

Ethnicity and Women's Courtesy Titles: A Preliminary Report

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Although numerous studies have been conducted on attitudes toward *Ms.* and patterns of *Ms.*-use since its popularization in the 1970s, few of these studies have examined ethnicity as a variable in its use. The present paper reports on a new online survey of women's courtesy titles and surname choices, focusing on the ethnicity of respondents as a predictor of their likelihood of addressing a woman with *Ms.* As the data include residents of both Canada and the United States, the label 'Black' is used rather than 'African American', and 'White' is then used in place of 'Caucasian', in order to have parallel ethnic labels. Preliminary results suggest a difference between Whites and Blacks in terms of likelihood of using *Ms.*, with Blacks tending to prefer the more traditional titles *Miss* and *Mrs.* at a higher rate than Whites. However, because of uneven cell sizes and the under-representation of some ethnic groups, statistical results must be treated with caution until further data are available.

Introduction

The courtesy title *Ms.* has been the focus of numerous studies and much debate since feminists began popularizing it in the 1970s. Prior to that time, *Ms.* had appeared in some secretarial manuals as a choice that could be used when addressing business letters to women of unknown marital status, but it was rarely used and it was almost unknown. When feminists took it up, their goal was to eliminate *Miss* and *Mrs.* completely and to have *Ms.* as the only feminine courtesy title, used in a manner parallel to the use of *Mr.* for men. This goal has yet to be achieved, although *Ms.* has gained a foothold and is now entrenched as a third courtesy title for women, used alongside the more traditional titles *Miss* and *Mrs.*

Few studies have considered ethnicity or race as variables either in people's attitudes toward *Ms.* or in their likelihood of using *Ms.* One reason for this may be that surveys on *Ms.* tend to rely on convenience samples rather than on truly representative samples of the population. In other words, data are not gathered systematically enough to ensure that the survey reflects the demographic makeup of the population being sampled. Rather, researchers select a location or identify an

available pool of respondents based on whatever groups or locations are accessible to them. For example, Kenneth L. Dion and his associates distributed their surveys at the Ontario Science Centre in Toronto (Dion and Cota, 1991; Dion and Schuller, 1990, 1991), and other studies have utilized university undergraduates as a ready source of respondents (see Atkinson, 1987; Feather, O'Driscoll, and Nagel, 1979; Jacobson and Insko, 1984; Lillian, 1995). Fuller (2005) broadened this sample type, using not only university students but also faculty and staff. Murray (1997), in the largest study to date, sampled a broader demographic in the US Midwest, over a 12-year period. One consequence of using convenience samples is that one cannot readily control for variables such as ethnicity or race. In fact, of the studies cited, only Murray (1997) and Fuller (2005) offer any data at all on race or ethnicity.

Murray (1997) sampled a total of 10,056 native speakers of English in the US Midwest, testing respondents' perceptions of women who use the title *Ms.*, as compared to their perceptions of women who use either *Miss* or *Mrs.* He did find differences between Whites and African Americans in terms of their perception of *Ms.*-titled women, with African Americans holding fewer stereotypes of these women than Whites (1997: 181–182). However, fully 95 per cent of his respondents were White non-Hispanics, so in spite of his overall large numbers of respondents, he cautions: '[A]ny conclusions involving the ethnicity of my informants should still be weighed against the unevenness of their ethnic distribution' (1997: 77). Fuller (2005) replicated Lillian's (1995) Canadian study, asking faculty, staff, and students at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale to choose forms of address for fifteen hypothetical women described to them, but found no statistically significant differences between European American and African American respondents in their likelihood of choosing *Ms.* as a form of address.

