

**African American Vernacular English: A linguistic study on the dialect and
the social implications for its speakers**

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Before the Oakland School Board dispute in 1996, terms like, “Ebonics”, “black English”, and “African American vernacular” were widely misunderstood. Language carries with it, major implications in many different situations. We are taught at an early age how to speak and we are presented with various different depictions of how to act and speak in certain settings. We know that in formal settings, “proper English” like “please” and “thank you” are in order. We know that in an informal setting a simple “what up” may be sufficient. *Or do we?* John Baugh asserts, “All normal children in every society learn to speak without the aid of formal instruction. In America we find three groups of language learners: those who learn Standard English as their first language, those who learn nonstandard dialect of English natively, and those who do not learn English as their mother tongue” (3). It cannot be assumed that everyone is always taught how to speak and how to act in certain social settings or at least that they are taught the “right” way. But what is “right”? Why do we automatically label speech as right and wrong? These labels seem to be most often used when referring to the African American Vernacular.

The questions being researched in this paper are: Can educators teach students the prestige language while still promoting the acceptance of AAVE as a dialect of the Standard English language? If this promotion does not occur, do speakers of the dialect suffer academically? By looking at these two questions, the position of this paper is not to say that AAVE should be taught to students in hopes that they will command this dialect as their dominant dialect. It is extremely important to understand that language and power go hand in hand and the prestige language is what should be used in order to gain that power. AAVE should simply be looked at as a form of the language and should not be labeled as incorrect or wrong due to the implications that this may have on the speakers of the dialect.

When looking at AAVE it is easy to see that there is a system present along with thousands of native speakers of this particular dialect. J.L. Dillard asserts that, “Historically, there can hardly be any doubt that the variety now known as Black English is the most complex of American dialects.” (289). So why do we label this dialect as socially unacceptable in certain social contexts, even within a context where the speakers are primarily African American? The study of variant English is of extreme importance when attempting to communicate on a day-to-day basis and especially in communication within a classroom. The education system holds the standardized English language in high regard. The strict focus on this standard could prove to be detrimental to the speakers of variations of English. Due to these different questions, this paper will discuss how the dialect emerged; analyze what the social implications are (especially within the school system) for speakers of AAVE; review some of the systematic features of the dialect while integrally posing a rhetorical view to explain why AAVE should be more socially accepted as a variant of the English language.

The emergence of AAVE

When studying the historical growth and development of the English language it is apparent that language changes over time and that change, although not always accepted, is nonetheless inevitable. In order to understand the English language it is also essential to understand the nature of the language’s variations to the fullest extent. This importance is due to the scope of changes that the English language has undergone throughout history. From Old English to the late modern English time periods, the language has taken on different variations in different parts of the world.

There are many assumptions as to the emergence of AAVE, but one of the most reasonable explanations is the speculation by Algeo and Pyles, that perhaps the variant did not

begin in the early years of slavery. It is possible that most slave ships consisted of homogeneous groups who spoke the same language. It may not be until the slaves were actually placed on a heterogeneous plantation with no predominant language, that the idea of desperately needing to communicate with others caused the slaves to begin speaking in pidgin languages (220). Dillard asserts that many people feel insulted when told that their ancestors had to rely on a pidgin language which is essentially the convergence of two separate and different dialects into one. Pidgins perhaps are misunderstood by those people because they, like other languages, have regular principles of sentence construction (4). Pidgins, when understood, should be viewed as historically influential because many languages emerged from the use of this system. Pidgins as they develop are historical processes and they provide an adequate basis for the explanation of the emergence of AAVE. According to Smitherman, “Black talk crosses boundaries of age, gender, religion, region, and social class because it all comes from the same source: the African American Experience and the oral tradition embedded in that experience.”(1)

Labels and myths

There are many myths concerning AAVE but one myth that is in dire need of being dismissed is that variant English is inferior to Standard English. This myth may be due to the tendency for our society to automatically label that the more prestigious one is the more “correct” and the lower the class the more incorrect their dialect becomes. D. Byren argues, “Correct can only mean “socially acceptable” and apart from this has no meaning as applied to language. The social acceptability and hence “correctness” of any form or word is determined, not by reason or logic or merit, but solely by the hearer’s emotional attitude toward it.” (4) Byren speaks from a linguistic point of view when he attempts to diminish the labels right and wrong as far as speakers of the language are concerned.

