

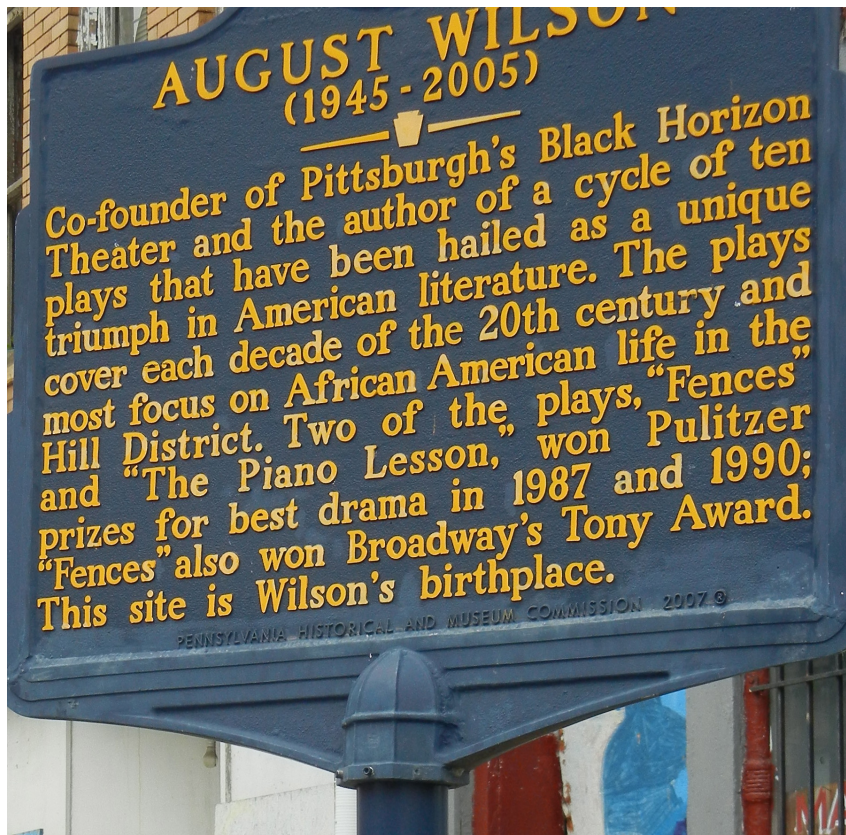
# Justice for Jeantels: Fighting Linguistic Prejudice and Racial Inequity in Courts and Schools, after Florida v. Zimmerman

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(NWAV 42, Pittsburgh, 10/19/13)

“Ain’t no justice. That’s why they got that statue of her and got her blindfolded. Common sense would tell you if anybody need to see, she do. There ain’t no justice.”—Memphis, in August Wilson’s play, *Two Trains Running*, 1992:42, set in Pittsburgh, 1969 in the Hill District, where August Wilson was born and raised. Nine of the ten plays in Wilson’s famous “Pittsburgh Cycle,” each covering a different decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were set in Pittsburgh. They represent the most vibrant use of AAVE in American drama.

# August Wilson: Pulitzer Prize-winning dramatist, and vibrant user of AAVE

Historical marker outside home  
in Hill District, Pittsburgh



August Wilson (1945-2005)





# August Wilson's childhood home (1<sup>st</sup> 13 yrs.), 1727 Bedford Avenue, Hill District, Pittsburgh

**Bella Grocery Store was in front.  
Wilson lived w. mom, 3 siblings in 2**

**rooms behind. Fond memories of  
card games, socializing in backyard.**



# Justice for Jeantels?

- In wake of Zimmerman's "not guilty" verdict in July, "Justice for Trayvon" rallies were held across America.
- Our focus instead today is on justice for Rachel Jeantel, prosecution star witness, and for similar victims of dialect prejudice & racial inequities in US courts & schools. (Hence "Justice for Jeantels.")
- 1<sup>st</sup> injustice: RJ pilloried for "bad" or "no" grammar.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> injustice: RJ wasn't understood or found credible.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> injustice: RJ, like most school mates, couldn't read.



# Intro: Rachel Jeantel & Zimmerman Trial

- Rachel Jeantel [RJ], 19, African American, born & raised in Miami, Florida, rising senior
- Mom from Haiti (Creole French); Dad from Dominican Republic (Spanish)
- Star witness in 2013 trial of George Zimmerman for murder of Trayvon Martin in Feb. 2012
- RJ central to prosecution. On cell phone to Trayvon Martin for a long time before & during incident with Zimmerman (call cut off mins. before he died), and her story directly contradicts his (e.g. TM was running *from* GZ)
- RJ's testimony 5.8 hrs (298 pgs), Jun 26 & 27, longer than anyone else
- Defense (Don West) tried to impeach her for allegedly changing testimony from 2012 depositions w. Attorney Crouch &. Prosecutor Bernie De La Rionda
- RJ castigated for “ungrammatical” & slurred speech. Our **1st** fight for justice is to show it was grammatical AAVE.
- Zimmerman found “not guilty” in July 2013. Juror B37 later said Rachel Jeantel was **unintelligible** and “**not credible.**” Our **2nd** fight for justice is to understand how often this happens in courts and schools, why, and how we can minimize it in future.
- Although a fluent speaker of AAVE, RJ appears to be a poor reader, like most of her school mates. Black/White inequities in literacy in Miami and elsewhere lead inexorably to similar inequities in prisons, where Blacks represent 42% of inmates but only 13% of US population. This is the **3rd** and most devastating injustice. How can we fight this?

# Rachel Jeantel testifying on Day 1



# Transcript of Jeantel video clip 1, Day 1 of testimony re Zimmerman following TM

1. Rachel Jeantel's video clip 1, Courtroom Testimony, Day 1 (Prosecutor Bernie de la Rionda questioning), as recorded by Court Reporter Shelly Coffey (unchanged)

A. He said he -- I asked him where he at. He told me he at the back of his daddy fiancée house, like in the area of where his daddy fiancée, by his daddy fiancée house. I said, oh, you better keep running. He said, no, he lost him.

Q. Okay. Let me stop you a second. This lady has got to take everything down, so you make sure -- Okay. So after he said he lost him, what happened next?

A. And he said he by the area that his daddy house is, his daddy fiancée house is, and I told him keep running. And he said, no, he'll just walk faster. I'm like, oh. I didn't complain because he was breathing hard, so I understand why, so.

Q. What happened after that?

A. And then a second later, a couple seconds later Trayvon said, oh, shit.

Q. Okay. Let me interrupt you a second. When you say the words, oh, shit, pardon my language, who said that?

A. Trayvon.

Q. He said it to you?

A. Yes.

Q. Okay. And after he used, pardon my language, he said, oh, shit, what happened then?

A. The --

*THE REPORTER:* I'm sorry?

*THE WITNESS:* The nigger's -- the nigger behind me.

Q. Okay. He used the N word again and said the nigger is behind me?



# The Pillorying of Rachel Jeantel

- “She [RJ] is a dullard, an idiot, an individual who can barely speak in coherent sentences” —Jim Heron, Appalachian State  
<http://www.miamiherald.com/2013/06/26/3471243/alternate-juror-dismissed-in-trayvon.html>
- “Sorry, but this is the blather of an idiot” —Thomas Stratford,  
<http://www.policymic.com/articles/52697/rachel-jeantel-s-language-is-english-it-s-just-not-your-english>
- “This lady is a perfect example of uneducated urban ignorance. . . . When she spoke everyone hear, "mumble mumble duhhhh" im a miami girl, duhhhhh.” —Sheena Scott, <http://www.miamiherald.com/2013/07/16/3502851/rachel-jeantel-on-cnn-talks-about.html>
- “This inarticulate, fat drughead is unemployable and another welfare parasite sucking on the government teat.” —Tom Robinson, [LSU. http://www.miamiherald.com/2013/07/16/3502851/rachel-jeantel-on-cnn-talks-about.html](http://www.miamiherald.com/2013/07/16/3502851/rachel-jeantel-on-cnn-talks-about.html)

# Data on Rachel Jeantel: 6.9 hrs

- Her deposition w. state prosecutor Bernie De La Rionda, April 2, 2012: 23 mins.
- Her court testimony in Zimmerman trial, Days 1 and 2, June 26-27, 2013: 5 hrs, 48 mins.
- Her CNN-TV interview w. Piers Morgan, July 15, 2013: 45 mins.