Methodology

The study I report on here is part of an ongoing study of women's surname choices and courtesy titles (Lillian, 2007; Lillian, forthcoming). Like the studies mentioned above, this study is based on a convenience sample; however, this is the first such study to be conducted online. One of the goals of using a web-based survey is to reach a larger and broader sample of people. I posted the survey on the SurveyMonkey website (www.surveymonkey.com) and then advertised it by sending emails to all of my contacts and by posting notices on a number of listservs, including Linguist List and the listservs of the American Name Society, the International Gender and Language Association, and Feminists in Linguistics. I encouraged people to forward my announcement to as many other listservs and individuals as they saw fit. This resulted in a convenience sample of 2641 individuals who responded to the questionnaire. Based on the data provided, 2123 women and 369 men answered the survey, with 149 persons not indicating their gender. Residents of the United States comprised 75 per cent of the sample, residents of Canada 10 per cent, and residents of other countries around the world 15 per cent. Since the listservs I belong to are academic in nature and since my friends and contacts are biased in the direction of educated, middle-class people, I expected to find an educational and socio-economic bias in my sample; however, I had hoped that soliciting participants using listservs such as

Linguist List, with over 20,000 subscribers worldwide, would give me a more ethnically diverse sample than previous studies had achieved. Unfortunately, this goal has not been fully realized.

In formulating the questions for my survey, I considered asking respondents to select from a list a label which best reflected their ethnic self-identification and I tested this format in a pilot survey given to students at East Carolina University. This proved inadequate, because, for example, while some respondents identify as 'White', others of the same ethnicity identify as 'Caucasian', and while some identify as 'Black', others of the same ethnicity identify as 'African American'. Furthermore, a term like 'African American' is only applicable in the USA, and this survey was distributed worldwide. Some people resent having to fit themselves into the categories offered by the researcher, so I made ethnicity a fill-in-the-blank question instead. This has the advantage of including all people on an equal basis, and not leaving some to identify as 'Other', but it makes it more difficult to code and analyse the data. My research assistant¹ has had to use her judgement sometimes in deciding how to assign people to categories for analysis. For example, people variously labelling themselves 'white', 'English', 'Anglo', 'Caucasian', 'Scottish', 'white bread', and 'vanilla', among others, were all classified as 'White', while people identifying as American or Canadian but also variously labelling themselves 'Chinese', 'Vietnamese', 'Japanese', 'Korean', etc., were classified as 'Asian' for the purpose of this analysis. Similar sorts of judgements were made for other ethnic categories.

In preparing the data for statistical analysis, we included only respondents who listed either Canada or the USA as their country of residence, since this provided a somewhat more homogeneous sample. We then omitted from the analysis people who had identified themselves or had been identified as being of mixed race, since 'mixed' might include any number of combinations of racial or ethnic groups and any conclusions about this set would be meaningless. Likewise, we omitted the category 'Other', because it included a wide range of ethnic and racial identities, none of which had enough members to be valid for statistical analysis. We were then left with the following four categories: White ($n=1758$), Black ($n=123$), Latino/Hispanic ($n=43$), and Asian ($n=52$).

Regrettably, the number of respondents is skewed in favor of Whites, with the other groups being severely under-represented. This problem becomes even more serious when one tries to subdivide the ethnic groups by gender and age.² The result is that for some cells there are no respondents at all, and for others there are only one or two. Without at least five respondents per cell (i.e. subcategory), analysis of variance (ANOVA) based on interactions of ethnicity with gender and/or age becomes meaningless, as Levene's test of equality of error variances demonstrates. Hence, rather than reporting on those interactions in this paper, I will reserve that analysis until I have obtained a more balanced sample of respondents.

One technique I use to increase the diversity of respondents is to assign my undergraduate students a project involving distributing paper copies of my survey and analysing responses. The students receive extra credit for recruiting respondents who are members of under-represented groups. So far, I have obtained approximately 200 additional surveys from African Americans in North Carolina this way, but the data have not yet been manually added to the online data pool as of the time of writing. I am trying to recruit colleagues in various regions of Canada and the US to make

data-gathering for my survey likewise part of their course assignments, in order to give me a geographically balanced sample. In addition, I am seeking to advertise the survey on listservs that may represent particular ethnic groups. For example, some organizations have a Black caucus, or a Latina/o caucus, or a caucus representing some other ethnic group. As a White woman, I do not belong to any such caucuses, so I am dependent upon students, colleagues, and interested acquaintances to promote my survey in these venues.

