


# Black, black, or African American?

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By Aly Colón

Sometimes some sentences suddenly stand out. The sentences seem familiar. But you see them in a different way.

That happened to me when I read the following sentences in Mary Sanchez's 'Blurring the Color Line':

New estimates for July 2001: 36.2 million people self-identified as black. Thirty-seven million said they were Hispanic. And 37.7 million people identified as black or as black and one other race.

What stood out to me was seeing the word "black" with a lowercase "b" in the same paragraph as "Hispanic" with an uppercase "H." Since both terms referred to a people, I wondered why the word "black" didn't have an uppercase "B" to match the uppercase "H" in "Hispanic."

Now, I've seen the use of the word "black," used as another way to say African American, with a lowercase "b" before. But this time I wanted to change the lowercase "b" to an uppercase "B" so it would be "Black."

Here's how I see it. When we use terms such as African American, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans, we uppercase those terms.

So why not Blacks?

To me, it's an issue of respect, fairness, equality, and parity. When we use a lowercase letter it makes the word less visible, less prominent, and maybe less important. It's the diminutive form. My name is written with an uppercase "A" and "C" for "Aly Colón." I consider that a sign of respect.

When I mentioned that I thought black should appear with an uppercase "B" to Julie Moos, the Poynter Online news editor, she took it up with the online staff. After their discussion, she e-mailed me that the staff felt that uppercasing colors associated with race could stop some readers. The staff was most comfortable using lowercase.

Poynter Online uses "black" primarily as a racial identifier, as the Associated Press does, and it uses African American, depending on the context. "Don't hesitate to shout back your concerns on this," Moos told me, as Poynter Online continues to develop policies and procedures.

Since Moos mentioned the Associated Press, I thought I would check with their stylebook editor to find out why the word "black" carried a lowercase "b" as part of their style. I also turned to the president of the American Copy Editors Society for some feedback.

Norm Goldstein, stylebook editor for the Associated Press, responded to my e-mail inquiry that AP uses the lowercase "black" primarily because it reflects a common language usage found in newspapers and magazines.

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"It is also the first-listed form in most standard dictionaries, including AP's preferred Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition," he added in his e-mail. "African-Americans, Hispanics, Arabs, and similar descriptions are considered nationalities (or dual nationalities), while 'black' and 'white' are the more commonly used terms for the Negroid and Caucasian races."

Goldstein noted that AP style changed with usage over the years, as "black" became the preferred term in the 1970s, replacing "Negro," much as "Negro" had previously replaced the term "colored." The term "African American" was first suggested in 1988 and endorsed by Jesse Jackson at a civil rights summit in 1989, Goldstein wrote. He added, "Studies since have indicated a strong majority of blacks prefer the term black, rather than African-American, Afro-American, or Negro."

In a follow-up phone interview, Goldstein said AP watches what newspapers around the country do when it comes to language usage. And since many use AP style, he said, "We're more sensitive when a newspaper does not use AP style and we might change."

AP also researches the stylebooks of such major newspapers as The New York Times and the Los Angeles Times, as well as papers like the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and smaller papers. It reviews its style every year. But Goldstein said he hasn't heard much about the use of lowercase "b" in black.

When I spoke to John McIntyre, ACES president and head of the copy desk at The Baltimore Sun, he said he consulted two standard references: the Merriam-Webster dictionary and the New Fowler's Modern English Usage. He explained that the term "black" has been an ethnic

identifier since the 18th century. It became the preferred term in the 1960s and 1970s.

Why lowercase "b"? First, he said, because it's always been lowercase and tradition plays an important part in language usage.

"Newspapers ... don't impose language, they follow the language," McIntyre said. "The terms 'black' and 'white' with lowercase have a long history," he said, noting it's not a wise idea to veer away from what readers use. "It's very difficult to alter traditional uses. It's been 20 years we've been encouraged to use 'African American' instead of 'black.' And it's still not a settled usage."

While any newspaper could set a style to capitalize the word "black," McIntyre said he doesn't know how much influence it would have outside the newspaper itself. Such a change would look strange to other newspapers, he noted.

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"The way language changes is not well understood," he said, adding that H.L. Mencken once said that the plain people, not the professors, determine language. "For my part, I would have to see (an) extremely persuasive argument to make the change. There would have to be a persuasive rationale, a logical reason to do it. I would also have to see the usage to have the prospect of use beyond the fringe group. This is why we're skittish about fad usage ... I'd have to see (a change to 'Black') somewhere other than my own newspaper. Not just from minority publications or fringe groups."

When it comes to making any changes in usage, like going from "black" to "Black," McIntyre said he would pay attention to what he calls "bellwether" newspapers, such as The New York Times and the Los Angeles Times. He noted that the Los Angeles Times is pioneering some new directions with the use of Latino and Hispanic because of its large population base. He'd also like to see how the Associated Press, Newsweek, Time, Reader's Digest, and The New Yorker would address such changes.

"These issues are extremely difficult," he stressed.

I agree. I recognize the value of tradition and the linguistic legitimacy that comes when language enjoys broad usage among the general population. And I understand how challenging it can be to set language standards for journalists. Goldstein and McIntyre care about how journalists use language. I appreciate their understanding of history and their desire to provide us with some kind of linguistic order.

However, what I understood by talking to both Goldstein and McIntyre is that many publications use AP style and AP determines its style by watching what other publications do. I see the possibility of circular thinking that may make change difficult.

If we only listen to each other, how will we hear voices different from our own? If the majority rules, what role do "fringe groups" and minority groups play?

I'm also interested in treating people fairly. Respect matters. How we address each other matters. Equity matters. How we identify people matters.

It just suddenly seems odd to me to see "black" with a lowercase "b" while other groups get uppercase first letters. And, for that matter, why not uppercase "W" in "white" as well when the term "white" is used to denote a people?

So am I off-base in wanting to change from "black" to "Black," and "white" to "White," when it comes to identifying a people?