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Another source not yet used (poor recording quality):

- Her deposition with Benjamin Crump, attorney for Trayvon Martin's family, March 19, 2012: 15 mins.

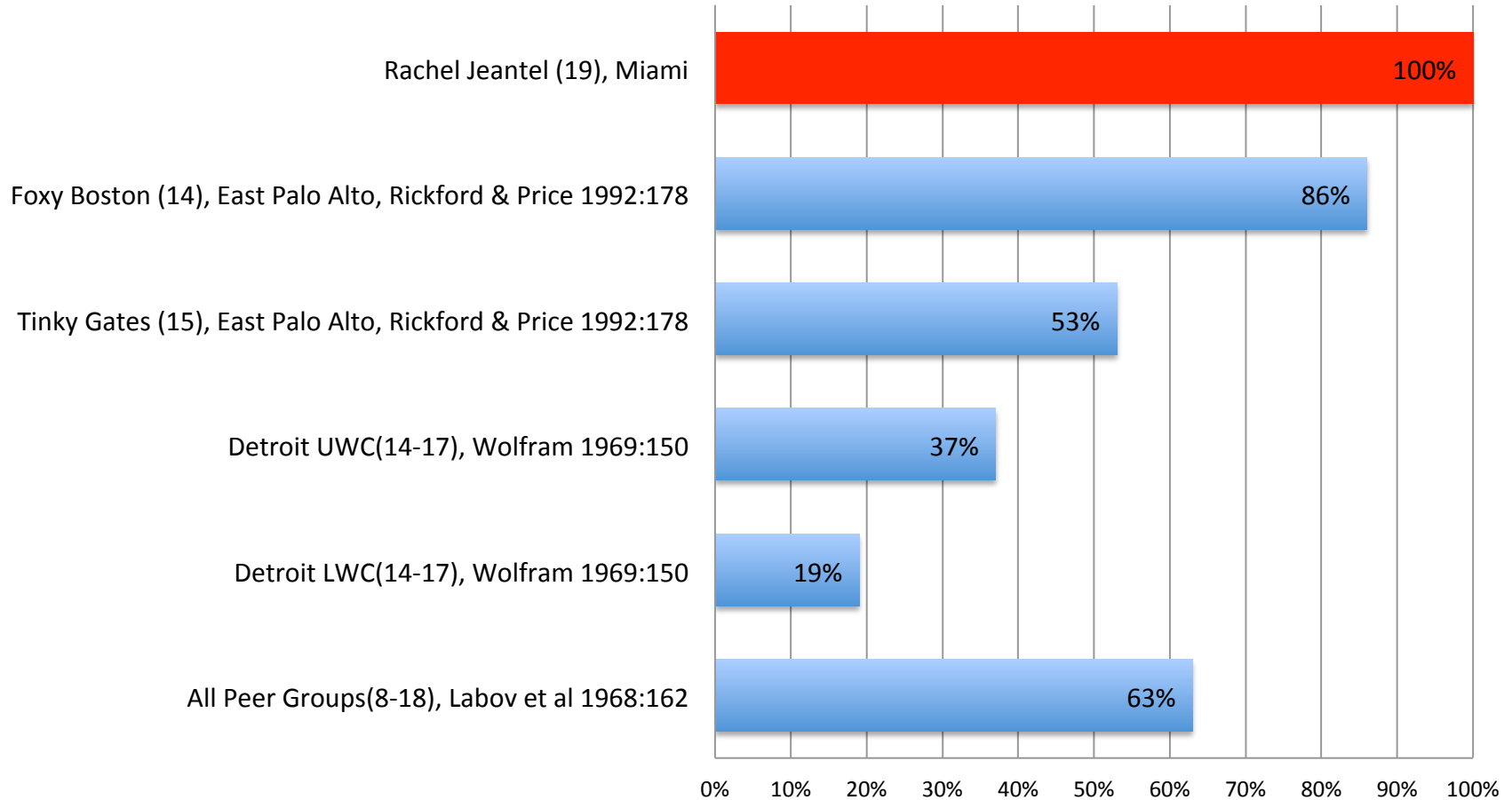
# Morphosyntactic Features:

## Morphosyntactic Features of Jeantel's Speech

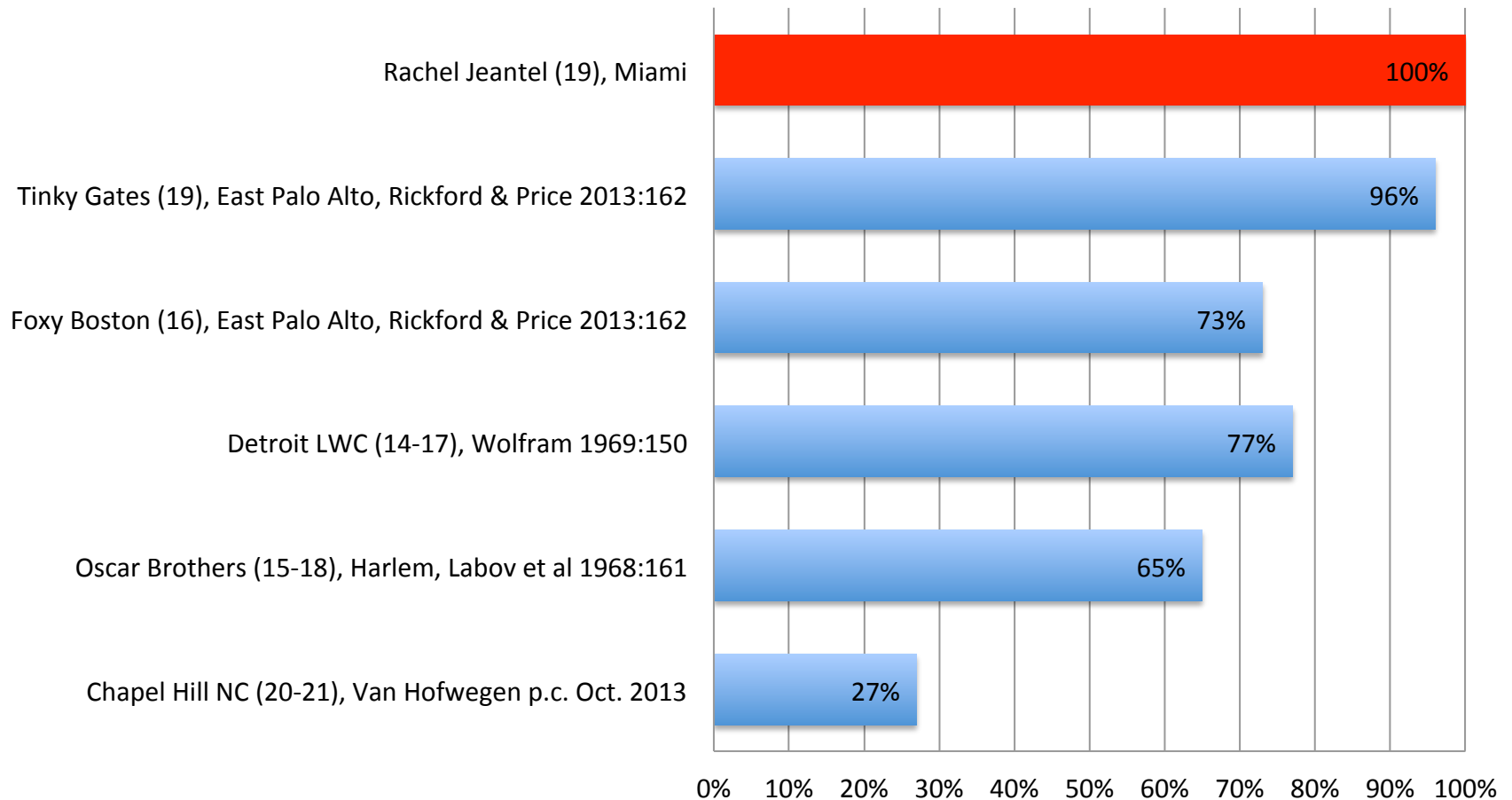
∅ possessive –s: His <i>daddy</i> ∅ <i>fiancee</i> ∅ house	100% (33/33)
∅ 3 <sup>rd</sup> present –s: It make ∅ him hungry	100% (27/27)
∅ Plural –s: A couple <i>second</i> ∅ later	55% (16/29)



