
WHAT WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY 'CREOLE' An Interview with Salikoko S. Mufwene

by Michael Collins

Salikoko S. Mufwene is an internationally renowned theorist of language evolution, language contact, and sociolinguistics, among other subjects. He sat for the following interview on April 7 and April 8, 2003, during a visit he paid to Texas A & M University in College Station to lecture on controversies surrounding Ebonics. Mufwene's ability to dazzle audiences was just as evident in Texas as it had been in the city-state of Singapore, where I first heard him lecture. His ability was indeed already apparent early in his life in Congo: Robert Chaudenson of the Université d'Aix-en-Provence reports that in 1973 "Mufwene received a License en Philosophie et Lettres (with a major in English Philology) from the National University of Zaire at Lubumbashi (with Highest Honors). The same year he also obtained his Agrégation d'enseignement moyen du degré supérieur (with Honors). Let me comment a bit on the significance of these diplomas, especially for readers who are not familiar with (post)colonial Africa. That the young Salikoko, born in Mbaya-Lareme, would find himself twenty years later in Lubumbashi at the University, with not one but two diplomas, should in itself count as an obvious sign of intellectual excellence for anyone who is in any way familiar with the Congo of that era. Salikoko must have seriously distinguished himself among his peers: at that time, overly limited opportunities and a brutally elitist educational system did entail fierce competition." For the rest of Chaudenson's remarks, and for further information on Mufwene, see <http://humanities.uchicago.edu/faculty/mufwene/index.html>. The following interview picks up where Chaudenson leaves off.

Part 1

COLLINS: Can you comment on what Robert Chaudenson has called "the brutally elitist educational system" in Congo?

MUFWENE: Well what he means by the "elitist system" is that the educational system was very competitive, at least at the time when I went to university. If there were 100 students beginning the first year at the university, four years down the road there might be just 20 graduating from that particular class. So it was a very competitive system and most of the people were already leaving . . . at the end of the first year and by the end of the second year, some people would just get discouraged and drop out of the system. And so he meant that the fact of going through the system and

graduating with distinction was already an accomplishment, especially since I was doing a teaching certificate (that's what the *Agrégation d'enseignement moyen du degré supérieur* means—a teaching certificate for teaching in high school) while I was completing my *licence*, which is more or less the equivalent of a BA in the United States. I did both degrees at the same time and [passed] both with distinction.

COLLINS: And they weeded people out just by failing them?

MUFWENE: Yes. Professors were not generous with grading. It was not common for students to have distinction. For instance, I gave the number 100. Out of 100 probably four people would have distinction. There would be probably one third of the class passing, and the rest of the class—they were advised to take the examination for a second time, and that would be three months later. And then a number of them would pass, and still a number of them would fail. And so by the end of the second year at least one half of those 100 had already failed.

COLLINS: And you went in the first place on scholarship to the university?

MUFWENE: Yes.

COLLINS: And then after you finished you went to the University of Chicago. . . .

MUFWENE: After the second year of university, I took a year off and went to work and then came back to finish my degree. And then worked for a year before going to graduate school. I came to the University Chicago for graduate school.

COLLINS: And got your PhD there and then you went to Jamaica. . . .

MUFWENE: Right. I did graduate school at the University of Chicago in 5 years and completed my degree in 1979 and went to Jamaica. I taught in Jamaica at the University of the West Indies for two years.

COLLINS: And that's where you began to be interested in Creoles?

MUFWENE: That's right. It was really one of those cases of serendipity. In graduate school I had a great interest in language contact, but I didn't think it was going to be my research area in professional life because I had specialized in semantics and syntax in graduate school, and my dissertation was on the interface of semantics and syntax.

But when I arrived in Jamaica, all my colleagues were working on Creoles. I didn't want to be an outsider, so I developed an interest in Creoles. And I was so unhappy with the state of the art, the kinds of questions that people were addressing or *how* they addressed them, that I started toying around with my own alternative approaches. And I did it actually as a secondary research line. I was hoping that I would continue doing my own research in semantics and syntax. But Creole studies have a kind of

attractive way of luring you. Before you know it, it becomes a passion, and before you know it, you drop everything else, and you do nothing *but* that. So about four or five years after I [began] this so-called secondary interest in Creoles, Creole studies became my primary interest.

COLLINS: This passion—does it have to do with the fact that there are so many elements involved in the development of Creoles?

MUFWENE: You come to discover complexity, and you come to distrust too much regularity in anything. The conventional explanation is that Creoles are really different. They didn't develop in any ordinary way. But my research has led me to a different kind of conclusion . . . that Creoles are the normal way that all languages have actually evolved, though all languages are not Creoles, nor do all have Creole origins. We have done historical linguistics the wrong way. And Creoles are reminding us to reopen the books on [many things] that we thought we really understood. There are so many questions that have been swept under the rug. And now we really have to face those questions.

COLLINS: So you are setting the knowledge that you were encountering on its head, in a way.

MUFWENE: Right. One of the received doctrines in linguistics is that you work with more and more data in light of the theory that you have already developed or the theories that have already been accepted. But the data must talk back to theory. So, if you do adequate research, every now and then you have to ask yourself whether the questions that seem so tough to answer are so tough because the data are really of a different kind, or whether they are so tough because you are an incompetent scholar, or whether they are so tough because your working assumptions are incorrect, and therefore, there must be something wrong with the theory itself. And I don't think that I'm that incompetent, and I don't think that data from Creoles are so irregular or so unnatural. My conclusion is that a number of the assumptions that we have been working with are simply unjustified. And every time I turn around to try to assign some justification for working assumptions in the state of the art, I fail to find any convincing justification for doing things the old fashioned way, according to the received doctrine.

COLLINS: Do you think there is some kind of political element in these working assumptions?

MUFWENE: Well, I think that there are a number of mistakes, but there is also a social element. Scholars are to some extent influenced by their social backgrounds, and scholars are human beings. However intellectual and objective they can claim to be, they have still been molded by their societies. I think that the biases are not necessarily deliberate or conscious ones. People that have these biases don't have them in a

conscious way. Moreover, there are things that have been transmitted from generation to generation. It takes a lot of strong will and a lot of independence of mind to step back and put everything in perspective and say, "Wait a minute."—You know?—"I have been trained to do things this way, but is everything really correct in the way that I was trained?" And so, yes, I think that there is a bias—but deep down unconsciously. When many scholars notice things about people of non-European descent, those scholars don't really work hard to look for adequate explanations; they are too easily contented with societally easy explanations. And so that's probably the social bias, in the way that I see it. I'm not going to accuse people of being racist or anything, but I will probably chastise a lot of my colleagues for not being challenging enough and adventurous enough in considering alternative interpretations.

COLLINS: For instance, did they take it for granted that Creoles would be more primitive than metropolitan languages?

MUFWENE: Well, nobody has ever said that Creoles are really primitive. But, according to much of the received doctrine, Creoles are supposed to reveal the state of the mind in its most natural way when it doesn't have much history to influence it. And who would have the state of the mind in its most natural way but a child? Thus the idea that Creoles were made by children. And so they allegedly represent the state of a language not really in its most primitive state, because the term *primitive* would be offensive, but in its most *pristine* state, so to speak. And *pristine* is not offensive.

COLLINS: Just a backhanded compliment! But then the idea of "childhood" ties into a lot of colonial thinking.

MUFWENE: Right. But the idea of it . . . You want to think, why would children in any society have so much power as to carry out a coup—a kind of *coup d'état* (as Robert Chaudenson once put it)—against their parents and impose their language on their parents? It really doesn't make sense. And, according to the received doctrine, the parents didn't really have any language (other than their ancestral ones) to speak of in those contact settings that produced Creoles. So children supposedly needed to invent a language of their own. And then you want to say, well, do you know any cases in the world where children really invented a language of their own that was not based on the language that their parents spoke before? Well, at that point the question becomes irrelevant because the conclusion is already foregone.

COLLINS: So when you were developing your alternative ideas, did you encounter a lot of resistance?

MUFWENE: Yes. In any place in history, when you work against an established paradigm, regardless of your race, you face some resistance. This has nothing to do with race; it has to do with making the establishment uncomfortable. When you challenge an established paradigm you are going to meet a lot of resistance, and

usually the onus is on the one who thinks differently to come up with the most convincing kinds of arguments. And therefore you really have to do your homework.

COLLINS: In your interview with Michel [DeGraff], you draw parallels between your own development as a person and the development of a given language or a Creole. For example, you said when you moved to the West that there are elements of Western culture that you selected into your personality in ways similar to those which, as languages develop, the speakers select—

MUFWENE: Right. I came from Africa with my own cultural background, and yet I had to evolve in a different kind of setting, being in a Western country, where the *modus operandi* is different from what I was accustomed to. So in a way, I had to remain myself, but I had to adapt to the environment. In other words, I was facing what I now describe as competition and selection. There were new values in competition with the values that I had brought with me. There were new principles in terms of academic and social operation that were different—well, largely different, not totally, after all we are all humans—from the kinds of notions that I had brought with me. And so I had to select new values.

COLLINS: What are some examples?

MUFWENE: Giving examples is always difficult because you have to go to the nitty gritty of what exactly those things are. But suddenly I was in classrooms where being a black person mattered. And it didn't matter to me before because I came from a background where everybody was black, and where it was being white in a classroom of mostly blacks that mattered. And now I was in a setting where every time I opened my mouth, I had to remember I had an accent; I had to remember that I didn't speak English fluently; I had to remember I was black—that's the thing that I wanted to forget the most. You know, try to think of me as a human being among other human beings, and not necessarily as a black person. But every now and then there are small incidents that remind you that after all you are not always perceived as a regular human being. And this in a setting where suddenly I was not necessarily always at the top of the class. When I left the Congo I was at the top of my class, but when I was here among many other brilliant minds . . . we had to operate differently.

