kind of European language input. Regardless of where in the world they are. So there’s an element of Black English no longer in use. But it ties Black English to its origins in Africa. There are certainly African words that exist not only in Black English, but now also in the speech of white Americans that have specific West African basis. In fact, there are very interesting books that discuss the West African input into Black English. You could just think of gumbo which has to do—you know what a gumbo is, the big, thick soup, and it’s thickened with okra. Okra is a vegetable you have to learn to love. I don’t think it’s a—it’s not like Coca-Cola—everybody in every culture naturally loves it. You’ve got to learn to love okra. But that’s what gumbo means in a number of West African languages and that’s how it has come into American English—white American English as well as Black American English. It came by way of people whose ancestors were speakers of these West African languages.

Let’s look at something else. Let’s look at the way Black English, not always but sometimes, drops out the verb to be. Remember we talked about this before—the copula. Well, remember I showed you the motto of Oxford University: Dominus illuminati Maya. The Lord my light. There’s no verb to be in there. Where is it? Well, Latin didn’t use it either. Well, Russian doesn’t use it either, if it doesn’t need to. Well, what do you know? Most pidgin and creole languages don’t use the verb to be either unless they have a particular reason for doing so. Why would they want to put it in? Well, you might want to make a distinctive point. You might want to stress it, but if you don’t, then why put it in? Okay, there’s a characteristic that not only shows up in many of the world’s languages but that is very common, and some people would argue universal in pidgin and creole languages. And the reason I mention it is to stress that this characteristic, the variable use of the copula, the verb to be, is a feature of Black English that many people point out—and in our next lecture, we’re going to talk out about some of the intellectual and social ramifications of it. People point to it all the time as though it were tremendously significant in itself. And what it is is not only a characteristic of many languages in the world generally, but specifically of pidgin and creole. And that’s why it shows up in Black English. Another thing you could look at if you wanted to look at another aspect of Black English is the very frequent deletion of word final r, okay. Not only word final r, but in fact r’s that show up in the middle of words, usually between vowels. Where does that come from? Well, many people argue that that’s a feature of Black English that results from the Scotch Irish style of speaking English. It was common in the white population of the American South. There’s also a heavy Scotch Irish population of the Caribbean—Caribbean islands as well. And many people argue that this has also had an impact on the speech of black creole speakers on Caribbean islands.

So, you see a number of reflections in the Black English spoken by many African Americans today of the past of their own language. The Scotch Irish influence of white rural southerners in the United States, the influence of pidgin in creole linguistic structure generally, as some elements of west African languages, and also some elements of the old, old European based pidgin language that was spoken by slave traders, and others, all around the Caribbean on the north and west coasts of Africa. What it produces is the view of Black English that is pretty complicated and certainly as interesting and complex as the history and general structure of any language in the world. Now what we’re going to do in the next—in our next episode is go over
Labov’s article on Black English as it’s primarily used by children in New York City. Then we’re going to look at a very different kind of article which is a tough one to cope with. We’re going to look at Bazzle Bernstein’s article on social class in England and the way different dialects manifest this social class variation and also reinforce it. Okay, so we’ll see you next time.