One very influential person in the study of variant English is sociologist, William Labov. His ideas center around the fact that the idea of a standard language, as it is one “correct” form of the language has caused us to apply negative stereotypes to the speakers of the variant English. It is important to understand that variant English has a system just as “standard” English, and that the systems of this variant are just as consistent as those within the standard. According to Byren, “Labov points out that all linguists agree that nonstandard dialects (variant English) are highly structured systems; they do not see these dialects as accumulations of errors caused by the failure of their speakers to master Standard English.” (4) This myth is one that needs continual research and linguistic knowledge to insure that it is dismissed from “standard” speakers’ minds as well as the minds of the AAVE speakers themselves. It is most likely that those speakers who are continually presented with the myth that variant English is inferior to that or the standard will begin to not only think poorly of their speech, but of their intelligence as well.

John Baugh notes that the perspective of AAVE as it is viewed by those who do not speak the dialect is actually quite different than the perspective of the actual speakers. He states, “Many speakers of Black English view this dialect from an entirely different perspective: they value it” (5). This assertion by Baugh gives some insight to address the idea that AAVE speakers are ashamed of their linguistic identity or that they attempt to change their speech in order to be more socially accepted. It seems that AAVE serves as a cultural identity to those who use the dialect. This may be a reason as to why many speakers of the dialect feel that members of the African American race who attempt to speak “proper English” are in a sense deserting their race, as well as their individual identities. It seems that although AAVE carries negative stereotypes in the business and education world, it is looked down upon by some speakers when an African American tries to command the prestige language. Baugh asserts, “As

long as the adoption of standard English is perceived to be abandonment of black culture, an African American vernacular will continue to survive, and it will do so despite perceptions that black speech is ignorant” (5). This idea serves as the support behind the reason that many dialects of English survive today. One’s dialect is a part of their identity and it is important to recognize that anyone who attempts to rid someone of their proclaimed dialect is in a sense proposing the neglect of their personal identity. The person or institution attempting to impose the change of dialect with obviously be viewed with contempt and rejection of the institution or individual will most likely ensue. This is one reason that could cause the rejection of education by speakers of AAVE. This rejection will be highlighted further in the latter part of the paper.

Systematic features of AAVE

The systematic features of AAVE are extremely important to understand. According to Smitherman, “African American Language has a lexical core of words and phrases that are fairly stable over time and are familiar to and/or used by all groups in the Black community.” (2) This “core” that Smitherman talks about, is one major way that AAVE is a very complex and important variant of the English language because it, like many other standard language forms, has a system, a system that is followed by its native speakers. For instance, the sentence, *He nice*, is found by some to be considered “developmentally immature” from a non-linguistic viewpoint. These labels create characteristics for AAVE when actually this sentence is a direct correlation to the system of the variant language. According to Byren, Hartman, and Tait, this sentence, *He nice*, “is correct and mature for a speaker of Variant English to omit the copula in this sentence.” They also point out that this omission of the copula is in fact a systematic feature of Variant English. Another systematic feature of AAVE is the invariable *be* in speech. For instance, the sentence, *He happy* among variant speakers actually contains its own meaning, separate from the phrase, *He be happy*. The sentence, *He happy* actually refers to someone being happy at the moment that the phrase is spoken, whereas *He be happy* is a referent to one’s overall character and demeanor. Because of the consistency of AAVE it is difficult to argue that this variant could be called “wrong” or “deficient” yet some still believe that the standard is the only correct form of the language.

Social implications of AAVE in education

When a child is born into a family that speaks AAVE and they are taught their letters and eventually words and then are taught to read and speak, that vernacular is always present in their upbringing. When this child enters the educational system, they are told that they do not speak correctly. They are told that their speech is wrong. Why don’t educators acknowledge that their speech is different and then explain the reasons for the differences in the classroom setting at the same time encouraging the use of the prestige form of the language? Baugh brilliantly states, “If we ever hope to overcome linguistic ignorance and uninformed assumptions about race and language, then educators must participate in systemic reforms that will ensure educational equity” (15). This approach would not only make the child who speaks the vernacular understand that they are not stupid or a worse student than other children and it would help other students understand the reasons behind the vernacular as well.

According to Dillard, “a lack of adequate structure and historical information about Black English has been a major handicap to educational programs for Black children.” (1) AAVE has been labeled many things over the years such as Negro Non-Standard English, Merican, as well as being called a “deficient” language (3). These labels, all of which carry a negative and demeaning connotation not only stereotype African Americans, but also create a barrier and further the lack of understanding among English speakers. Through research on the idea of the

lack of acknowledgement by educators dealing with AAVE it seems that many speakers of the dialect feel a disconnect between themselves and the education system. It seems that it is difficult for these students to connect in an environment that feels threatening towards their social and racial identity. Baugh also points out the necessity of “three parties” in the academic progress of a student. “The lingering legacy of educational apartheid has weakened essential bonds between numerous parents, teachers, and school administrators, yet Finn correctly observes that students are most likely to succeed when cooperation among these three parties is strong” (Baugh 17).