I was in a setting where I didn't have to wait until the end of the quarter or the end of the year in order to cram and pass my exams. I had to work every day because there were all these regular assignments. I was in a setting where I had to participate in class discussions. And then outside, I had to be a regular social being. I had to date. And the challenges that I was facing were not the kinds of challenges that I had faced at home. Somehow I had to learn new ways of talking to women, which is not the way I used to do at home. I had to learn new attitudes toward friendship, because expectations from friendship are no longer the same . . . or the kinds of things that you share with friends. I was in a world where it was not so easy for me to talk about my personal problems anymore.

In some ways, it was like learning to wear a mask in one's social life. You are probably very sad at times, but since people don't like to see sad faces, you have to project a neutral face. You have to smile when you don't really want to . . . These are the kinds of things that I had to learn, and the reason why it was so difficult to give examples when you asked for them is that, when you have these challenges, you don't face them in a conscious way.

And that is the same thing with language. I knew I didn't speak English like native speakers. I knew there were a number of things about English that I had to learn. But it's not like I went to the classroom and made a list of all the things that I didn't say well in English and the ways that I had to say them. You just learn gradually as you go. So language development and the exercise of acculturation in the new environment are more or less similar processes. You go through transformations that you are not necessarily aware of.

I arrived here as a fluent speaker of French. And there are times now when I don't like to hear myself speak French, because I know something is not as normal as it used to be twenty to thirty years ago. My French is no longer as fluent as it used to be, because there has been this gradual shift—English has become my primary language, though it was among the last languages that I learned. Because I have lived in North America, I have had to operate in English, and English has become my primary language, what we call a vernacular. And the other languages have receded into the background.

COLLINS: In the same interview with Michel DeGraff, you say that "in light of Pierre Bourdieu's linguistic market model there will be an array of symbolic and real and sometimes conflicting interests to be derived from maintenance of a Creole versus shifting to the acrolect [the language variety spoken by the socio-economically dominant group]. . . by those who speak it." And I guess I'm asking again for an example. Is there an example in African-American Vernacular English (AAVE)?

MUFWENE: No, no, but here you have to see this mostly in terms of Africans being brought to the New World to work on the plantations; and surely they brought African languages. But the question is whether they could continue to speak African languages and whether they could have chosen not to speak the European colonial language. And in terms of symbolic values and of linguistic capital, you see that their own survival depended very much on mastery of the European languages. And no African could afford to refuse to speak the colonial language. Why? Because if you refused to speak the colonial language, you realized you had to do some of the most stupid and the most demanding and the harshest tasks. But if you spoke the European language you had a chance of being ranked higher and being given some of the more interesting jobs and probably having some privileges. So learning to speak the European colonial language was an investment.

Children in particular found it more rewarding to speak the colonial language, rather than the ancestral languages of Africa. Of course, some of them did learn to speak those African languages because there is this element of curiosity. I think that gradually the African languages became kinds of secret languages. But secret lan-

guages can only survive if you have other people who know those secret codes. The circumstances on the plantations didn't really offer those kinds of communities where you would find so many people to speak Ibo or Yoruba or KiKongo with. And so, when indeed you follow the ways in which the colonial populations were growing, it was inevitable that the African languages would soon fall into attrition. They would fall out of use and the European languages would prevail. And the European languages prevailed because there was a kind of linguistic capital in it. It's not that the languages would bring freedom. But within the context of slavery there were advantages to be derived from speaking the European languages.

And Creoles didn't develop the way they did because Africans wanted to speak something different, but because the settings in which the Africans learned to speak the European languages as their vernaculars were such that European languages had to be transformed. We see this among the elite in Africa. The African elite who decide to speak just French or English don't typically speak metropolitan French or English varieties. They wind up speaking African varieties of English and French, and this despite every effort they make to speak French or English in the best way they can.

COLLINS: And this is because of the influence of the African languages on the acquisition of French or English?

MUFWENE: That's right. The languages that you learn earlier, even though you give them up, have an impact on the way you speak the new languages, especially when you make the shift as an adult.

COLLINS: You find the same kind of phenomenon in Singapore and Hong Kong for people who acquire the languages there.

MUFWENE: Yes. I was going to say the same thing—when you are in Asia you notice that Asians speak English in an Asian way.

COLLINS: I found as a lay person that Singlish [the Singaporean name for the local vernacular variety of English] in a way has some of the rhythms as Jamaican Patois.

MUFWENE: Yes.

COLLINS: Sometimes if you listen they sound very similar.

MUFWENE: Yes.

COLLINS: Do you often encounter that?

MUFWENE: Yes. There are a number of words that are similar, especially in their stress patterns. If you take a word such as *deTERminism*, in Jamaican English it sometimes comes as *determinISM*, with the primary stress on the last syllable. And you

may hear the same kind of thing in Singapore English. There is a shift in the stress position compared to standard American or British Englishes. It's hard to tell where these kinds of changes originate. We cannot say it is necessarily African linguistic influence. You know there's always the danger of trying to explain everything in terms of what we call "substrate influence"—that is in terms of the influence of languages previously spoken by the relevant population. But that is not the full story. The dynamics of language contact are so complex that people should resist the temptation of jumping to the explanations that seem to "jump out" first.

COLLINS: Especially in a place like Singapore, where there are at least four primary languages and so many dialects—

MUFWENE: Right. And imagine in a place like the large plantations of the Caribbean, where there could have been a huge number of languages competing with each other.

COLLINS: And [in the New World] on a particular plantation the slaves wouldn't all be from the same ethnic groups.

MUFWENE: That's right. You would find slaves from Senegal speaking West Atlantic languages; you would find slaves from the Sierra Leone-Liberia area speaking Mande languages; you would have slaves from the Nigeria area speaking Yoruba or Ibo; and you would have slaves from the Congo-Angola area speaking KiKongo, KiMbundu, and so forth. Moreover, what complicates the whole picture is that the mix was never identical from one plantation to another. So you could have a plantation where Akan speakers were the majority, and you could find a plantation where Kongo speakers were the majority. But, eventually, something that we call Jamaican Patois or Guyanese Creole would emerge, okay?

Now, when we use terms like *Jamaican Patois/Patwa*, or *Guyanese Creole*, or *Gullah* in the case of South Carolina, you more or less project a kind of myth there, that everything is unified . . . until you start doing field research among these people, and you find out that there is really nothing so uniform from one speaker to another. And this is one of the most interesting things because in linguistics, at least in the 1960s and 1970s, and even the 1980s, people used to say, "Oh, you know, you find that variation occurs because there has been more social mobility, and education is starting to have its effect on the population, so the language is now moving from what we call the *basilect*—stereotypically, the old and 'deep' Creole—to something that is closer and closer to the European language." That is an aspect of what I have called "hypermetropic [i.e., hyperopic] linguistics." It's like hypermetropia in vision—the condition that enables you to see things that are far away but prevents you from seeing things that are so close to you.

However, when you pay attention, you hear that kind of variation in any language. When you pay attention to the way people speak English around you, you can notice variation from one speaker to another. So that leads me to my point: Creoles are really opening our eyes and redirecting our attention to things that we thought we knew

... or things that we thought that we have all perceived. And then you turn around and find out that you never knew this thing—

COLLINS: Which leads me to ask, do you intend your book, *The Ecology of Language Evolution*, as a kind of manifesto to people who approach language study with inappropriate assumptions?

MUFWENE: No, no. I used the term “ecology of language” more or less in the same way that population geneticists talk about the ecology of evolution. Actually there is a linguist before me, Einar Haugen, who had used the term “ecology” before. But he used it in reference to the social environment of language. I use “ecology” in more than that particular sense. In the way that the term “ecology” is used in population genetics, it subsumes both the environment of a species and variation within the species itself. Because the moment you pay attention to variation within a species, you cannot help thinking of a species as an ensemble of individuals. For each individual, all the other individuals in that population are part of the ecology.

So, in my approach, a language is a species because it really is a function of individual ways of speaking. We call those individual ways of speaking “idiolects.” So a language as a communal phenomenon is really a population of idiolects. In that population, all the other idiolects are part of the ecology. I wanted to capture that dynamic of the coexistence of idiolects, how they influence each other. For instance, you and I are from different backgrounds, but if we evolve regularly in the same setting and interact regularly with each other, before you realize it, you will be using some of my phrases, and I will be using some of yours. And I want to know what particular individual mannerisms we are going to give up so that ultimately we will come to a formula where our varieties get closer and closer.

If we happen to have children in these communities, our children living in this particular setting will be speaking varieties that are even closer to each other than ours are. And those are the kinds of things that I wanted to understand: What are the dynamics of inter-individual interactions in a population that lead to language change? A whole lot of language change is internally driven by the dynamics of interaction among individuals. But the individuals are embedded in a socioeconomic context. And that socioeconomic context is an ecology that drives their activities. So things really become more complex.

The socioeconomic environment works on a language through the mediation of speakers. And because they interact with each other, the speakers’ own individual idiolects come in contact with each other and influence each other. So there is something there, on the order of phenomena addressed by complexity theory, if you want to really understand it, which works in a way that we don’t always observe.

COLLINS: When I was reading *The Ecology of Language Evolution* it really reminded me of two parallels to the process of language evolution in addition to the parallel of ecology: the idea of two gases that are going into the same chamber and they find an equilibrium.