# Fig.1: Zero Possessive –s *e.g. “his daddy0 house”*

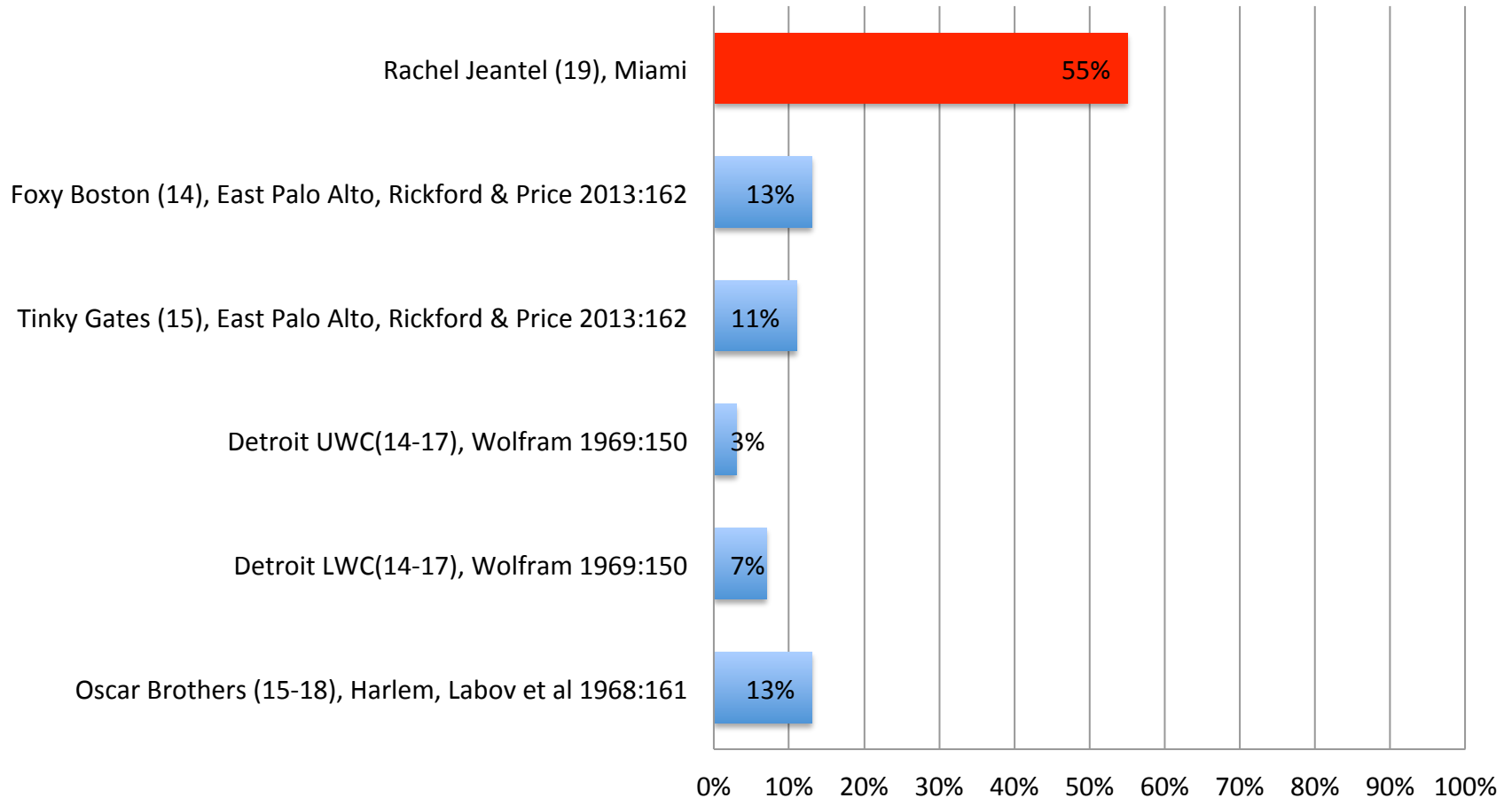


# Fig.2: Zero 3<sup>rd</sup> sg. present –s *e.g.* “It make Ø him hungry”



# Fig 3: Zero Plural –s

*e.g. “A couple second0 later”*





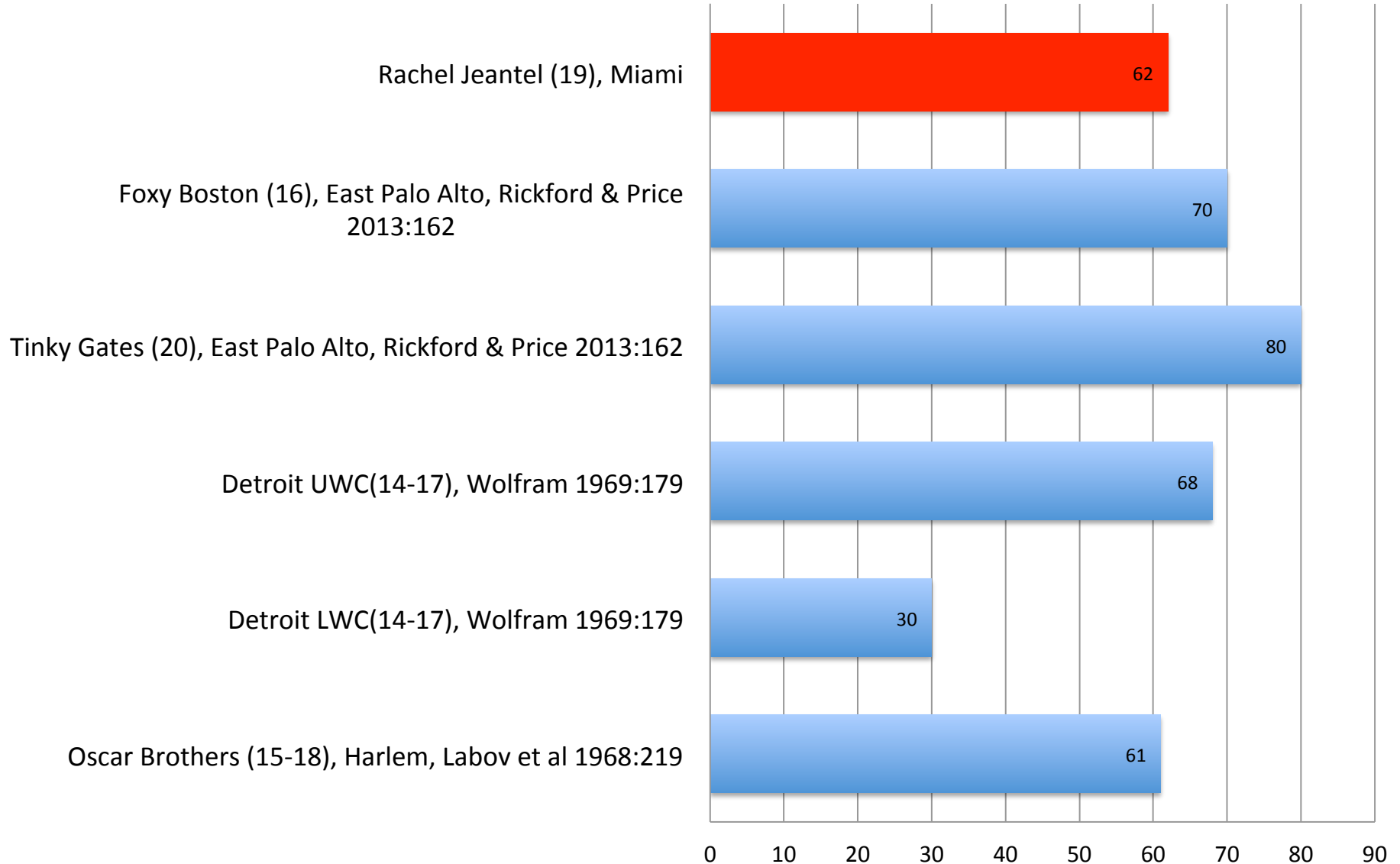
# Follows classic (Labov et. al 1968) restrictions on Copula Absence