Results

Although caution is warranted in drawing any conclusions based on data skewed as strongly as mine are, I can make some preliminary observations about ethnicity and use of *Ms.* based on one-way ANOVAs. In these analyses, the independent variable is ethnicity and the dependent variables are respondents' answers to fifteen scenarios, which are identical to those used in Lillian (1995). Respondents are asked to pretend that they are doing a mailing to the female clients of the company they work for. They are presented with short descriptions of fifteen different women and asked to select how they would address them. Varying sorts of information about age, occupation, and relationship status are given for the fifteen women in these scenarios. The woman is always identified by first and last name, and where a spouse or partner is identified, his or her name is also given. Respondents must then select which form of address they would use. The following is a sample scenario from the survey:

2. Elaine Parker is a 35-year-old lawyer, married to Alex Wilson. You would address the woman as:

Miss Parker	Ms. Parker	Mrs. Parker
Miss Wilson	Ms. Wilson	Mrs. Wilson
Miss Parker-Wilson	Ms. Parker-Wilson	Mrs. Parker-Wilson

(See Appendix A for a complete list of the fifteen scenarios.) For the purpose of the present paper, I am interested only in which courtesy title respondents use for the woman in the scenario, not which surname they opt for. Lillian (forthcoming) discusses some of the survey results concerning women's surname choices.

Analyses of variance reveal significant between-groups main effects for ethnicity ($p < .05$) for scenarios two, three, four, five, six, seven, ten, twelve, and fourteen, but not for the other six scenarios, but it is not clear what differentiates the scenarios for which significant results were obtained from those for which no significant results were obtained. The women described in the scenarios which reached significance were of varying ages (17, 19, 27, 29, 34, 35, 38, 57, and no age given) and so were those in the non-significant scenarios (23, 42, 43, 52, 63, and 83). Women in the scenarios reaching significance included three married, one separated, one divorced, one widowed, one unidentified, and two single, while those in the scenarios which were not significant included three living in common-law situations (including one lesbian), one single, one divorced, and one with unidentified marital status. Thus, there was no apparent reason why results for some scenarios achieved significance, while others did not. I will, however, only present the data for the scenarios which achieved statistical significance.

Scenario two describes a thirty-five-year-old married lawyer who kept her own surname. There was a significant difference between Whites and Blacks, with Whites using *Ms.* 67 per cent and *Mrs.* 31.6 per cent of the time, in contrast to Blacks, who used *Ms.* 32.5 per cent and *Mrs.* 66.6 per cent of the time. Blacks also contrast significantly with Asians, who used *Ms.* 55.7 per cent and *Mrs.* 44.2 per cent of the time. A further significant contrast was found between Whites and Latinos, the latter using *Ms.* 48.8 per cent and *Mrs.* 51.1 per cent of the time. Apparently, for Whites, the woman's status as a lawyer and her non-traditional surname choice outweighed her status as married, whereas for other groups, particularly Blacks, marital status may have been the more salient factor.

Scenario four also involves a married woman in her mid-thirties, this one a full-time homemaker with children. The only significant contrast for this scenario was between Whites and Blacks. A majority in both groups preferred to address her with *Mrs.*, but 35.6 per cent of Whites and only 12.1 per cent of Blacks addressed her using *Ms.* This woman is portrayed as living the most stereotypically traditional lifestyle of all the women in the scenarios and this was reflected in the choice of courtesy title, particularly among Black respondents.