MUFWENE: That's right.

COLLINS: Or a market situation—a market that approaches equilibrium. And you speak of two people whose idiolects converge. It's as if —just to make a wild metaphor from a layman—it's as if each is going toward or selecting the cheapest form of expression, the one that's going to cost the least in terms of the effort they make to understand each other. So they're converging on this kind of—

MUFWENE: Well, it may be the one that is the cheapest, but it can also be the one that has the greatest yield. So it is not necessarily the cheapest—

COLLINS: The most efficient—

MUFWENE: It can also be both. There are cases where you have a choice between one way that's going to take more of your energy, and another way that takes less of your energy. You will prefer the one that takes less energy. That's why in my book I speak of the "principle of least effort." But there are cases where the one that should require least energy is the one that's going to cause you more trouble—

COLLINS: Why?

MUFWENE: Because a lot of people may not understand you.

COLLINS: I see.

MUFWENE: Therefore, you may make an effort to look for the alternative that is more difficult or more complex because it will take you a long way in terms of being understood. We communicate not just for the sake of speaking. We produce utterances so that we can be understood, and there are benefits in being understood because we can get what we want. And we can get people to do what we want them to do for us.

COLLINS: Yes.

MUFWENE: So those are some of the rewards.

COLLINS: Another thing that might affect language evolution is style . . . the way people speak. For instance, you might want to adopt somebody else's really interesting way of saying something. These kinds of striking and fashionable phrases seem to go around in fads.

MUFWENE: Right. Well, you know, I mention "cost and benefit" in my book. But I would hate to have to explain everything in terms of cost and benefit, because there

are probably cases where it would have to [be analyzed] a little differently. However, since you mentioned style . . . If you change your speaking style you are more or less changing your personality. So there must be something to be gained from doing that. And I don't know whether you can always articulate it logically, but to want to be like somebody else must have some reward. Those rewards may not necessarily be in terms of intelligibility; they may be in terms of prestige; they may also be in terms of being accepted to the degree that the other person is. So you know there are all sorts of benefits to be derived from our linguistic activities.

COLLINS: Yes, it's like when a kid moves to a new neighborhood, and he wears the same clothes the other kids wear. . . .

MUFWENE: And also learns to speak like the other kids in order to blend with them.

COLLINS: Yes. Now, this may be a stupid generalization of this sort of development, but let me make it just to provoke you. I think you emphasize in *The Ecology of Language Evolution* that the more unpredictable elements of verbal interaction gradually resolve themselves into certain communal ways of speaking—

MUFWENE: Right. It's the question of how norms emerge. So although when you observe a population, each individual speaks in their own way, the ways in which they speak are still very similar, especially if they interact regularly with each other. But if you take this from the point of view of the fact that their starting points may have been more different—the question is: How did they come from different beginnings to have patterns that are so similar with each other? How did their norms emerge? And these things work in unconscious ways, except that after a while we notice that people talk alike. And so, I think it is worthwhile investigating these dynamics from the point of view of evolution and of complexity theory in order to understand the emergence of patterns. How do patterns emerge from things that may be more or less chaotic?

COLLINS: The reason I was bringing that up has to do with the fact that another scholar, Marcyliena Morgan—she's a contributor to your co-edited book on African-American English—stresses the role of power in the emergence of linguistic patterns in her book, *Language, Discourse and Power in African American Culture*. Let me just read a quotation from her book and see if you agree with it, or if you have a different emphasis. She writes that "The fact is when two or more languages have come together, two or more peoples have come together and the result is always about power and identity. If the result is that one language becomes the lingua franca it means that the ideology of a dominant language/people has overwhelmed the other language/people." Do you agree with this emphasis?

MUFWENE: Yes. The only difference is the order in which she enumerates the entities that come in contact with each other. She says when languages come in contact with

each other, it means people come in contact with each other. Actually, people come in contact with each other first, before languages come in contact with each other. I shouldn't have put it in terms of first, but what I wanted to say is that languages don't have lives that are independent of speakers, and the metaphor that I use in my book is that languages are like parasites. And they are carried by hosts, and it is the hosts that bring them in contact with each other. And the model that I really want to use, and that I hope I will understand better in the future, is really an epidemiological model.

COLLINS: So languages are like epidemics—

MUFWENE: Epidemics of a good kind. There are germs that are not necessarily harmful, but beneficial. Languages are those kinds of parasites. They are beneficial. It's not a perfect metaphor, because when you mention parasite, you are suggesting that the parasite has an origin that is independent of the host. In the case of language, the language is made by the speaker and, at the same time, it cannot live on its own without the speaker. So it's an imperfect analogy. But you get the picture there in the sense that once a language is in place, it really doesn't have a life that is independent of its speakers.

COLLINS: There are some parasites that don't live anywhere except in the body, so—

MUFWENE: Yes, they are like symbionts. In biology they call them "symbionts."

COLLINS: Yes.

MUFWENE: Except that a person is born with his/her symbionts. You are not born with a language. You "acquire" it. You develop it—"acquire it" is not really the right way to say this. But, anyway, a lot of these analogies become imperfect, and you really have to be cooperative in working on the part that captures an important idea. So languages don't come in contact with each other alone; they come in contact with each other because speakers or populations come in contact with each other. Speakers bring them in contact with each other. And the politics of population interaction—let's identify it as *population structure*—will more or less determine the patterns of coexistence and how competition and selection work among these languages.

There are cases where all the languages that come in contact with each other survive, because the contacts are really of a special kind where there is a division of labor, in the sense that language A is used for these kinds of activities, language B for those other kinds of activities. For instance, there are the cases where Europeans came in contact with Africans on the coast of Africa, or later on in Africa itself, for the purpose of trade or for the purpose of exploitation and colonization. In those particular cases European languages came to acquire special functions and more or less additional functions that were not part of the communicative repertoire of Africans. They were added to the latter's communicative repertoire and they didn't displace the African languages.

But there were other cases where the conditions of population contact or population interaction were of a different kind—where although things were not so egalitarian (and in Africa things were not always egalitarian all the time, either), power relations were such that some of the languages just had to be ruled out. So this happened in the New World where African languages inevitably had to be displaced and replaced by the European languages. But here, too, there is too much danger in just wanting to see things in terms of slavery and in terms of European domination. Take North America, for instance, if you look at the European ethnic composition of North America, you find that European Americans came from so many ethnic or national backgrounds. And yet only one language has really prevailed, the language of the English. The language of the Irish, Gaelic, is no longer spoken; the language of the Germans, German, is no longer spoken; the language of the Dutch is no longer spoken—

COLLINS: Even though New York was New Amsterdam in the beginning—

MUFWENE: That's right. So New York could have been a Dutch-speaking territory, but it no longer is. It helps to put things in a broader perspective so that we don't fall into the trap of wanting to articulate the questions only in terms of slavery. We can thus understand what kind of power we are talking about; it is not necessarily the power of oppression; it is also a matter of economic power. Among the slaves maybe it was not so much the power of oppression that caused African languages to disappear. It was also the way the populations were being mixed in a new socioeconomic system that favored English, that gave advantage to a particular European language over all the other languages, be they African or European, that were competing in the same socioeconomic system.

COLLINS: English won economically, in a way, or it won politically. . . .

MUFWENE: Yes, because the venture of colonization was an economic venture, and then it took political dimensions. And it is within that broad context that slavery was conceived; but next to slavery was also indentured servitude. Even before slavery there was indentured servitude as an instrument of that socioeconomic and political venture—

COLLINS: You point out in *The Ecology of Language Evolution* that Africans first came here as indentured servants alongside the whites.

MUFWENE: Right.

COLLINS: On another topic, in *The Ecology of Language Evolution* you suggest that “within a population, linguistic features (roughly analogized with genes) are transmitted not only vertically (from older to younger speakers) and horizontally (among peers) but also bidirectionally: children do in turn influence their parents.” I've asked

you about this before, and I know you don't agree with this concept, but I want to bring it up again: Do you see any similarities between your "linguistic features" and Richard Dawkins' "memes," which include everything from catchy tunes to catchy phrases like "okay" that propagate themselves almost automatically?

MUFWENE: The main problem there—well, actually, I have about two main problems. One is that with linguistic features, I have a clear sense of what they are. But memes—I don't have a clear sense of what they are—

COLLINS: They can be almost anything—

MUFWENE: They can be almost anything. They could be a whole story. And that's not how far I want to go. When I speak of linguistic features, I speak of things that can be associated with a particular language variety and which contribute to the identity of that particular language variety. Ways of pronouncing sounds, for example, or ways of pronouncing words. Or words that people consider particular to them. Or rules of grammar; or nuances of meaning. Or one might examine particular prosodic features—how people modulate their voices when they are speaking.

I think you can get Dawkins' memes to work more or less along the model of linguistic features. That's fine. But Dawkins thinks that memes are things that are independent, things that have their own separate lives. In the language of Dawkins, memes colonize human beings. And they use them in order to survive so that they can compete with each other. And that is not how I want to talk about linguistic features. Linguistic features have no independent lives. Linguistic features have no lives at all without speaking humans. So there is a symbiotic relation between linguistic features and speakers, and I don't know that Dawkins really managed to articulate his memes in that way.

COLLINS: And to go back to your previous point, there's also a symbiotic relationship between linguistic features and economic conditions in a way.