- Doesn't delete clause-finally:
  - He by the area where his daddy fiancée house *is*
- Contracts, but doesn't delete first person *am*:
  - *I'm* holding back
- Contracts, but doesn't delete in *tha's, wha's, i's*:
  - *Da's* ol' school people
- Interestingly, she has some *was* deletion, resembling Caribbean Creole (Rickford 1999; Blake 2010):
  - I was just shocked that my voice *0* on television

# Morphosyntactic Features: Zero Copula

Overall rate of Copula Absence	
Zero <i>is/are</i>	62.2% (66/106)
Zero <i>was/were</i>	5.7% (11/191)

# Fig. 4: Zero *is* + *are* Copula





# Styleshift 1: RJ's “Yes Sirs” on Day 2



# Transcript of Jeantel, video clip 2, showing “Yes, Sir”s, Day 2 testimony

## 2. Rachel Jeantel’s video clip 2, Courtroom Testimony, Day 2 (Defense attorney Don West cross-examining)

*Don West:* From the signal on the cell phone.

*Rachel Jeantel:* Naw, it was him, breathing hard.

*Don West:* And—

*Rachel Jeantel:* He sound tired.

*Don West:* He sound tired from running?

*Rachel Jeantel:* Yes, SIR.

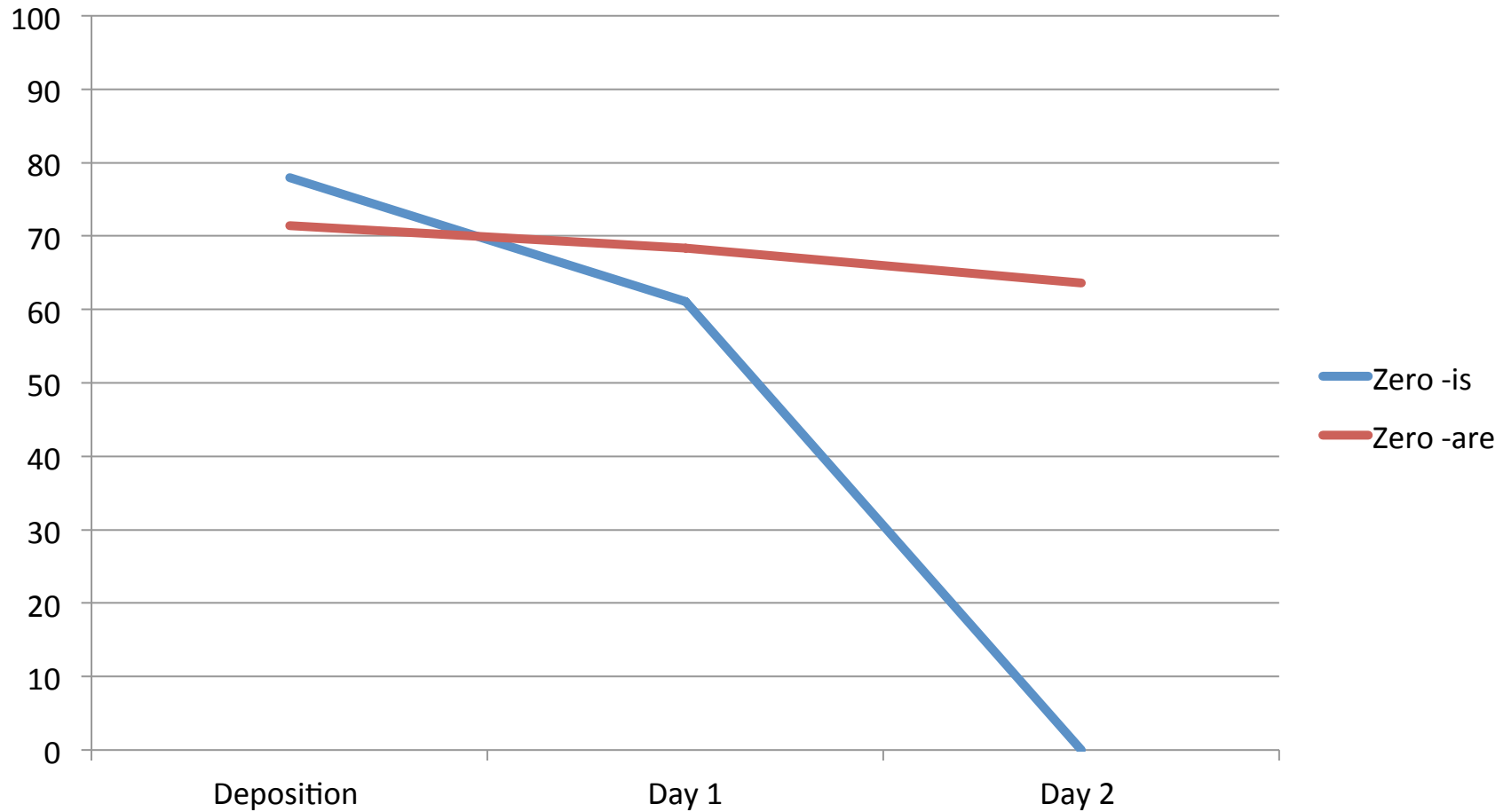
*Don West:* That was your impression.

*Rachel Jeantel:* Yes, SIR.

*Don West:* And that he breathed hard—

*Rachel Jeantel:* Yes, SIR.