Fiona Stevens-Harper, the married woman who runs a family business with her husband (scenario seven), leads a lifestyle more traditional than the lawyer of scenario two, but less traditional than that of the homemaker in scenario four. Once again, there was a significant difference between Whites and Blacks, and once again Blacks were more inclined than Whites to use *Mrs.* (84.5 per cent compared to 49.0 per cent). Blacks also contrasted significantly with Asians, who used *Mrs.* 59.6 per cent of the time. For all these groups, where *Mrs.* was not used the choice was made to use *Ms.* Once again, marital status seems to have been the most important factor in the decision of Blacks, whereas for other groups Fiona's non-traditional choice to hyphenate her surname might explain their greater likelihood to address her using *Ms.*

In deciding how to address the fifty-seven-year-old widow in scenario six, Whites and Blacks again showed a significant difference, with Whites using *Ms.* 36.5 per cent and *Mrs.* 47.7 per cent of the time, and Blacks using *Ms.* 36.5 per cent and *Mrs.* 61.7 per cent of the time. A widow is apparently more likely to be perceived by Blacks than by Whites as remaining in the 'married' category identified with *Mrs.*

When the woman is separated from her husband by choice, rather than by death, however, as in scenario fourteen, a strong majority of all groups were likely to address her using *Ms.* (Whites 93.5 per cent, Blacks 80.4 per cent, Latinos 83.7 per cent, and Asians 84.6 per cent of the time). Nevertheless, there was still a significant contrast between Whites and Blacks. There was also a significant difference between Blacks and Asians and this appears to be a function of which title was used when *Ms.* was not selected. Specifically, Blacks used *Miss* 5.6 per cent and *Mrs.* 13.8 per cent of the time, while Asians used *Miss* 11.5 per cent and *Mrs.* only 3.8 per cent of the time. Asians also contrasted significantly with Latinos on this measure, with Latinos using *Miss* 2.3 per cent and *Mrs.* 13.9 per cent of the time. Thus, Blacks and Latinos appear to be more likely than Whites and Asians to continue to use *Mrs.* for a woman who is separated from her husband but not divorced.

The remaining four scenarios for which significant contrasts were found involve women who are either unmarried or whose marital status is unspecified. Of these, the

woman least likely to be addressed using *Ms.* was the seventeen-year-old high school student described in scenario five. There was, however, a significant difference between Whites, who used *Ms.* 42.7 per cent and *Miss* 56.9 per cent of the time, and Blacks, who used *Ms.* 30.8 per cent and *Miss* 69.1 per cent of the time. In this case *Miss* is the more traditional choice and, once again, Blacks were somewhat more likely than Whites to use the traditional form of address.

Scenario three describes a woman who is a nineteen-year-old single parent. Once again, Blacks were significantly more likely than Whites to choose the more traditional *Miss* (28.9 per cent versus 16.1 per cent) rather than *Ms.* (70.7 per cent versus 82.9 per cent). There was also a significant difference between Blacks and Latinos for this scenario, with Latinos more likely than all other groups to use *Ms.* (90.6 per cent) rather than *Miss* (17.7 per cent).

Scenario twelve describes a twenty-nine-year-old single bank employee who intends to keep her own name if she marries. For this scenario, Whites and Blacks used *Ms.* at the same rate, so the difference therefore arose in the choice between *Miss* and *Mrs.* Since the woman is single, one would expect her to be addressed with either *Ms.* or *Miss*, but not with *Mrs.* Nevertheless, 6.5 per cent of Blacks, in contrast to just 1.4 per cent of Whites, choose *Mrs.* for her. This may indicate that some people, perhaps reading quickly, misinterpreted the statement 'She thinks she might marry someday, but she has already decided that if she does, she will keep her own last name and not take her husband's name' as meaning that she was already married.

Finally, scenario ten describes a twenty-seven-year-old heavy equipment operator of unspecified marital status. This scenario revealed significant differences between Asians and Whites and between Asians and Latinos. Asians used *Ms.* 71.1 per cent and *Miss* 28.8 per cent of the time, while Whites used *Ms.* 85.1 per cent and *Miss* 14.5 per cent of the time and Latinos used *Ms.* 90.6 per cent and *Miss* just 9.3 per cent of the time. Perhaps the woman's non-traditional occupation was a less salient factor for Asians than for either Whites or Latinos.