MUFWENE: That's right, but in an indirect way, because the socioeconomic conditions bear on a language through the mediation of speakers. Because speakers have to make some decisions about what particular roles they want to play in the socioeconomic structure of the society. And with those socioeconomic roles come certain ways of speaking. Or, you can look at it in a different way. The socioeconomic roles the individuals want to assume more or less determine where they are going to live. And where they are going to live more or less determines who they are going to interact with, what school their children are going to attend. Or, when there were no schools yet, which other kids their children are going to play with. And all these factors determine how a person is going to speak.

COLLINS: This reminds me of the point you made about the emergence of norms; it also reminds me of a quotation from *The Ecology of Language Evolution*, which for me,

again as a layman, really sums up a lot of your thinking. You write that,

. . . like AAE [African American English], WAEVs [White American English Varieties] and other varieties of English in the USA are outcomes of language contact . . . They are all outputs of the same restructuring equation; differences among them can be explained by assigning different values to the variables. I am still unable to formulate the equation—which is very likely *nonlinear*—in a specific algebraic formula; but I have a sense of some variables it must include, for instance, the nature of the diverse dialects of English brought over by the British colonists, the coexistence of English speakers in the colonies with speakers of other languages, the demographic proportions of speakers of the language varieties in contact during the critical periods of the development of new English varieties, the kinds of social contacts between different social and ethnic groups during the formative stages of the new varieties, the structural features of the varieties that were actually in contact, the rate of immigrations after the original (formative) stages. . . .

And you go on and list a few others. And this raises many interesting questions in my mind. One of them is: Can the emergence of vernaculars such as White American English and African-American English be seen as the emergence of a consensus about not only the nature of English and its most proper or most eloquent or stylish use, but also about the nature of the culture, or even the nature of what people are—of people versus “savages,” for instance, which is what the Europeans called the Native Americans?

MUFWENE: No. Not in terms of people versus savages. But when you look at things in terms of the emergence of new language varieties, there are some sorts of consensuses that are emerging—what I identified earlier as *norms*. However, not one consensus. From the point of view of language, thinking of the United States as a territory where people speak one language is really an overgeneralization. It’s a construct that is useful to the extent that you want to contrast the American population with the British population or the Australian population. But there are a lot of differences—internal differences—that are glossed over. There are all sorts of levels of consensus. For instance, we can speak of regional consensus, to the extent that there is a particular Southern way of speaking, to the extent that there is a New England way of speaking, or a Midwestern way of speaking. Think of what you call “consensus” here as the emergence of patterns or norms.

However, take the Southern way of speaking, for instance. What do you make of differences between people on the coast of Georgia or coastal South Carolina and people in the hinterland of the same states? And what do you make of the Appalachian way of speaking? And yet somehow when you speak of the Southern way of speaking, you are lumping all these people together. If you speak of the Midwestern way of speaking, what do you make of ethnic differences? But when you choose smaller aggregates, then you can see that there are some sorts of consensuses. We can speak

of the African-American way of speaking, or more precisely of the non-educated African-American way of speaking, as opposed to a larger category of the African-American way of speaking. Because there is variation within the African American community. And if you were an African American, you might want to make a distinction between the Southern African-American way of speaking versus the Midwestern African-American way of speaking, and things like that. And what the smaller aggregates reveal is that when people are likely to interact with each other on a more restricted and more regular basis, they develop these similar ways of speaking which we call *norms*.

And, to some extent, all groups in North America have developed their small consensuses—to use your term, which means that they have developed their own local or regional norms. But what is interesting is that all North American ways of speaking are different from British ways of speaking, and there must be some good explanation for why North American ways of speaking are different from British ways of speaking. A traditional explanation has been, “Hey, listen, English was taken across the Atlantic. And once it got over here, English speakers across the Atlantic just kept their own ways.”

Some scholars hold that English speakers across the Atlantic were conservative, whereas English in England changed. But that is not the true story. Because when we look at the white population in North America, the majority among the whites are not people of English descent, right? And yet we know that the French learn English with an accent. The Germans speak English with an accent. The Italians speak English with an accent. So these people who have collectively become the majority in relation to descendants of English speakers, they must have exerted some influence on the development of White American varieties of English. And that is what I mean by saying all varieties of English in North America are contact-based. There is *no* place where you can say that white Americans inherited English and kept it intact, whereas Africans just couldn’t learn it. That is the message that we have been given, as if Africans were too lazy to learn English like everybody else.

COLLINS: But in fact they have contributed equally to English as it exists now.

MUFWENE: I don’t know—

COLLINS: —at any rate disproportionately—

MUFWENE: —if it was equally. At any rate, they have contributed to English as much as any other ethnic group has contributed, although some of the contributions remain contained within their particular ethnic group as a byproduct of segregation. Some of these creations have diffused outside the ethnic group and have become general features of American English.

COLLINS: Yes. One thing I was thinking of is the tremendous influence—that’s one reason why it might be a disproportionate influence—the great influence of African-

American music and culture and even gesture, on Americans in general, since the era of minstrel shows until right now.

MUFWENE: That's true, but we have to make a distinction between culture and language. And there are areas where things are just so interwoven that it is difficult to extricate them. But we really have to try to extricate those things even though they come together. You speak of minstrelsy. The particular kinds of performances have their own origins. Actual minstrelsy was invented by whites.

COLLINS: Yes, but supposedly by whites imitating and making fun of blacks.

MUFWENE: Yes. Making fun of blacks. But a way of speaking is something else. Now, we also want to know whether the language of minstrelsy has become part of general parlance, the general way of speaking. And there are certain things that are so contained in particular domains that it is not so easy to say whether they are part of general culture or part of general language.

COLLINS: I guess I'm thinking more of the twentieth century, where phrases from rock and roll and blues music get picked up, and where you find that, say, Mick Jagger from England is singing like Muddy Waters from Mississippi.

MUFWENE: That is very good. That is very well put. There you can see the trajectories that certain linguistic influences take. They do not necessarily go from an African-American ghetto to the mainstream or to general American culture. They can spread through the channel of music. In this particular case, the music that was innovated by Blacks and was copied by White-American musicians spread some African-American features in the general American music scene. And then through the music some of the African-American expressions found their way into regular American vernacular. That's a very good way of putting it. And that is also what I mean by language evolution not being necessarily unilinear nor rectilinear. So you don't see a direct line which a particular linguistic feature follows. It can be mediated in different ways before spreading among other segments of the population.

COLLINS: One interesting example—I don't know if it comes from music—is the word "cool," which I think has been traced back to an African derivation.

MUFWENE: I don't know if it really has an African origin, but what we know is that it was used first among African Americans, regardless of whether the etymology is African or English. But it was used among African Americans—in the sense that is relevant here—and then it has become part of not just American language but has spread around the world.

COLLINS: And it's got all these derivatives, like "chill out," "chilling," and so on. And it's like a whole lifestyle. In fact, there are whole books about cool and the whole

ethos . . . But, anyway, let's go to another example from your co-edited book on African-American English. It goes back again to African-American speech as it spreads out or gets overheard by other people.

MUFWENE: Right.

COLLINS: Arthur K. Spears, in his contribution to *African American English: Structure, History and Use*, talks about the controversy that surrounded the rap group 2 Live Crew. The remarks are part of his discussion of "obscene" language—which he calls "uncensored language."

MUFWENE: That's right.

COLLINS: And he goes on to question the kind of condemnations that rained down on 2 Live Crew as being sort of hypocritical. Which leads to my next question: Does morality have any effect on how fast a language changes or evolves or—

MUFWENE: Yes. Morality and emotional attitudes to certain forms of language do have an effect on how rapidly certain linguistic expressions can spread. And in some cases they remain contained because only members of a particular group can use certain expressions, expressions that are not accepted when used by outsiders. You know. The "N" word, for instance. There are certain ways of using it among African Americans that only those insiders know how to use. Not even all African Americans feel free to use it, let alone outsiders, who wouldn't dare use it. Randall Kennedy's book *Nigger* (published in 2002) gives a very apt account of the risks involved in uses of the word—especially by outsiders.

COLLINS: Would you consider it a different word because of the way it is spelled in hip hop texts? When you see it spelled it's "n-i-g-g-a"—it's not spelled "n-i-g-g-e-r."

MUFWENE: Yes, that's true. But that kind of spelling—I don't know if it is deliberately innovative, or whether it is a way of making sure the word is not understood in the derogatory sense.

COLLINS: It reflects a different pronunciation.

MUFWENE: That's right, but still, even with the different pronunciation, there are outsiders that are not supposed to use the word.

COLLINS: Certainly. A good example is Eminem, the White rap star who uses all the other words but doesn't use that one.

MUFWENE: Exactly. [Laughter]

COLLINS: You know, he's being careful.

MUFWENE: It's "off limits." [Laughter]

COLLINS: Yes. Now, to go back to this "coolness" issue—coolness is connected to prestige, which is one of the issues that you mentioned as being influential in language ecology. And you write in *The Ecology of Language Evolution* that

European colonies typically started with large proportions of indentured servants and other low-class employees of colonial companies. . . This proletarian background of the colonies generally explains the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century non-standard origins of several features of Creoles. Further, some features which might be considered disadvantageous in the metropolitan varieties of the lexifiers . . . may well have become advantageous in the speech of the colony's founder populations.

