The Connection Between Black English and Memes

How African American Vernacular English made it to the internet

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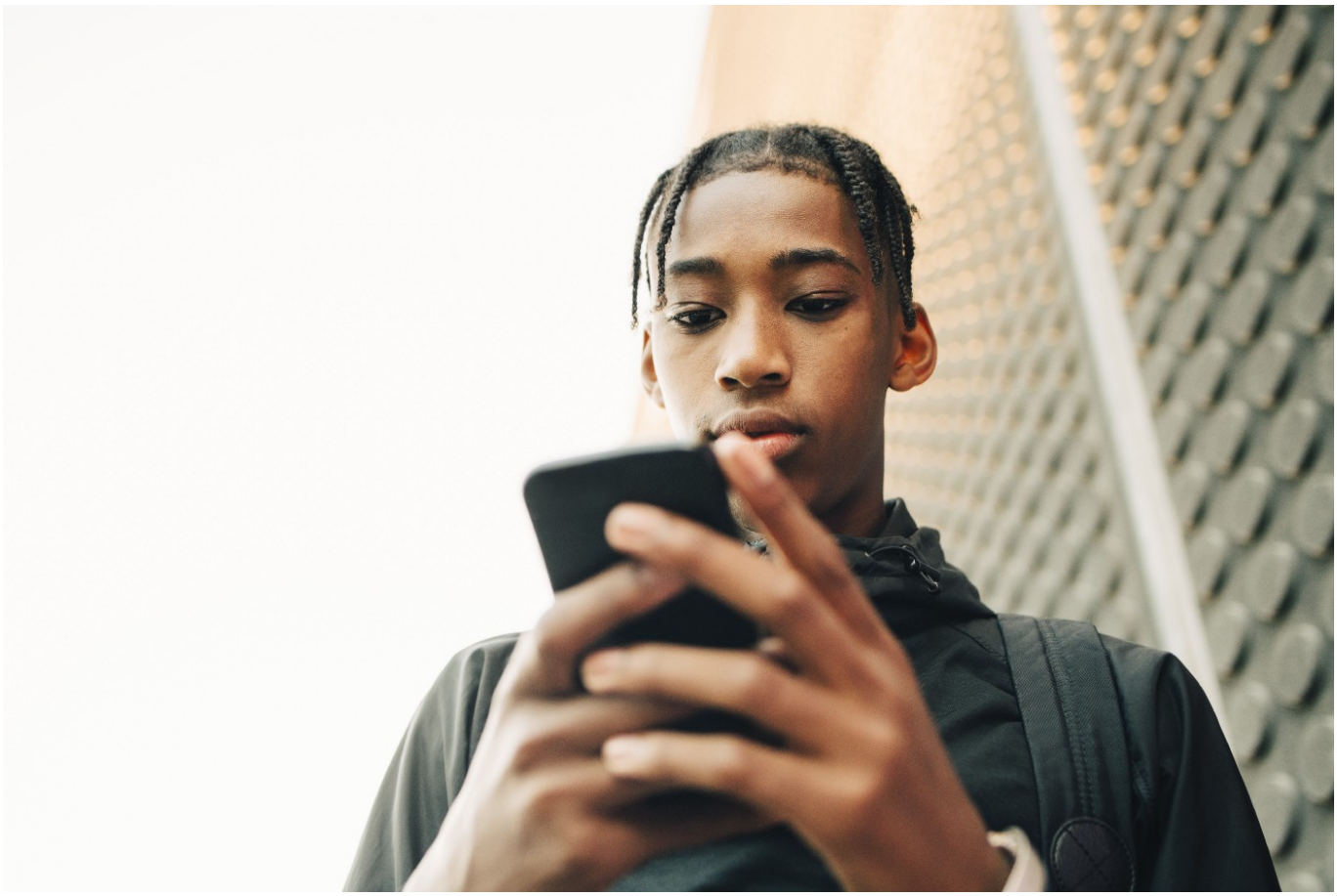

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If you are an African American who grew up in integrated spaces, you may have had the not-so-pleasant experience of others calling African American Vernacular

English (AAVE) “bad grammar” or “talking ghetto.” For some, speaking with the habitual “be” (“they be…”) or not conjugating a verb (“He crazy”) is associated with negative stigmas like being unprofessional or having poor communication skills. But contrary to mainstream understanding, this way of speaking has its own rules and syntax structures and comes from a particular experience of Black folk in America.