# Style Shifting, Day 2: Copula Absence



# Styleshift 2: RJ on Piers Morgan Show, after verdict



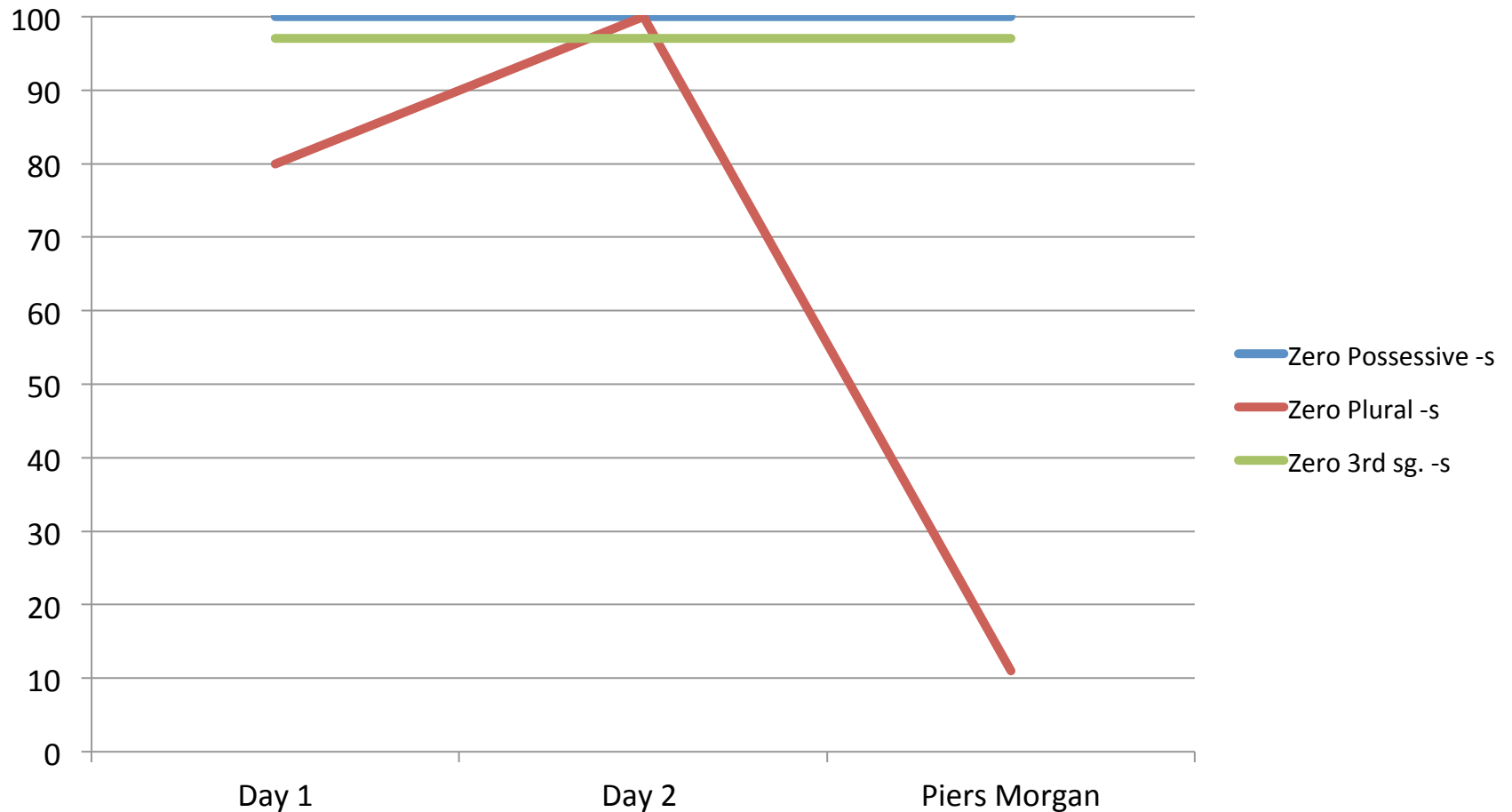
# Transcript of Jeantel video clip 3, showing her on Piers Morgan TV show

3. Rachel Jeantel's video clip 3, Piers Morgan television Interview (Note plural –s suffixes increase, but possessive and third singular present –s suffixes do not)

*Rachel Jeantel:* My mother birthday, his mother birthday, i's a lot of birthdays up in there. and so on. So, death—creep me out. I don't—don't do death at all. I even told my parents—don't—I'm not going to they funeral. I'm not doing none of that. I don't like funerals.

*Piers Morgan:* It's a little—

# Style shift on Piers Morgan show in zero plural –s (but not poss. -s, or 3<sup>rd</sup> pres. –s, both 100%)



# Other Morphosyntactic Features

- Preterite *had*: “then I ***had*** call him back “
- Remote past *BIN*: “ I was ***BIN*** paying attention”
- Aspectual *be*: “That’s where his headset ***be*** at”
- Multiple Negation: “I ***ain’t*** hear ***nothin***”
- Existential *it*: “Monday ***it*** was a rumor going around his school”



# Lexical Features

- The *nigga* still followin' me (= 'male' Spears 1998)
- *Creepy-ass cracka* (See JRR commentary on *Language Log*, referencing Spears 1998)
- For = 'so, in order to,' e.g. "I wanted to talk to my mother **for** I could -- **for** she could agree for me to talk to her." Cf. French *pour que*, Haitian creole *POU*: "M vle pale manman m *POU* m t a -- *POU* l t a (vin) dakò pou m (t a) pale " (courtesy of Arthur Spears)
- *Come and say* e.g. "I *come and say*, run!"

# 2<sup>nd</sup> injustice: Jurors couldn't understand Jeantel, didn't believe her

- Asked by Anderson Cooper on CNN if she found it hard to understand Rachel Jeantel, juror B37 said, “A LOT of . . . times! Because she . . . was using phrases I had never heard before.”
- See #4 on handout: juror in video clip asking questions. “You can’t ask questions,” judge says. “. . . just raise your hand.”
- Maybe Rachel’s “underbite,” soft voice, absence of Af Am juror\* & fact that jurors never got/get transcript [!!] exacerbated problem.
- But they never asked for transcript read-back, and reaching verdict without understanding prosecutor’s star witness is shocking.
- Would using an interpreter have helped? (Plusses, minuses)
- Note that linguists couldn’t validate credibility of Jeantel’s claim that voice calling for help on recording was Trayvon’s, not Zimmerman’s, as Labov did in 1987 Pan Am bombing (Prinzivalli) case. Recording short (3 secs.), low quality. (See Lieberman, *Language Log* 6.24.13, discussing “expert” testimony of French et al vs. Owen and Reich.)

# Juror interrupting Jeantel to ask for clarification



# Jeantel video clip #4, showing a juror asking for clarification

4. Rachel Jeantel's video clip 4, Courtroom Testimony, Day 1 (Defense Attorney Don West cross-examining), as recorded by Court Reporter Shelly Coffey. ["THE COURT" = the Judge, Debra S. Nelson.]

A. Yeah, now following him.

Q. Now following him. Okay. What I want you to do, Rachel Jeantel --

*THE COURT:* Just one second, please. Yes, ma'am?

*A JUROR:* He is now following me or -- I'm sorry. I just didn't hear.

*THE COURT:* Okay. Can we one more time, please, give that answer again.

*THE WITNESS:* He said, he told me now that a man is starting following him, is following him.

*A JUROR:* Again or is still?

*THE COURT:* Okay. You can't ask questions.

*A JUROR:* Okay.

*THE COURT:* If you can't understand, just raise your hand.

# How often are AAVE speakers NOT understood or believed, & why?

- These are two critical questions raised by the Zimmerman trial that cry out for research.
- We don't really know [no one does], but imagine the thousands of AAVE-speaking witnesses, defendants and school-children who might face injustice in courts, and mis-education in schools, if they're not understood or believed.

# Experimental and anecdotal evidence of misunderstanding & non-credibility

- Eisenstein and Verdi 1985: Black English was understood less and judged less favorably than New Yorkese or Standard English by 113 working class English learners in NYC.
- Vivian Paley, in *White Teacher* (1979/2000) says of a 5 yr old kindergarten child from Iberville, Louisiana, “I could not understand a word.” Roger Shuy says teachers in 1970’s workshops made similar claims wrt AAVE speakers.
- Rubin 1992: Undergrads comprehended less when projected speaker was Asian, even when speaking Std Eng. [Cf. Williams 1973—identical speech heard more non-standard w Blk spkr.]
- Lev-Ari & Keysar 2010: Foreign-accented English found to be less credible, perhaps due to increased processing difficulty.
- How counteract these linguistic prejudices & pre-judgements?