Conclusions

Only nine of the fifteen scenarios in the survey revealed any significant effects of ethnicity, and fully half of all significant contrasts occurred between Whites and Blacks. When these two groups are contrasted, it appears that the difference most often involves a greater tendency on the part of Whites to use the non-traditional title *Ms.* for the women in the scenarios and a greater tendency on the part of Blacks to opt for either *Miss* or *Mrs.*, according to which would be the more traditional choice in the given context.

Any conclusions drawn from these data must, however, be considered tentative and preliminary. The small number of non-Caucasian respondents and the unevenness of cell sizes make any results of significance statistically unreliable. Nevertheless, the data are suggestive and further investigation is warranted. Furthermore, noting a possible difference in usage between two or more ethnic groups does not explain the reasons for that difference, so a deeper sociological analysis is warranted. As I gather more data to continue this study, I will concentrate on recruiting more respondents from the under-represented ethnic categories examined in this study, namely

Blacks, Latinos, and Asians, as well as other groups too small to have been included in the data for this paper.

Appendix A: Scenarios used in questionnaire

1. Julia Allen is a 23-year-old university student. She is not married but she has been living with her boyfriend, Fred Rogers, for two years.
2. Elaine Parker is a 35-year-old lawyer, married to Alex Wilson.
3. Sandra Brant is a 19-year-old single mother living on her own with her child. The child's father, Stan Morris, has no contact with Sandra or the child.
4. Leanne Norton is 38 years old. She is a full-time homemaker with three children. Her husband works full-time and supports the family.
5. Selina Farley is a 17-year-old high school student living with her parents.
6. Grace Dawson is a 57-year-old widow, who works as a volunteer at a shelter for battered women and children.
7. Fiona Stevens-Harper and her husband Frank Harper are co-owners of a small hardware store.
8. Barb Elliot is a 42-year-old stock broker who lives with her lesbian partner, Judy Albright.
9. Mildred Jenkins is a 63-year-old retired teacher. She has never been married.
10. Allison Moore is 27 years old and works as a heavy equipment operator for the municipality she lives in.
11. Erica Jones-Carter is 43 years old with 3 children in high school. Her partner, Felix Carter, is the father of her children. Erica and Felix have lived together for over 20 years, but they have never formally married.
12. Rita Prentice is 29 years old and works at a bank. She thinks she might marry someday, but she has already decided that if she does, she will keep her own last name and not take her husband's name.
13. Esther Smith is 83 years old and is living on her own.
14. Lori Owen is 34 and is separated from her husband, Oliver Hanson. He has custody of their children. She attends university and works part-time. When she got married, she changed her last name to Hanson, but now that she is separated she has gone back to using her own last name.
15. Mary Walston is 52 years old and is divorced. She has just been elected to chair the organization *Feminists for Safe Transit Systems*.

Notes

¹ I thank my graduate assistant, Myleah Kerns, who patiently coded and organized some very messy data and who worked with me on the statistical analysis of the data.

² For all ethnicities combined, the data reveal that for every scenario, women used *Ms.* at a higher rate than men, and that both women and men used *Ms.* at a higher rate in this study than they did in Lillian (1995). Furthermore, when the respondents

were classified by age a distinct pattern emerged: for all but two of the scenarios, the rate of *Ms.* use climbed steadily with each successive age group, peaking with the fifty-fifty-nine age group, then dropping off again with the sixty-hundred-year-olds. This pattern can be explained if one considers that it is the members of the fifty-fifty-nine age group, particularly the women, who led the feminist movement in the 1970s and who were of the

generation who first popularized *Ms.* The sixteen–nineteen-year-old age group showed the lowest rates of *Ms.* use of any age group in all but three scenarios, and even though overall rates of *Ms.* use have risen from those noted in Lillian (1995),

this teen group consistently used *Ms.* less often for married women than even the 1995 respondents did. This corresponds with a growing preference among younger people to have a wife adopt her husband's surname upon marriage (see Lillian, forthcoming).

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