So again, who becomes prestigious in the colonies as opposed to—

MUFWENE: No, no, that's not necessarily the sense in which the adjective "advantageous" should be interpreted. The moment you read the term my antennae went up saying, "Oh boy, the terms may have been misinterpreted." "Advantageous features" or "advantageous gene" as used in population genetics has a specific interpretation. An advantageous gene is the kind of gene that is likely to survive, or to have a selective advantage over alternatives, and a disadvantageous gene is just the opposite. And what I mean here is that the setup in England, for instance, may have been unfavorable to some of the features because they were minority features. Whereas in the colonies, because of the kinds of people that were shipped here, you have people that spoke a variety of English that had no big status in England. But because these people became the majority in the colony, and because there was nobody to put pressure on them to speak otherwise, they continued to speak in what used to be the stigmatized way.

COLLINS: Yes.

MUFWENE: But they are the founder population. And they are the people who more or less started the initial norms about how to live in the colonies. And when the others came later, by the principle of least effort, it was easier to learn what was already in place than to start all over. That included language, too. You want to be on good terms with the guys that came before you. This is how a number of these non-standard features of the 17th and 18th century became "normal" and dominant features in the colonies.

COLLINS: My next question is on a similar topic, but it shifts the emphasis from adapting to norms of speech to establishing norms. You write about the fact that

African-American English actually diverged more from white American varieties after the Reconstruction than before. Can you say why that is?

MUFWENE: Yes. Because up to Emancipation, indentured servants and slaves had interacted regularly with each other, and they spoke language varieties that were very similar. After Emancipation, a new setting emerged in which the one thing that had made a difference between the indentured servants and the slaves had been removed from the picture: slavery. So, suddenly, the poor whites and the former slaves were in the same category—and what happened? The white supremacist movement started. White supremacists advocated the passage of the Jim Crow laws, which introduced segregation. And there is something here very similar to the apartheid system, which started in the 20th century—around the time of the Second World War, right?

COLLINS: Yes.

MUFWENE: And it had such a tremendous effect on the lives of blacks and whites in South Africa. In the same way, the passage of the Jim Crow laws rearticulated social relations between the poor whites and the former slaves in the United States. So, suddenly, they couldn't interact regularly with each other any more. Segregation fostered the divergence of white and black varieties of English, as well as their cultures.

Now in this context, something else happens: The American population continues to grow by immigration. There is a lot of immigration from Europe, but no more immigration from Africa. And the new Europeans who are generally immigrating are mixing with the whites that preceded them, whereas the blacks are alone. With more and more whites coming, more and more changes are taking place among the whites. But since the blacks are not interacting regularly with the whites anymore, the blacks are not participating in the linguistic changes that are taking place in the language varieties of the whites. And because the blacks are living in isolation, whatever innovations that they are making in their language variety, the whites are not participating in them. And that is what I mean by white and black varieties becoming more and more different since Emancipation.

COLLINS: Because the ecologies are more and more different.

MUFWENE: The ecologies are more and more different, that is the socio-economic environments have changed.

COLLINS: Do you think African-American Englishes and White-American Englishes are still diverging, are they converging, or are they in equilibrium?

MUFWENE: Well, it really depends on how we look at things. I talk so much about divergence because in the 1960's, 1970's, and even in the early 1980's, there was so much emphasis on African-American English coming closer and closer to White-

American ways of speaking, and by that people usually meant the white middle class way of speaking. But that was actually a myth. There was no particular reason to expect the mass of African Americans to increasingly or gradually speak like White Americans. Just because more and more African Americans become educated does not mean that African Americans give up the way that their ancestors used to speak, or the way that they grew up speaking. What I mean is that educated African Americans who grew up in the ghetto learn to speak more than one variety, and they automatically develop a division of labor: there is one variety for the public place, for school, for the office, etc.

And yet there is another way of speaking, a more vernacular way, when they find themselves at home or in the old neighborhood and must connect in a different way with the people they grew up with. The late dialectologist Raven McDavid, a white [professor] from South Carolina who taught at the University of Chicago, described variation in his speech in similar terms, highlighting differences in his speech depending on whether he was in public, hosting friends at his house, or “back home” in South Carolina. So that is an experience similar to a lot of people who learn to speak English for the purposes of interacting with people who speak English, but once they go home and when they are with people who speak their ancestral language or another language that they learned earlier, they go back to that language. So the hypothesis that African-American English was converging with white middle class English was really unfounded.

The other way of looking at this situation is that separate groups that have developed their own separate ways of speaking express themselves differently because their language varieties have also become markers of their identities. So, in this particular case, we can expect African-American English, as a marker of black identity, to be spoken still in its old-fashioned way—although “old fashioned” does not mean that it is frozen in the same form that it was spoken in the 19th century. But there will always be ways of telling African-American English from white varieties of American English. The danger is also to think that African-American English should be a monolithic, homogenous variety. But that is not warranted because there is no particular variety out there—not even standard English—that is so homogeneous. Therefore, you are going to find variation in the African-American community and in African-American English as you will find say in Appalachian English or what we called Southern English or New England English or Midwestern English. So to that extent we can say that African-American English will remain different.

As long as the African-American population and the White-American population have not merged to become really mixed to a point where people don’t pay attention to either socio-economic differences or race differences, African Americans are still going to speak their own way, just as white Americans are going to speak their own way. I prefer to address such a question from a more global perspective, because there was a time when it was easy to speak of German English, Italian English, and Jewish English; and that’s when the white population was internally more segregated than it is today. As long as the Jews lived in their own communities, they developed their own way of speaking, and as long as the Germans lived in their own separate communities, they developed their own way of speaking English, and so forth. And

nowadays those ethnic barriers have—I won't really say that they have collapsed—but they are less rigid, and we can say in some sense that the white population is relatively more integrated.

But in relation to the black population, there is still *de facto* segregation; there is still a distinction that is based on ethnicity; or maybe it is based primarily on socioeconomic factors, and it so happens that the vast majority of African Americans are still in the low socioeconomic bracket, and they are not going to mix with the middle class, which happens to contain mostly White Americans. So, the majority of African Americans will continue to speak their own way. Now, whether we should interpret that as a sign that African-American English is becoming more and more different is a question that is difficult to answer. It's not just that African-American English is evolving its own direction; White-American English is also evolving in its own direction.

Overall, the African Americans who are associated with African-American English don't want to sound white; and white Americans in general, don't want to sound Black. That is a good reason why there will always be evolutions that mark African-American English and White-American varieties of English ethnically.

COLLINS: Even though phrases get traded back and forth—

MUFWENE: That's right.

COLLINS: —it's not enough . . .

MUFWENE: There are mutual influences, but there are particular features that people consider as their own particular way of speaking. And people really hold to those characteristics that can tell them apart, that can be associated with their ethnic identities. And once those features have been borrowed by outsiders, people develop other features that can tell them apart from the outsiders.

COLLINS: Yes, you say in *The Ecology of Language Evolution* that White American English vernaculars are more conspicuously different from each other than AAVE varieties are. You write that it is easier for an African-American Midwesterner than it is for a non-African American to tell a New York AAVE speaker from an Atlantan or a Chicagoan AAVE speaker. Can you elaborate on that in light of what you have just been saying?

MUFWENE: Yes. The reason is that from the very beginning, one could notice differences among English settlements. The Englishmen who settled in the Northeastern part of the United States were not exactly of the same kind, socially or regionally, as those who settled in the Middle Atlantic states, nor were they the same as those who settled in the Southern parts of the United States—we are actually talking about the English colonies in the 17th century. So we have mostly Puritans, most of them from East Anglia, who settled in the Northeast. We have a lot of people from the Southern

part of England, and especially around London, who settled in the Virginia area, and in the South generally we have people who came from all over Western Europe . . . This is true of Georgia, which was conceived and founded as a frontier colony between the Spanish colony in South Florida and the English colony of South Carolina, as well as a barrier from the French colonies in the then Louisiana, which was much larger than the state of Louisiana today. Georgia's colonists were a diverse group. Furthermore, Georgia was also founded as a barrier between the English colonies and the Native Americans. So a lot of people who went there were the kinds of people that the English found dispensable. In the beginning, it was not the "cream of the crop" that were sent there.

The founder population was also more mixed. There were yeomen who came to start a new life . . . There were Jews who were escaping persecution in Europe; there were Huguenots, the French Huguenots among them, who were seeking religious freedom; there were Germans, and there were Irishmen. Most of these people were from the lower strata of the European communities. The other thing is that the Europeans who settled in the Southern colonies interacted more regularly with blacks, whereas the people who settled in the Northern parts didn't go very much into the institution of slavery because they came as small family units. They had mostly small farms. Even if there were one or two blacks on those farms, you know there is no way the Africans would develop a variety of their own. So what happens is that because of differences in settlement patterns, different varieties of English developed among whites.

On the other hand, the blacks found themselves concentrated in the Southeastern part of the United States—on the cotton and sugarcane and tobacco plantations, and, of course, the rice fields of coastal South Carolina and Georgia, which had the highest proportions of blacks. And so, until the 19th century, we could only distinguish two varieties of English among blacks. The first, which is called Gullah, is the variety that developed on the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, where the rice fields were. The second is the variety that developed on tobacco and cotton plantations, which has become "African-American Vernacular English" [AAVE], now also known as "Ebonics." So the cradle or birthplace of African-American English is in the American Southeast. Originally, this variety was not different from what was spoken by the poor Europeans with whom African Americans interacted regularly before the passage of the Jim Crow laws.