AAVE has a long history — largely rooted in the earliest generations of enslaved Africans that arrived on America’s shores. Black English was birthed from people who were forced to learn a second language (English) almost exclusively through oral means and without formal instruction (since it was illegal to teach a slave how to read). This experience produced a vernacular that reconciled both the differences between English and the different African mother tongues.

This dialect has been passed on from generation to generation and is an important part of African American culture. Writer Alice Walker says that when you consider the amount of time Black people have been in America, they have spoken Black “folk” English longer than they have even been able to speak standard English. Many AAVE speakers employ it only in specific contexts — as scholar André Brock writes in *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*, there are many AAVE speakers who “cannot or will not use these forms at work or in certain social settings.” Brock was referring to the common experience of linguistic “code-switching,” where Black people use more standard English when speaking to non-Black audiences but revert back to AAVE when they are in Black communal spaces.

But one key truth that explanations, critiques, and defenses of AAVE often leave out is that Black English was developed by a group and is meant to be spoken by that group. There are certain parts of AAVE that are, in fact, not concerned with and are not meant to be understood by non-Black speakers.

In the same way that kids have slang that adults don’t understand or lovers laugh at their inside jokes, there are times where we communicate and only mean for a specific person or group (regardless of whether the public sees the message or not) to decipher it. Whether it’s “noob” in video game culture, an anime reference, or “tweakin” from Chicago AAVE, you have to be within the group to understand the terminology. But even if you aren’t Black, you can understand this concept through something you may see just about every time you are online: memes.

> If you aren't from or knowledgeable about the Black community, you likely wouldn't be able to decipher the message.

Though they first flourished on particular platforms like 4chan, Reddit, and Tumblr, memes have become a ubiquitous part of the average user's social media experience. According to scholar Limor Shifman in *Memes in Digital Culture*, the term "meme" was first coined by biologist Richard Dawkins to describe how "units of culture" spread from person to person through imitation. The word "meme" is a combination of the word *mimema* (a Greek word meaning "something which is imitated") and "gene." Memes are the digital manifestation of forms of communication like posters, political art or cartoons, and visual propaganda.

While the most popular memes are often comedic or convey some social commentary, most memes contain some subcultural reference that isn't necessarily meant for "everyone." Take the one below for example:

When you look at this meme, do you get all the references? The meme is of Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot. Lightfoot uses social media and memes to make civic announcements, raise awareness about the pandemic, and urge Chicagoans to stay inside. But what does "GYAITGDHBIBYMFA" mean? As comedian and writer Travon

Free denoted, “Black people know” that in the meme, Lightfoot is comedically positioned as a Black mother telling her kids to get inside before they get a spanking (to put it lightly).

The meme is showing you one thing, but meaning something else — in fact, multiple things. And yet if you aren’t from or knowledgeable about the Black community, you likely wouldn’t be able to decipher the message. This example shows how in some ways, Black English is like a “meme,” particularly when comparing it to the concept of “double talk.”

History and linguistics scholars trace the origins of “double talk” back to Africa, but within the context of America, it is deeply rooted in the slave experience. Having few constructive outlets to release emotions like anger and sorrow or openly critique their bondage, the enslaved found catharsis through language — by using “double talk,” or saying one thing but meaning another. It was a way to send messages without the slave owners knowing what they meant — “bad meaning good,” or singing hymns about the Israelites escaping from Pharaoh to symbolize them running away from the plantation.

Much of this linguistic tradition was forged in the Black church since many slave owners forbade social gatherings amongst slaves (with exception of church and certain holidays). The church provided a vital space where Black people forged communal identity and experienced catharsis from the physical and emotional tolls of slavery. It was a place where they could be critical of the master, even when he was in the room. Seminal African American writer James Baldwin articulated this idea in his essay “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?”

> *There was a moment, in time, and in this place, when my brother, or my mother, or my father, or my sister, had to convey to me, for example, the danger in which I was standing from the white man standing just behind me, and to convey this with a speed, and in a language, that the white man could not possibly understand…*

By using double talk, Black speakers were subverting the rules of English to get their message across. When understanding how memes work (as tools to communicate and spread culture through a kind of “encryption”), we can also more fully understand the ingenuity and creativity embedded in Black speech.

When we think about what makes for “good” communication, a simple definition would be “if the person who you want to understand you understands you, you have successfully communicated.” Black English follows its own rules, which are meant primarily for those who are fluent in its form. If you hear someone speaking AAVE or see them use it online, there’s a good chance that, like memes, even if it is displayed in public, the message might not be meant for you to understand.

Memes Culture Race Language Internet