

CCHA Program: Talking Black in America

The Chatham County Historical Association's program on Sunday, February 17, 2019, was a special screening of the documentary *Talking Black in America*. The documentary was introduced by the film's executive producer, Dr. Walt Wolfram, who directs the Language and Life Program at North Carolina State University. A question and answer period followed the 60-minute film.



"Talking Black in America" is the first documentary ever produced to focus on the African-American language and its powerful role in African-American culture. The Chatham County Historical Association is the first organization of its kind to screen the film.

"Talking Black in America" tells the complicated story of African American English through interviews with native speakers, linguists, educators, hip-hop artists, and historians. The film explores the use of African-American vernacular as a way of belonging--of friendship, home and family. Cognizant of social stigmatism associated with Black English, speakers utilize "code-switching" -- shifting skillfully between "standard" English and African-American dialect.

According to Dr. Wolfram, "The status of African American speech has been controversial for more than a half-century now, suffering from persistent public misunderstanding, linguistic profiling, and language-based discrimination. We wanted to address that and, on a fundamental level, make clear that understanding African American speech is absolutely critical to understanding the way we talk today."

Wolfram noted that "The speech of African Americans is the most socially stigmatized, the most controversial, and the most misunderstood language variety in the history of American English. . . African-American language, in fact, has traditionally been dismissed as little more than a 'collection of errors.' Ironically, the language traditions of African Americans have contributed more to the shape of contemporary American English than any other variety . . . "



Walt Wolfram with graduate students who will conduct a linguistic study in Chatham County later this year.

Talking Black in America challenges persistent stereotypes and prejudices about African-American language and demonstrates that African-American language is worthy of celebration and recognition for its contribution to the English language

Discrediting the popular belief that the African-American speech structures are just “grammatical errors,” the documentary highlights the rich tradition of language skills of the African-American community-- the tradition of creative oratory performance and rhetoric, ranging from preaching to hip hop and rap—and celebrates the creativity and resilience of people living through oppression, segregation and the fight for equality. According to Wolfram, hip hop and rap music have introduced African-American speech, long viewed as a controversial dialect, to an appreciative worldwide audience.

CCHA is also supporting Dr. Wolfram’s efforts to advance a Chatham County linguistics study. The study is proposed as part of the Language and Life Project at NC State. Three graduate students from the linguistics program were introduced at the meeting and some members of the audience signed up for the project, which will be conducted later this year.



The Chatham project will consist of interviews with native Chatham residents of all generations. The interviews will be analyzed to discover linguistic changes in a place that is moving from rural to urban. In addition, the content of the interviews will be saved and shared with the Chatham County Historical Association as meaningful oral histories. CCHA will help publicize the study to give Chatham natives the opportunity to participate.



Audience members talk to the project team and sign up for the Chatham study.

Walt Wolfram is William C. Friday Distinguished University Professor at North Carolina State University, where he also directs the Language and Life Project which he founded in the 1990s to promote public awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity. He has pioneered research on social and ethnic dialects and has published more than 20 books and over 300 articles. Over the last two decades, he and his students have conducted more than 3,500 sociolinguistic interviews with residents of North Carolina extending from Murphy to Manteo. He has received numerous awards, including the North Carolina Award--the highest award given to a citizen of North Carolina.