And from there, African-American Vernacular English spread all over. You can tell that there was some sort of homogeneity, to the extent that any communal language can be said to be homogeneous. One of the reasons why African-American English has remained basically the same wherever it went is that with the Great Migration, when the former slaves left the South and migrated to the North, they found themselves in segregated ghettos. Among them there was really nothing new from the point of communication, and they continued to speak the same language variety that they had brought from the South. In the end, there is very little regional variation. Nowadays it is easier for an African American to identify regional variation in African-American English than it is for an outsider. Whereas for whites, not only were there differences in settlement patterns in the earlier colonial days, but all the way to the late 19th

century there were new patterns of settlements. For instance, a lot of Scandinavians immigrated to the Midwest, and they also developed their own particular kind of English. The linguistic consequences of those differences in settlement patterns have survived and we can still notice them. On average it's easier for a non-white to tell the different white dialects apart than for a white to tell regional variation in African-American English.

COLLINS: On the subject of different dialects and differences within dialects, I want to ask you a question that you ask in *The Ecology of Language Evolution*: "Why is it that on some occasions, independent of performance factors, members of the same community, or even of the same family or network, fail to communicate successfully?"

MUFWENE: Because, in linguistics, we have assumed that there is one grammar out there for a particular language variety. For any given language variety, there is one grammar specific to it that every member of that community learns.

But, that assumption is questionable. We can't prove that two individuals communicate with each other because they have identical grammars or the same one. All we can prove from mutual intelligibility between two people is that they are equipped with systems that can interpret each other's utterances. It's like having two computers, a Macintosh and a PC. You get them to interface, but the algorithms that enable them to operate are not identical. There are conversion rules. And between speakers, there are conversion rules, too. So the causes of language change lie in part in the dynamics of that variation from one speaker to another. Speakers have idiolects and idiolects as individual ways of speaking are not identical systems; and because they are different there are these continual negotiations between idiolects, and there are idiolects that give up some of their idiosyncrasies and there are idiolects that prevail. From this there ensues the continuous evolution of a language. Fortunately, very often when people innovate something, what they have innovated already exists in the community. So the communal language doesn't change that much. Otherwise the language would be changing much more often and much more rapidly than we imagine it. Many changes affecting idiolects have no bearing on the distribution of features in the communal language.

For the most part, things that are balancing out in society. But because there are those slight differences, there are cases when two people who have lived together all their lives still can produce utterances that cause them to be misunderstood. You can even find this in families—husbands and wives who fail to understand each other on particular occasions.

Aside from that, there's also the factor of attitude towards each other which can lead you to misinterpret the other person. Those are the kinds of things that might not be in the category of performance factors, but if you take communication systems alone, it is quite possible that somebody will produce an utterance that the other person will not make an effort to understand.

COLLINS: Right. One thing I thought of when you mentioned the husband and wife example is that a couple might be able to communicate with each other very well until

one of them discovers that the other one has had an affair. And then, it's as if all of the things the other person says get programmed into some different interpretive system, or some different part of the idiolect—

MUFWENE: Yes.

COLLINS: And then they can't communicate anymore. The system crashes.

MUFWENE: Yes, so what happens in that case is that the cooperative system breaks down. When you follow a conversation between two people, even when you follow this interview later, you will find out that there are cases where I may say something not exactly the way I intended it, but you cooperate in bringing up the best interpretation out of that. But once there is a conflict, that system works in the opposite direction—it maximizes the misinterpretations, instead of enhancing what was intended.

COLLINS: Can you blow that up to the level of different groups of people? I mean, can the same thing happen?

MUFWENE: Well, things such as dialects—they are an expression of that variation at the population level, because what happens, ultimately, is that individuals who interact with each other on a regular basis are better prepared to understand each other, too. And they know each other's idiosyncrasies; each knows in the other operates. So Mary pronounces *god* as [gad], but Tom pronounces it as [g]d] okay? And whenever Tom hears [gad] he knows it corresponds to his [g]d] and whenever Mary hears his pronunciation, she interprets it as her [gad], and they know they are saying what is spelled as *g-o-d*.

But if a foreigner arrives here and says the word in a somewhat different manner, native speakers don't quite know whether they should interpret it as 'god' or something different.

COLLINS: Yes, "good" or something like that—

MUFWENE: Yes.

COLLINS: Can you attribute misunderstandings between races, and even the continuing de facto segregation of AAVE speakers, to these kinds of break-downs in communication or gaps between idiolects, and then dialects? I mean, will the difference in the language then kind of feed back and help to preserve the separation between races?

MUFWENE: Yes. what happens is that there is really one basic form of variation. Each idiolect is different from other idiolects. Because each idiolect has its own individuality, it shares with the other idiolects the fact that they are using more or less the same

code. It's a kind of contradiction because what we call the same code is really a projection from these idiolects that are so similar. Okay?

COLLINS: Yes.

MUFWENE: And people try to communicate, and idiolects that are in regular contact with each other wind up becoming more and more similar because through their continual accommodations, they borrow features from each other, giving up those that impede successful communication.

You wind up having small or larger networks of communication, and, corresponding to those networks of communication, clusters of idiolects that are more similar among themselves than they are idiolects that participate in other networks. The idiolects used in overlapping networks are more similar to each other than those that are not. Such overlapping networks can be constructed into "communities," such as the "African-American community," or the "white middle class," or the "white middle class of Chicago" versus the "white middle class of New York," etc.

What happens then is that people in the middle class tend to interact more regularly with other people in the middle class, even if they are distances away; and people in the lowest class communicate most often with other members from the lowest class, even if they are distances away. So lower class varieties wind up being more and more similar and middle class varieties wind up being more and more similar, even from one city to another. When you factor race in, you also find out that blacks communicate more among themselves than they do with whites, and they develop their own ways of speaking that are more peculiar to them and also more similar among themselves than to what emerges from the white communities. These things reflect, more or less, the basic principle of who interacts with whom, or who has the potential of interacting with whom. To the extent that race or ethnicity determines who is more likely to interact with whom or who we happen to interact with the most, we wind up conceiving of these communal varieties that are based on ethnicity too.

COLLINS: And then when you do meet somebody of the other race, you have in the back of your mind that there is a greater potential for misinterpretation, and so you are more cautious.

MUFWENE: That's right. You are more cautious, and if you're not familiar with the other group's way of speaking, it is just difficult. What we have to learn is that sometimes race is an incidental or epiphenomenal factor and not really the basic factor, because the basic factor is: You speak more like your neighbor (i.e., the person you interact more regularly with) than like anybody else. For instance, you will find that Americans, black or white, speak more like each other than any American compared to any Caribbean—right?

COLLINS: Yes.

MUFWENE: White Caribbeans and Black Caribbeans talk more alike than a White American and a White Caribbean or a Black American and a Black Caribbean. These are the kinds of things we should remember. Overall, Americans are different from Australians, because countries more or less represent these *mega-neighborhoods* in which people have more potential to interact with each other.

COLLINS: Except for the race issue—sometimes it cuts across these kinds of borders because it's so charged and because people pay so much attention to it.

MUFWENE: Yes, but there's another factor there. The people who establish bridges across countries are usually members of the intellectual elite. There is, for instance, a black Diaspora that is culturally more obvious to the educated black elite than to the average black person. People from different nationalities communicating at this level are also more likely to use "educated" varieties, which reduce dialect gaps between them. That facilitated mutual intelligibility can mask communication problems at the level of nonstandard vernaculars, such as between AAVE and Jamaican Creole or Nigerian Pidgin English.

COLLINS: That's true.

MUFWENE: So there is a historical and/or intercultural connection there at the elite level that is not so obvious at other levels; that is something you want to remember.

This has actually created quite problematic notions of *Ebonics* among the elite. Because the term "Ebonics" didn't originate in the lower class of the African-American population, and yet that's where speakers, or the majority of Ebonics speakers, evolve. The term "Ebonics" is as strange to them as it is to whites or as it is to Africans. But if you go and check definitions of "Ebonics" in the literature, some of them are so ideologically loaded that they become ridiculous. When a person tells you that "Ebonics" is the way that blacks communicate within the black Diaspora, that means Jamaican Patois is Ebonics, and that also means Nigerian Pidgin is Ebonics. It gets even more interesting when you infer that Haitian Creole is also Ebonics! And then you start expecting a speaker of Jamaican Patois to be able to understand African-American English and vice-versa. You know it doesn't hold, and then when you bring in Nigerian Pidgin, it becomes even more difficult.

So there we have an ideological characterization of "Ebonics" that is not operational, and that doesn't ring a bell to the vernacular speaker of AAVE, because, no matter how much consciousness of the black Diaspora we want to factor in, it's the African-American Vernacular English that is spoken in the United States *only* that can really be referred to as "Ebonics" and needs to be distinguished from the other English-based language varieties of the black Diaspora.

COLLINS: Do works of literature help to slow or speed the rate of evolution of a language? Can this be done by a book such as the Bible which is very central?

MUFWENE: Well, I don't think it has any effect at all.

COLLINS: None?

MUFWENE: Well, if there is some effect from the literature or from literary sources, it is really marginal, and it would be restricted to specific domains. You mentioned the Bible. That is actually very interesting because every African American I know who goes to Church, who is a Christian, reads the Bible. Is it King James English?

COLLINS: Yes. There are modern translations now, but the classic is the King James.

MUFWENE: That's right, everybody reads it, and everybody interprets it. But I have never seen an African American who speaks in King James' English!

COLLINS: Yes, you're right.

MUFWENE: It has no effect. Again, there is a division of labor. Everybody knows that that peculiar English variety that sounds more or less like a foreign language is good only for the Bible. Even the minister does not preach in it. Likewise, we go to school and we learn standard English. But we associate standard English with specific functions. In the classroom, the teacher expects us—

COLLINS: —The King's English!—

MUFWENE: —to speak the King's English, which we try to approximate and fail to realize faithfully. We know that if we are lucky enough to have white collar jobs, people expect us to speak in that standard English. We also know that once we come back to our community we don't want anybody to ask us why we're trying "talk so proper."