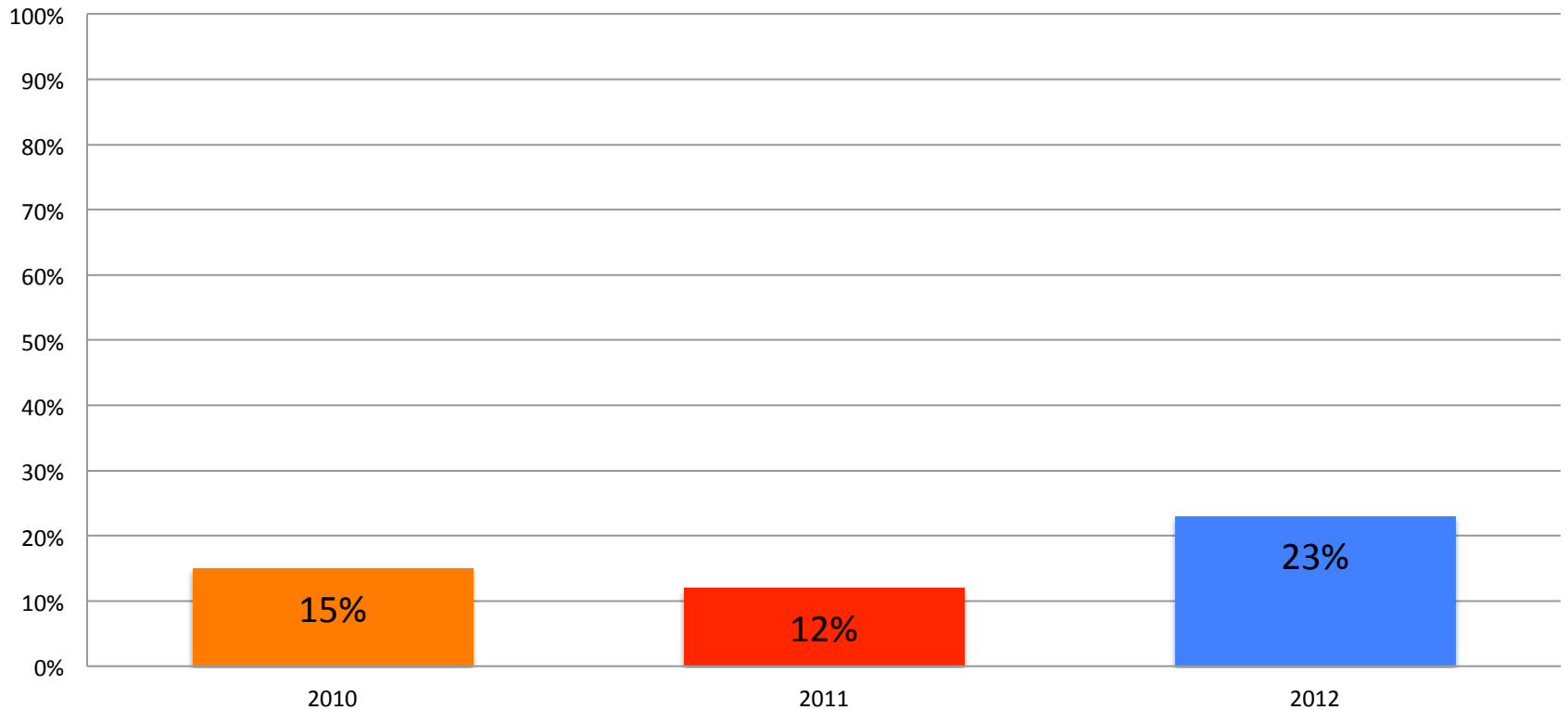
# Literacy, RJ's and her school's

- Jeantel admitted in court she couldn't read cursive, but inability to read printed testimony put in front of her by Defense Attorney West suggests her reading problems were deeper, more general.
- At her senior high school, Miami Norland, (94% Black, 5% Hispanic, but 100% White when opened in 1958) only 23% of 10th grade students passed the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test 2 [FCAT2] in Reading at grade level (3 or above) in 2012. If the older FCAT test results are considered, the reading pass rates for 2010 and 2011 are even worse: 15% and 12% for grade 10.
- Miami-Dade public school district's 2011 reading results for grade 8 show the Black/White achievement gap evidenced elsewhere, but worse: 41% of non-Latino Whites passed at or above the proficient level, but only 11% of Black students did so.
- Oakland Unified School District—home of the (in)famous Ebonics controversy of 1996/97 did better: 81% Whites, 42% Blacks passed.



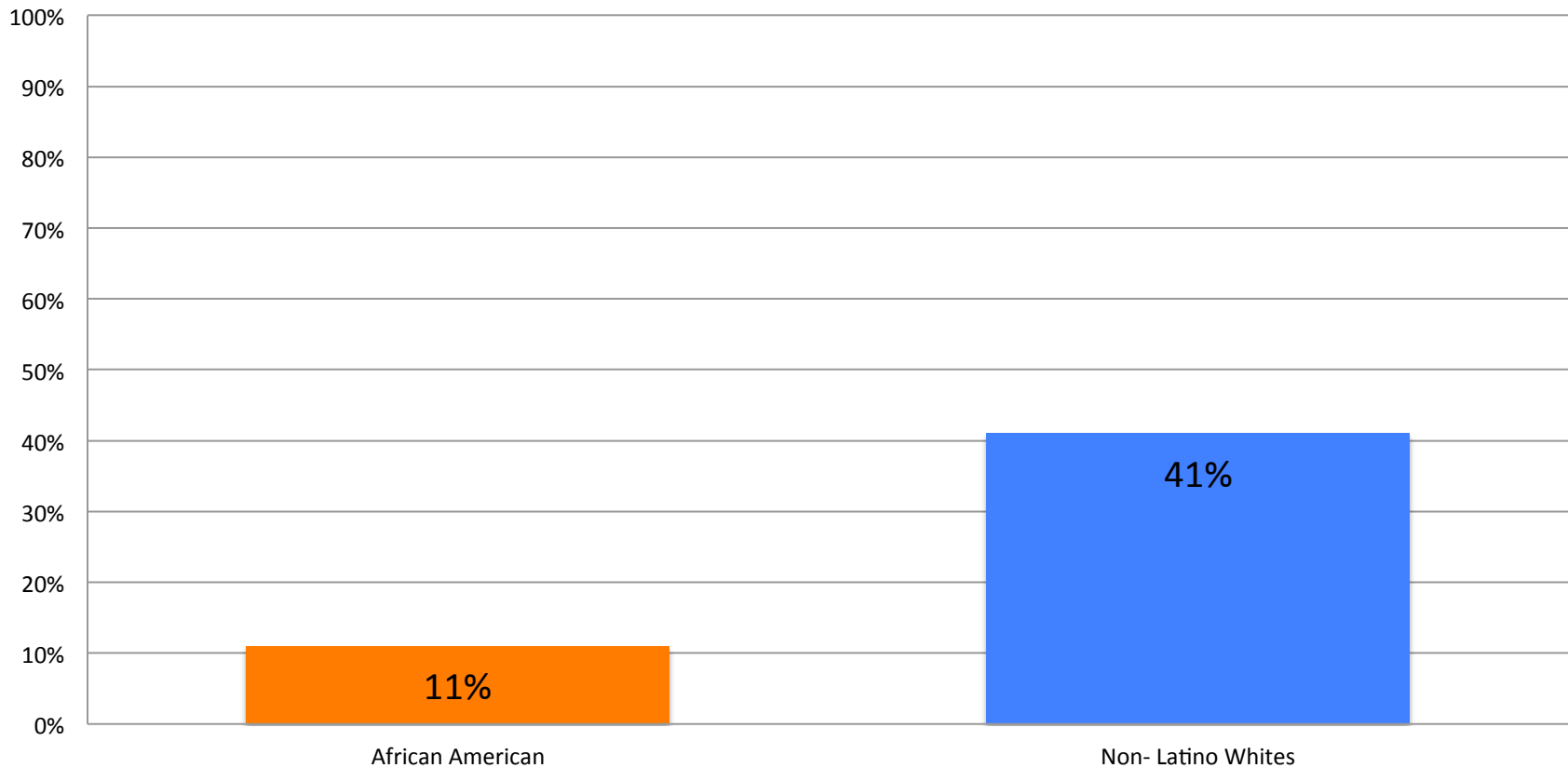
# Reading scores, Jeantel's school, Miami Norland Senior High

