

**Harvard University Department of Linguistics  
GSAS Universals Workshop**

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3:30 - 5:00 pm  
Boylston Hall Room 105

**Intonation Beyond Black and White: Identity, Perception, and Variation  
in the Speech of Black/Biracial Men**

Black Americans are no longer viewed as a monolithic community in sociolinguistics, as evidenced by several 21st century studies on language variation within African American Language (AAL) (cf., Blake 2014). And yet there remains a dearth of critical work on the complex identities that exist within black American communities as well as how these identities are constructed and perceived in linguistic practice. In this talk, I will present results from three studies that expand our knowledge of the rich tapestry of linguistic features employed by speakers who have not been traditionally considered in the sociolinguistic literature. Using a corpus of data from 20 men who variably identify as black and/or biracial, aged 18-32, in Washington D.C., I examine the ways in which racial identity is performed via the use of a number of intonational variables including different pitch accents, focus marking strategies, and peak delay intervals. Results of multiple regression models suggest that speakers employ pitch contours and focus marking in the service of performing highly individualized racial identities, with speakers who self-identity as more black being especially more likely to employ narrow focus marking as well as a greater proportion of L+H\* pitch accents. I will also present the results of a perception study that tested listeners' perceptions of these same speakers, and found that both black and white listeners are sensitive to the use of variable focus marking and pitch contours in an ethnic identification task. Finally, I will discuss topic-based intonational variation in the same corpus, showing that these young men may alter their use of ethnically-linked linguistic phenomena when discussing how their identity is performed and perceived in different contexts. In particular, I focus on intonational variation in identity performance in discussions of situations with speaker perception of material risk, such as interactions with law enforcement. The results of these three studies expand our knowledge about how intonational variation can be employed by both speakers and listeners in the service of multifaceted linguistic and racial identities.