COLLINS: That's right. [Laughter]. "Who do you think you are," right?

MUFWENE: [Laughter] And one of the problems experienced by people of the African Diaspora, of the black Diaspora that were not born in the United States or didn't grow up in the United States, is that they find themselves in an African-American ghetto but they speak like foreigners, right? And it affects how they can relate with speakers of African-American English because they speak a different variety.

COLLINS: Yes, that's right. Historically, there has been some tension sometimes between immigrant Africans, or other immigrant people of African descent, and native African Americans.

MUFWENE: Right. In New York you can find this—I don't know if it is very subtle—division between black Caribbeans and African Americans.

COLLINS: There are definitely, in the Bronx, big neighborhoods that are almost all West Indian, and in Brooklyn also.

MUFWENE: And they continue to speak in their own way, and not the African-American way.

COLLINS: Although on the edges you do have a mixture. . . .

MUFWENE: You get children that cross the boundaries.

COLLINS: Yes, or children who are born here. You say in your book that those who are born here—*they* are the ones who acquire the new ways of speaking. And that brings us back to the founder principle. Can you briefly recapitulate the founder principle?

MUFWENE: Well, the founder principle means that the people who settle the earliest in a new territory exert a large influence on the development of the new variety, and this influence can be disproportionate to their size, because every new installment of newcomers will find it more practical to speak like the locals than to speak like outsiders. Adults don't succeed, but children do it very quickly, because they want to be associated with the new language, with the new system, and they learn everything local, including the way of speaking. In the vast majority of cases, the founder principle prevails; but there are other cases where it will not prevail because the new layers of immigrants are suddenly much more numerous, or they are socio-economically more powerful or more prestigious, and they can change the system. But even if they change it, you will still find traces of the older systems that still survive. That is part of the founder effect, as the founder principle is also called.

COLLINS: Now, to backtrack a little, the reason I brought up the Bible issue earlier is that sometimes when you read literary criticism and they talk about writers like Dante Alighieri, they argue that, well, Dante helped to consolidate the modern version of Italian because he wrote this tremendous book, and he consciously incorporated elements of different dialects—what he thought were the most effective and the most beautiful elements, and combined them in his poem. So does that make any sense to you?

MUFWENE: Well, yes and no; and if you think that Italian consists only of standard Italian, then it makes sense. But if you know there are non-standard varieties of Italian that are different from the variety used by Dante, the answer is obviously no.

What that means is that Dante developed a variety that a lot of people would imitate—a lot of writers—and because they wrote more or less like him, by imitating

him they all converged in developing this literary variety of Italian that can be associated with Dante. When I used the term “copy,” I am saying that copy is just like imitation, and in speaking we often imitate other speakers, because we don’t want to be that different. Even non-native speakers who maintain their accents still imitate native speakers. They are just less successful.

COLLINS: Can events have a similar role in terms of consolidating or shifting the speed of language evolution? For instance, the most prominent event in our recent history is the 9/11 destruction of the World Trade Center, which has contributed phrases like “Ground Zero” and “weapons of mass of destruction” to everyday language. And the current war in Iraq—I’m sure there are some phrases that will come out of it.

MUFWENE: Yes, we are getting rid of “French fries.”

COLLINS: Yes, “Freedom fries.” [Laughter]

MUFWENE: We still eat them but we don’t want to call them “French fries.”

COLLINS: Is this a passing thing, or can an event have profound influence on language?

MUFWENE: Only time can tell. But events are usually occasions for people to become more creative and to rethink certain things. In a way, every day we do these kinds of things. However, only some individuals—those whose innovations are copied by other people—get to cause communal changes. On occasions like this, there is something taking place at the conscious level. What these events enhance is the same process that occurs in other cases of language evolution, but now it is at the conscious level, and we think aloud about language as we use it.

COLLINS: So, in these large events people become very critical of language use. For instance, one thing the news broadcasts seem to reflect—maybe because there is a lot of war news—is the idea that public discourse is getting more militarized.

MUFWENE: Yes. A similar example is reggae music as it gained currency. There are a number of phrases that spread around with reggae music. Or, when other styles of music became popular, people talked about them because they were in the news; and phrases spread around with those particular practices [and discussions]. And so wars are just such occasions, too. It could have been an electoral campaign, remember the first election of Bush when people started talking about what was it—*chad*? [Laughter] There are occasions that just make certain words more obvious, or, in the language that I used in my talk last night and in my book, they make some variants “advantageous.”

Or, speaking of “Ground Zero,” you know, I still keep wondering whether ground zero is at the level of surface, or at the level of the foundation of the building. It is not clear to me yet what people mean by “Ground Zero;” is it at the street level or is it at the lowest level of digging. . . .

COLLINS: I’ve never seen it defined, but I always thought it referred to the epicenter of the event—

MUFWENE: Where everything took place, the focal point of what everybody talks about.

COLLINS: Exactly. I’m sure that phrase will become a permanent part of everyday language. And then you wonder what other things will drop out. . . .

MUFWENE: There are certain things that will drop out. A linguist like myself may also be struck by the new phrase “embedded journalism,” because we speak of “embedded sentences” in syntax....

COLLINS: Two general questions. First, when you travel to places like Jamaica, Hong Kong, and Singapore investigating varieties of English, do you notice any parallel in terms of postcolonial situations in these places or are they quite different?

MUFWENE: There are parallels. The first thing that strikes you is that wherever there was contact of English with other languages and English was adopted, either as a vernacular or a major lingua franca, English won a Pyrrhic victory, because it came out quite modified. It became a different kind of English. Places such as Jamaica, Hong Kong, Singapore, they all prompt me to look back at North America, and rethink what particular ecological factors I may have overlooked that deserve attention. It also strikes me that since independence a lot of these former colonies have realized that it is hopeless to want to talk like Britons.

COLLINS: Singapore has that “Speak Good English” campaign—

MUFWENE: Yes. They try, but they are going to be just like India and other places. Eventually they will acknowledge that there is a local variety that people simply must accept, and there is some sort of beauty in the diversity that is emerging.

But you also learn more about the association of language with national identity, and that is very interesting also. When I find these new identities that are emerging, one of the questions on my mind is: Will there continue to be one English language five hundred years from now, or will there be separate languages that have evolved from English? I don’t know what terms should be used in this particular case because we already use “Germanic languages” for all the languages that have a Germanic background, and English is, of course, Germanic.

Will there be a kind of—I don't want to say "Anglican" because that is already used for a religion—but will there be several "Anglo" languages? Will there be an American Anglo language—I don't know what name will be used for it—and a British Anglo language, an Australian Anglo language, a Caribbean Anglo language? They are all related, but at the same time they will probably be different enough to cause lack of mutual intelligibility, as there is between Spanish and French, or between French and Italian, or between Spanish and Italian. We don't really know. Linguists have tried to avoid that problem by christening varieties of English in Jamaica, or in the Caribbean in general, as *Creoles* or *Patois*—

COLLINS: And that's what you are fighting.

MUFWENE: That's right. They are suggesting that they are already separate languages. But I have reservations about that because we have similar varieties in the United States, such as Appalachian English or Old Amish English, or in England there is Cockney, but nobody has ever stipulated that those varieties are separate languages. On the other hand, we know if we put speakers of Cockney next to a speaker of some variety of American English, chances are that they won't understand each other, right?

COLLINS: One thing I find interesting here is the international media issue, the issue of the global media village. Because sometimes they make movies about Cockney people, and I delude myself that I can understand some Cockney because I've been able to follow what the characters say in the movies.

MUFWENE: Yes, but one of the factors that make mutual intelligibility possible is exposure to it. People understand each other not necessarily because they speak the same variety, but because they are familiar with it.

COLLINS: Yes, just like you pick up some Mexican words if you live—

MUFWENE: Yes, if you live long enough with Mexicans you pick up a fair amount of Spanish, and when people speak, you understand a little bit. But there will be a time maybe when a speaker of Jamaican standard English and a speaker of American standard English won't understand each other.

COLLINS: I think if I went back to Jamaica there would be some Patois I couldn't understand now.

MUFWENE: At least at the colloquial level. Even two people, one American and one Jamaican, at the colloquial level, when they make no attempt to embellish their English, do not fully understand each other. I was talking to a friend of mine in Jamaica this morning and she was telling me about people that "pretty up" their language. And I said "pretty up?" What is that? You know, there are phrases like that.

If there are many of them in a conversation, they are going to lower the extent of mutual intelligibility.

COLLINS: I remember—this is an embarrassing thing—when I was a kid coming to America—again, I guess I had stereotypes. I thought all Americans spoke like the people on television, so I tried to imitate the television voice, and of course nobody could understand anything I said. I would have been better off speaking Patois.

MUFWENE: People are looking at globalization and thinking that globalization is really going to reduce differences. We haven't really seen all the effects of globalization, and in many ways globalization is introducing new inequities.

COLLINS: Do you mean economic, or—

MUFWENE: Economic and social. And that means that the people that are not really participating in globalization are going to evolve in their own directions, too—

COLLINS: —linguistically and otherwise.

MUFWENE: Yes, economically and linguistically.

COLLINS: But doesn't globalization also kind of shuffle the language deck, so you can have mutual influence to some extent?