In addition to the idea that there is a disconnect between AAVE speakers and the educational system it is also interesting to examine what fuels this particular disconnect. An important idea to research was idea that dialects should be accepted if the ability to communicate and be understood is present with the speakers of the dialect. Algeo and Pyles highlight this idea by acknowledging the “will to communicate”:

The differences between black and white speech are seldom of such magnitude as to impede communication, when a will to communicate exists. Whether such differences are increasing in importance is also controversial. As Ronald B. Buttes has pointed out, studies of the subject are difficult to interpret. In some cases the language of African-Americans appears to be converging with, rather than diverging from, that of other Americans. (49)

Here, Algeo and Pyles discuss the idea that if different dialects of the English language are spoken in conversation and there is a will to communicate between the speakers, then there really is no hindrance among the communicators. This is an important aspect of dialects that should be acknowledged because the label of “incorrect” often carries a stigma, by those labeling it as such, that it is impossible to understand the speaker. Perhaps the real problem in this situation is that there is no real “will to communicate”.

Another idea that Algeo and Pyles point out is the idea that AAVE seems to be becoming more similar to the other forms of the English language. It is contrived that this convergence could be due to the rise of hip-hop culture over the past five to ten years. It is no longer a rarity to see a member of another race, outside the African American race, speaking AAVE. This heightened awareness of the dialect from speakers of the standard should continue and can do so through the education system. As noted earlier, it is not to say that AAVE should be taught in writing courses or in speaking courses, I believe the standard, or prestige dialect should always be encouraged, however it is important that AAVE is taught as a variant of “standard” English and stressed to students that it is an acceptable “form” of the language. Sutcliffe explains that if action is not taken in light of the lack of knowledge about AAVE serious implications may occur, “... chances are that if the school rejects this aspect of the child’s identity then the child will reciprocate and gradually come to reject the language and culture of the school” (76).

In addition to Sutcliffe’s statement about rejection as one of the implications of AAVE, William Labov did a case study in which he observed the reading levels of 10-12 year old boys at a summer camp in Harlem. The conclusion of Labov’s research was “that the major cause of reading failure is cultural and political conflict in the classroom” (243). Labov found that in many of the social groups constructed within the day camp, there were the “street groups” in which there seems to lay a value system. The main concerns of this group that are outlined by Labov are, “toughness, smartness, trouble, excitement, autonomy, and fate” (244). The term “smartness” seemed to be used as a way to manipulate others rather than a way to receive or understand information. Labov found through his study of this particular group of boys, that

success in school is completely irrelevant to prestige within the social group and that reading is rarely ever exercised outside of school (244).

The conclusion of Labov's study is that "reading failure is a cultural conflict. The group of boys which does not show learning contains a large percentage of boys who do not fit in with the street culture-who reject it or are rejected by it. This study confirms indirect evidence that teachers in the city schools have little ability to reward or punish members of the street culture or to motivate learning by any means" (Labov 252). This study is an indirect answer to the research question of: If the promotion of AAVE does not occur, do speakers of the dialect suffer academically? This study shows that there is suffering from young speakers of AAVE in their reading skills as well as their social skills. They have rejected the culture from which the standard language is being taught.

According to Labov, "The fundamental situation that we face is one of reciprocal ignorance, where teacher and student are ignorant of each other's system and therefore of the rules needed to translate from one system to another" (4). Although this is a quite strong opinion of teachers being ignorant about the dialect, it sheds light on the fact that there is a disconnect in the education system between educators and speakers of variant English. Teachers, specifically at the high school level need to stop dismissing different dialects of English and instead recognize them so as to create a sense of understanding not only among the AAVE speakers in the classroom but for the students who speak the standard as well. This promotion of knowledge will reduce the labels and discrimination of ignorance that are placed on speakers of AAVE today. Labov asserts, "Some teachers are reluctant to believe that there are systematic principles in nonstandard English which differ from those of Standard English. They look upon every deviation from schoolroom English as inherently evil, and they attribute these mistakes to laziness, sloppiness, or the child's natural disposition to be wrong" (4).

Labov also talks about the sources of reading problems with speakers of AAVE. Labov asserts that in the early stages of education, the need for teachers to understand the use of homonyms in variant speech is imperative. Labov states:

There is no reason why a person cannot learn to read Standard English texts quite well in a nonstandard pronunciation. Eventually, the school may wish to teach the child an alternative system of pronunciation. But the key to the situation in the early grades is for the teacher to know the system of homonyms of nonstandard English, and to know the grammatical differences that separate his/her own speech from that of the child. The teacher must be prepared to accept the system of homonyms for the moment, if this will advance the basic process of learning to read, but not the grammatical differences. (35)

In this assertion, Labov points out the primary necessity in early education to teach the child how to read whether the pronunciation of particular words is correct or not. I am unsure about my agreement with Labov in this instance for one reason. I believe that the prestige should be promoted and perhaps if it is promoted from the beginning, the child will be more likely to command the prestige later. It seems that through this statement, Labov is recommending that teachers overlook the nonstandard completely which I do not believe is a constructive way of teaching the language.