**10th grade reading performance at grade level (= 3 or above),  
Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test**



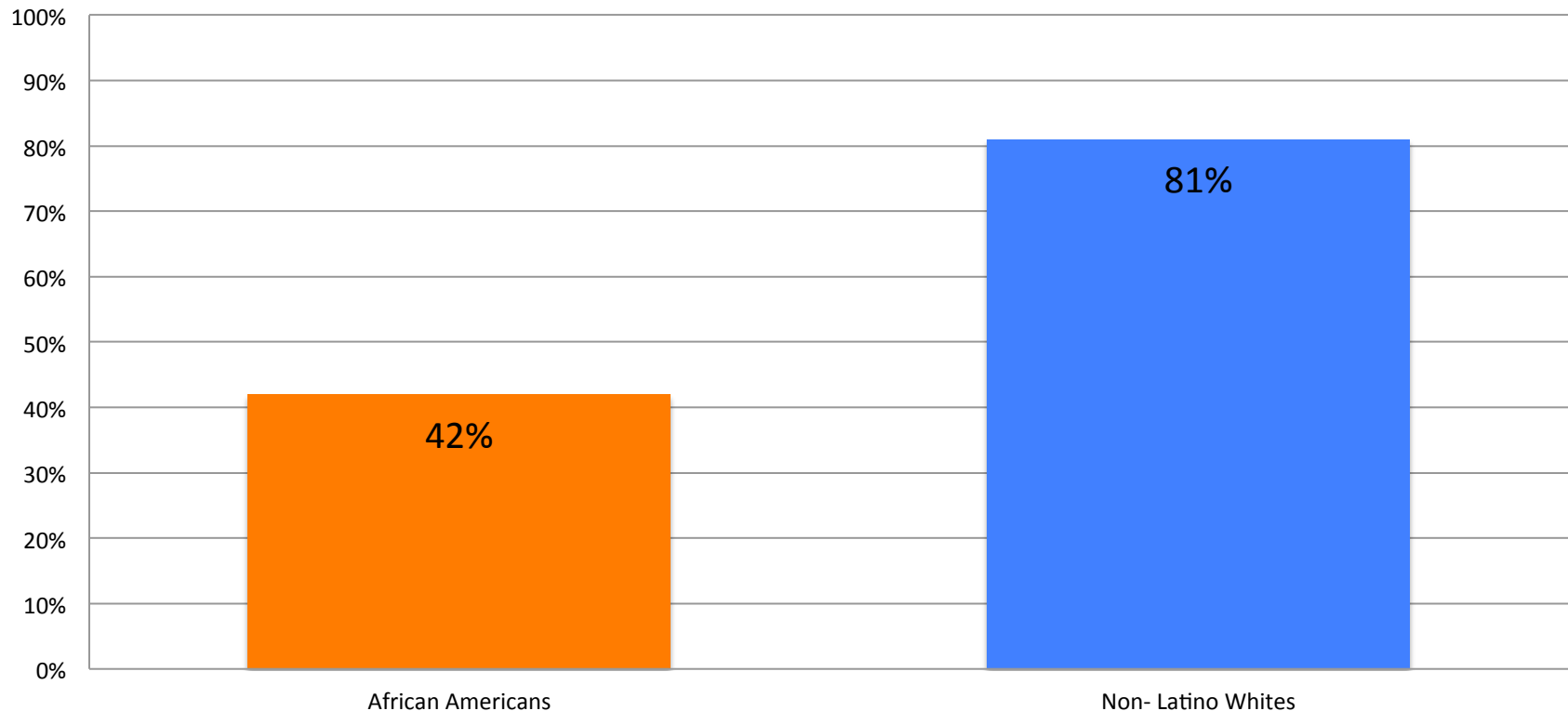
# Black/White achievement gap, Reading, Miami-Dade district, 2011

8th grade reading, Miami - Dade Public School District, 2011



# Black/White achievement gap, English, Oakland Unified School District, 2012

**10th grade English-Language Arts, Oakland Unified School District,  
STAR test, % passing at Basic level or above, 2012**



# Teaching reading to AAVE speakers

- Note that with “right” facilities, teachers and methods, even deep vernacular speakers can succeed, as with Eastside Prep in E. Palo Alto (Baugh was on advisory board), where 100% of Black, Brown graduates go on to 4-year colleges annually.
- No ONE right method. But status quo methods that ignore the vernacular are not as successful with deep AAVE speakers as methods which take it into account in teaching lg. arts.
- It’s not enough to teach about linguistics. We have to learn from educators how to teach decoding skills, phonics, word skills—in short, how to teach Reading and Language Arts.
- Many references in: J Rickford, J. Sweetland, A. Rickford and T. Grano, 2013, *African American, Creoles and Other English Vernaculars in Education: A Bibliographical Resource*.

# From Julie Sweetland's (2006) Stanford PhD study of elementary schools in Cincinnati, Ohio

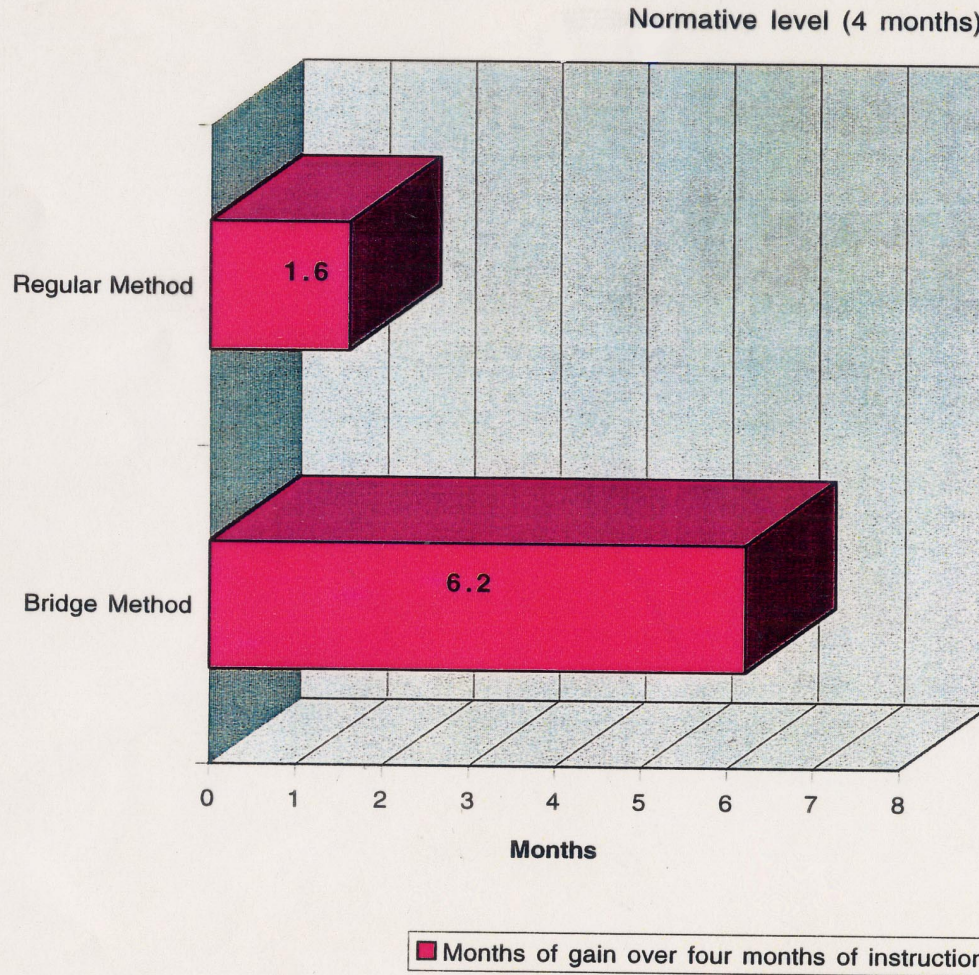
1. Mean scores of student ability to revise written vernacular text toward Standard English:

Sociolinguistic Approach (CA)	68.9%
Writing Process (No CA)	64.4%
No Treatment (No CA or WP)	60.4%

2. Mean scores of student's writing (by outside raters) on Conventions trait rubric:

	Pretest	Posttest	Gain	SIG?(p<)
<b>Sociolinguistic Approach</b>	<b>2.79</b>	<b>3.09</b>	<b>0.30</b>	<b>YES .00001</b>
Writing Process	3.03	3.11	[0.08]	NO .37
No Treatment	2.68	2.88	0.20	Yes .016

**FIGURE 4:**  
**Reading Gains using Regular vs. Bridge Methods, Grades 7-12**



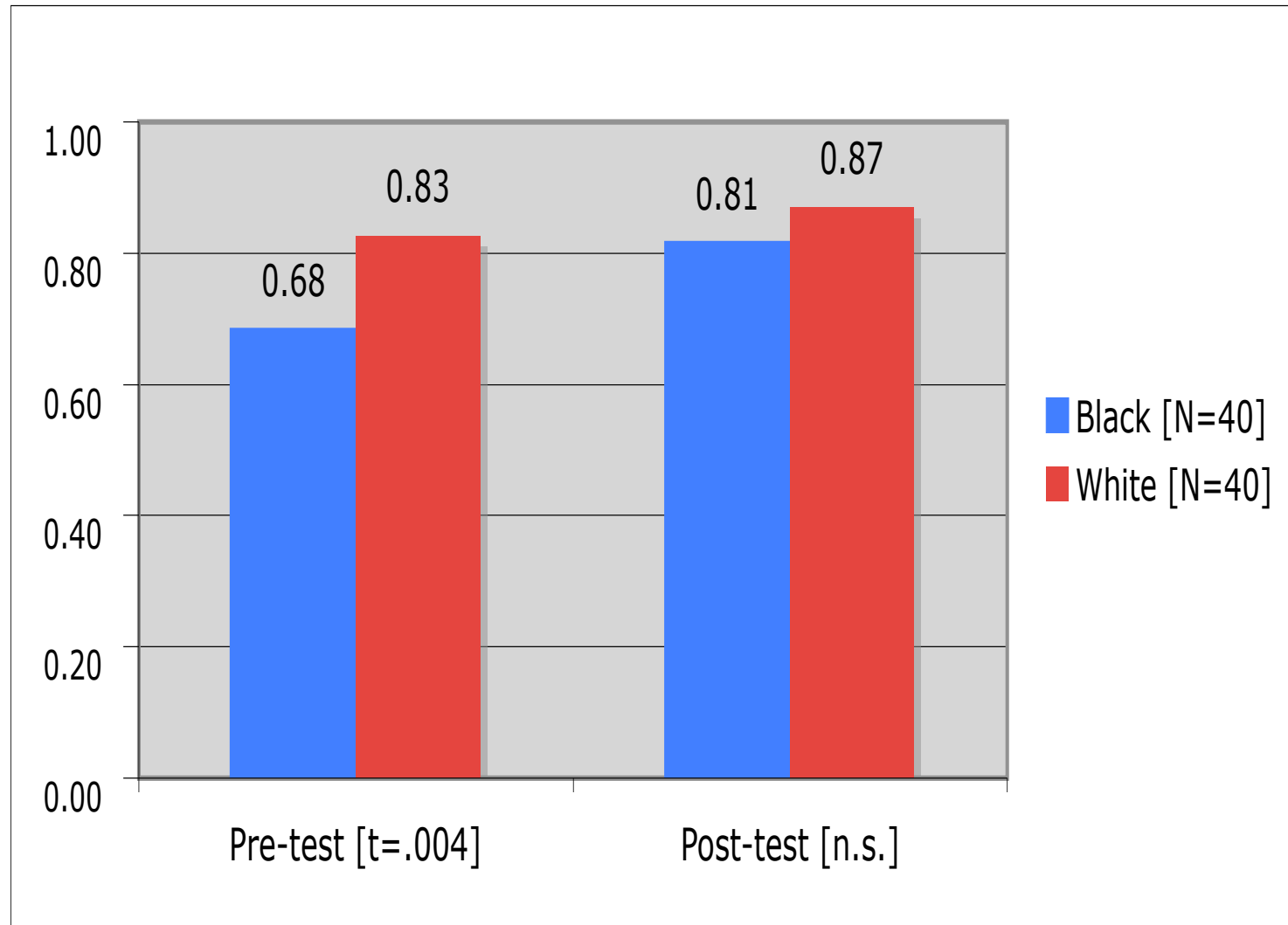
Source: Simpkins &  
Simpkins  
(1981:238)

## Progress in reducing the minority differential:

The effect of 40 hours of instruction with the Individualized Reading Program

Proportion read correctly of 25 words with final -CCC spelling, before and after instruction in California schools, grades 2-4, 2001-2004

*thought, catch, caught, hands, branch, works, didn't, might. . .*





# Summary: “Ain’t no justice”?

- Many believe this case was fairly decided by the facts, but the facts were filtered through the prism of linguistic and racial prejudice (and the skills of lawyers on each side).
- Trayvon is dead. Zimmerman is free. And Jeantel was unfairly castigated for her speech and neither understood nor believed. Her inability to read (well) also restricted her effectiveness in court and may similarly restrict her life chances.
- It’s frightening to think of the myriad AAVE-speaking witnesses, defendants or students who may everyday share Jeantel’s fate.
- It’s difficult to get the public to see the linguist’s perspective, but we cannot afford to stop trying, expanding our theoretical understanding and working closely with teachers, students, lawyers, judges and the media to increase our effectiveness.
- As Wilson reminds us, “If anybody need to see, she [Justice] do.”



# Thanks

- Center for Race, Ethnicity and Language [CREAL] at Stanford for funds to cover official court transcript, audio/video, other expenses.
- Shelley Coffey, official court reporter in Florida v. Zimmerman case, for transcript & helpful emails.
- Amanda McFarlane, Danielle Ola, Lila, Rebecca Greene for transcription and/or some data extraction.
- Gabrielle John & Kim Saechao for research, tech support.
- Hiram Smith for Elan transcript of Jeantel's interview on the Piers Morgan show.

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For JRR's blogs on Rachel Jeantel's speech in the Zimmerman trial, see the Writings section of his website, [www. johnrickford.com](http://www.johnrickford.com)

# Co-authors outside Wilson home, Pittsburgh, Oct. 17, 2013 [not shown]

Sharese King



John R. Rickford (w. Angela)



# Morphosyntactic Features: Copula Absence [not shown]

## Change in rate of Copula absence from Day 1 to Day 2

Day 1	64.8% (24/37)
Day 2	41.1% (7/17)
Deposition	74.1% (20/27)
Piers Morgan	57.6% (15/26)

# Style Shift: Copula Absence [not shown]

	Day 1	Day 2	Depositi on	P- Value
is	61.1% (11/18)	<b>0% (0/6)</b>	73.6%	<b>0.016**</b>
are	68.4% (13/19)	63% (7/11)	75.0%	1.0 Not Sig.
was/were	3.2% (24/37)	6.7% (7/17)	34.2%	0.431 Not Sig.

Longer v. of video clip 2 [not played]