MUFWENE: Yes, but mutual influence occurs if you interact with each other, if you don't interact—

COLLINS: —you remain isolated from each other—

MUFWENE: Yes, I think of Jamaica again, in the context of globalization. Well, how many Jamaicans are really participating in globalization? People say, "look, every Jamaican has a cell phone now." That's true. Most Jamaicans in Kingston, in Montego Bay, or in Ocho Rios have cell phones. But it's still the same traditional patterns of interaction. The manual worker in Montego Bay, for instance, is not talking (regularly) with the University professor at Mona/Kingston.

COLLINS: Yes, people remain in the same networks.

MUFWENE: Yes. It's true. People are communicating remotely by telecommunication with each other. And, yes, they can call their relatives in the United States. But when they call their relatives in the United States, they are still using Patois. So that changes nothing.

Nevertheless, some people still might say, "Look at the news. When you go to Jamaica everybody is watching CNN. People have the choice to watch Showtime or HBO in the evening." Which is true. But how many of us try to speak like the TV? [Laughter]

COLLINS: Only if it's some kind of interesting phrase . . .

MUFWENE: That's it, because you don't want to look ridiculous or sound ridiculous. You talk the way everybody else around you does. So, globalization is still poorly understood even among people who invoke it day after day to explain things. Globalization does not only create uniformity, it also creates disparities, and with disparities come divergence.

COLLINS: It's interesting, this 100 year perspective you have about what will happen.

MUFWENE: Unfortunately, you and I will probably not be alive to test these things. When you think about globalization, it is important to note that globalization didn't start today. You can already speak of globalization when Europe colonized the rest of the world. You can speak of some form of globalization at the time of the Roman Empire, and you can speak of some form of globalization when agriculturalists started colonizing hunter-gatherers.

COLLINS: Or even when the first people came out of Africa and globalized.

MUFWENE: Yes, you know there had to be some form of globalization since the emergence of mankind on this planet.

COLLINS: Yes.

MUFWENE: Yet there have been continuous divergences.

COLLINS: Speaking of your long perspective, I think you mentioned that people in Chicago are testing your theory with computer programs?

MUFWENE: Yes, I have a colleague in the Computer Science department who told me that he would like to model it on the computer. It's a matter of having the right students work with the right programs and we will see. But there is something we have to realize here: Computer modeling enables you to pay more attention to the multiplicity of factors that should be singled out.

COLLINS: But you still have to do the research.

MUFWENE: Right. Computer modeling will enable you to ask questions that you could otherwise overlook. Because there is a reality out there, you try to interpret it. And in evolution—I mean in theories of evolution—the focus is not on making predictions. The focus is on explaining the past. What computer modeling does is try to recreate a universe out there in a virtual environment where some of the accounts that have been suggested can be replicated. When that doesn't happen, then you start looking for reasons, and you start teasing out the different factors, one at a time. It's like people who do multivariate analysis in statistics. That's the advantage of computer modeling.

COLLINS: Can you comment on the people you dedicated *The Ecology of Language Evolution* to, and can you also comment on the sentence at the close of the dedication: "Together we work for a better world"?

MUFWENE: Well, there's something interesting here. It starts: "To the memory of *Ntazyel, Ekyey, Osum, Zaki, Seveehna and Tumunete.*" These are all members of my family who saw me go to school and hoped that I would come out of school to help them, and they all died before this book was completed. Some of them I managed to help, and some of them I never did.

And then *Tazie* and *Embu*, these are two women who are very, very special in my life. *Tazie* is my daughter and *Embu* is my mother, and they all have a lot of faith in me, and they both believe that I can make changes in the world, and so we try. My mother keeps encouraging me to remain a fighter. My middle name is *Sangol*, which means, "Hang in there, keep on fighting, stand up to the challenge."

COLLINS: It seems as though you *have* made changes—in the way people think about Creoles.

MUFWENE: Well, I hope so. And as we were saying last night, when you put the theory of Creoles in perspective, there is some racism there. This is an opinion I share with Michel DeGraff, a Haitian professor of linguistics at MIT, who has recently written a couple of insightful articles on the subject matter of Creole exceptionalism. But it's not the people who are racist. A lot of people who are doing Creole studies, who are doing genetic linguistics, they are people who are opposed to racism and so forth, but they haven't realized—

COLLINS: They haven't thought it through—

MUFWENE: —that some of their working assumptions are racist. And to the extent that I understand these biases, I'm trying to expose them. Because they perpetuate double standards. For some languages you have a set of working assumptions, and for some others you hold a different set of assumptions, *a priori*, and then you select information only about some languages to develop genetic linguistics. And you tend to ignore even some of the most obvious lessons from particular languages, especially

Creoles, that should actually help you rethink genetic linguistics in general. This is elaborated in the book that I am now readying for publication: *Créoles, écologie sociale, évolution linguistique*.

COLLINS: Your findings could actually be evidence—I mean as a layman, I’m just guessing—for, say, Chomsky’s idea about this universal linguistic competence—

MUFWENE: Universal grammar—

COLLINS: Yes.

MUFWENE: Well, Chomsky’s Universal Grammar is a good idea; it’s a very good research program. But details of it must be worked out. We will understand the nature of Universal Grammar better as we get to know more about different languages. Unfortunately, Creoles seem to have been excluded from the franchise of languages that should enlighten us about details of Universal Grammar. Perhaps this notion of Universal Grammar can also shed light on mechanisms of language speciation, the object of genetic linguistics.

But, you know, here we are dealing with very challenging questions about the development of Creoles, and if we ignore whatever is worth learning from those challenging questions when we are doing genetic linguistics, or don’t even consider questions regarding the development of creoles as being within the domain of genetic linguistics, that leads to the incorrect conclusion that creoles cannot really contribute to shaping genetic linguistics.

And then there are many other aspects. While some scholars have been working on the emergence of new language varieties such as creoles and indigenized Englishes, others have focused on the ongoing extinction of Native American and Australian Aboriginal languages. Interestingly, in this colonial context, people have talked very little about the disappearance of several European languages in the same territories. Okay? Swedish, Dutch, German—these are some languages that used to be spoken in the United States of America, and they are no longer spoken. There are African languages that were brought over here with the slaves and later immigrants, which are no longer spoken. It seems to me that paying some attention to how all these languages died should help us better understand why Native American languages are now dying.

COLLINS: So you want a more global view—a global approach.

MUFWENE: Yes. And one of the interesting things about Creoles is that their history is so recent, that we can figure out a lot of the relevant factors. Once we understand those things we can also go back farther in time and check, for instance, what happened during the Roman Empire or the colonization of England by the Germanic populations. Notice that most Celtic languages have now become extinct in Europe. The number of Celtic languages spoken today is very small compared to the number

of Celtic languages that were spoken in the same territories over 1000 years ago during the Roman Empire and when the Germanics spread from the Scandinavian countries to colonize the part of Europe south and west of them.

We want to learn more about all of this. Then we can come back in time and look at Native Americans losing their languages or Australian Aborigines losing their languages and ask interesting questions too, or try to figure out what is really going on. And we can go to Africa or Asia, and see why the languages there are not dying as rapidly as the languages of the New World or Australia. I make a distinction between different colonization styles *The Ecology of Language Evolution*. Can that distinction help us understand what is going on?

COLLINS: You mean the distinction between settlement colonization and exploitation colonization?

MUFWENE: That's right. I mean that there are probably a number of factors out there in human history that deserve more attention than we have given them, and as I work on Creoles, I am constantly reminded that there a number of those factors that genetic linguistics didn't pay proper attention to.

COLLINS: In *The Ecology of Language Evolution*, you write that you are interested in macro ecology, "a branch of biology in which *ecology* is treated as a cover term for diverse factors which are both external and internal to a species and bear on its evolution. Such factors include 'population size, habitat requirements, and genetic variation' as well as 'differences in initial conditions,'" and so on. One of the impressions that such a passage gives me is that the units of a language include not only morphemes and syntactical and physiological structures that you use to make the sounds with, but also social interactions, expectations about those interactions—I mean, can you expand the definition of language to include such things or would that be self-defeating?

MUFWENE: Units of language remain more or less the same. You know, there are phonemes, there are morphemes, there are words, and there are sentences. And well, sentences are more like productions, and they are not really—well, they are units at the level of analysis, but they are not constituent parts of the language. But in order to understand how a language evolves, you have to pay attention to a number of factors that I will treat as ecological. Those factors include who the speakers are, what particular status the speakers hold in the community, how they are affected by socioeconomic factors within that particular community, when they arrived, whether they were the founder population or came later, and where they came from. Were they a majority or a minority, and what kind of relation or rapport in terms of interaction did they hold with the population that preceded them, or with the populations that followed them, etcetera, etcetera. All those factors bear on language evolution.

For instance, nowadays, we know that African Americans have been in North America for centuries, and they have developed their own varieties of English. But there are new waves of immigrants that are still coming from Africa and the Caribbe-

an. Can we expect those new immigrants to influence the speech of African Americans, or can we not expect them? Do those people interact regularly with African Americans or don't they? And which particular people are those people using as models for their speech?

Those are the kinds of things that matter. How come the new waves of immigrants really have very little impact on American English? Two hundred years ago they could have exerted a different kind of impact on the development of American English.

COLLINS: Because they find the population so big now.

MUFWENE: Yes, because the people that come are a minority; they are not bringing any particular economic strength with them. They are coming to evolve in a socio-economic structure that is already in place. They are being absorbed. Two centuries ago, the equation was different. Some of the people brought new jobs and new businesses, and had opportunities to redefine things.

COLLINS: And there was a frontier that was being forced open. People could "go west."

MUFWENE: That's right.

COLLINS: All right, I'll let you rest. Thanks so much.

MUFWENE: You are welcome.