Overall, this section has pointed out the different social implications of AAVE in the educational system. It is concluded that the educational system needs to find a way to command the prestige dialect as well as being conscious not to dismiss AAVE as a reasonable form of the language. The labels that are often given to speakers of AAVE need to be removed due to the fact that the dialect does not necessarily constitute a lack of need or want to command the

prestige by the speakers. Although there are many credible sources that agree with the position of this paper, there has yet to be an answer to the research questions posed earlier: Can educators teach students the prestige language while still promoting the acceptance of AAVE as a dialect of the Standard English language?

Labov's proposed priorities

It seems through all of this discussion that there is yet to be a solution offered in order to both promote the prestige dialect at the same time recognizing the need to understand AAVE. Although this assertion from Labov does not offer an absolute solution, it does offer a starting point for the education system. Labov offers a series of "priorities" that he believes would be helpful in concentrating educators attention to the previously referred "disconnect" in education. The problems listed by Labov are as follows: "Ability to understand spoken English (of the teacher); Ability to read and comprehend; Ability to communicate (to the teacher) in spoken English; Ability to communicate in writing; Ability to write in standard English grammar; Ability to spell correctly; Ability to use standard English grammar in speaking; Ability to speak with a prestige pattern of pronunciation (and avoid stigmatized forms)" (5). This list of priorities is exemplary of the research point of this paper. It seems that through the focus of this list it would be possible to both teach and promote the prestige pattern of pronunciation as well as recognizing the difference in dialect. If a list of priorities in the teaching of English is not employed there could be serious implications. If it is not stressed to AAVE speakers, that their dialect is not only an acceptable form of the language, but more importantly, that this form of the language is not a sign of lack of intelligence, the high school drop out rates of African Americans could continue its destructive pattern.

Drop out rates among African-Americans

According to Greene, "...the national graduation rate for the class of 1998 was 78% for white students...For African-American students nationwide the rate was a mere 56%..." (Greene 2002) It is not reasonable to point the finger on all high school English teachers in saying that their lack of teaching AAVE is the reason for these low rates, but it is reasonable to say that the introduction of its acceptance may create a positive effect. Greene also asserts that high school graduation rates are a very important measure of the performance of our public school system. He says, "The better able schools are to provide students with the skills necessary to complete high school, the more successful the school system is." (Green 2002, p.11) These public schools must begin to focus less on the standardized testing scores of their students and more on the curriculum being offered to them. Connecting with students who may feel belittled by society's strict view of what is right and wrong may benefit greatly by a classroom that is non-threatening to their personal linguistic style.

Concluding Thoughts

The research and opinions of this paper have undergone the task of answering two socially and academically significant research questions: Can educators teach students the prestige language while still promoting the acceptance of AAVE as a dialect of the Standard English language? If this promotion does not occur, do speakers of the dialect suffer academically? It has been proven that speakers of AAVE can be affected negatively through the non-acceptance of their main dialect. The *recognition* of AAVE as a variant of Standard English will allow AAVE speakers to feel equal when communicating with individuals of different ethnic backgrounds. This dialect that is heard and learned from an early age cannot rightfully be labeled as "wrong" by an educator as soon as the child who has grown up hearing the dialect enters the school system. The dialect should be understood and promoted among speakers of the

dialect however the prestige form of the language should be taught due to the power and status that this form holds for its speakers. Baugh asserts:

When social stratification of languages, and dialects within those languages, is objectively viewed in terms of their political and economic parentage, it becomes impossible to fairly allocate linguistic attributions by means of most of the highly subjective terms that are commonly misused for this purpose, not only in America but in every society in which linguistic differences are also a reflection of real— or potential—social strife. (97)

The need to introduce AAVE into the school systems is imperative. By telling speakers of AAVE that their language is wrong the education system is forcing the speakers to hide their true identity and surrender their voice. By attempting to cover their natural dialect, these speakers are in turn trying to play the role that they know is expected of them. This forces students to feel inferior to other students and to cover up the roots from which this dialect emerged, which is ultimately denying their own history. Educators of English must take it upon themselves to recognize the list of priorities given by Labov. If these priorities are understood and utilized, the disconnect between educators of the prestige dialect and speakers of AAVE can be bridged.

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