

Social Media's Role in the Suppression of Black Voices

In linguistics, there is a framework for how language and dialects are acquired called usage-based linguistics. In this framework, an intimate relationship between linguistic structures and frequency forms: the frequency at which you consume a type of language (dialect) will determine which dialect you have. This is in contrast against the generative framework of linguistics, whereby language is determined through a module in the brain. To put it simply, usage-based linguistics is bottom-up, while generative linguistics is top-down.¹ Dialect acquisition can occur when a person interacts with a party over a significant period of time, thereby fulfilling the need for frequency in our usage-based framework. In most cases, a dialect shift will occur when someone spends a significant amount of time in another country, such as an American spending a few years in England. Other times, spending time with those of a different social class can produce similar results. Until recently, most linguists believed that media had no effect on dialect acquisition, however, a 2019 study suggests that the media we consume can have an effect on our dialect.^{2*}

One such dialect is African American Vernacular English (AAVE), a form of English used by some African Americans. Like much of black history in America, AAVE has a history of being criticized. Many people think that AAVE is lazy, unprofessional, or ignorant, which often leads to African Americans “code-switching,” where African Americans would switch from AAVE to Standard American English to fit in with the current setting.³ Many bilingual, and some bidialectical speakers are beginning to fight against the notion that the colonizer's language should take priority. In Oakland,

* While many linguists believe that media has no effect on our dialects, the average person seems to disagree. Many families are reporting their children learning an English dialect through Peppa Pig. Reporter, G. S. (2021, July 19). Having a go: US parents say Peppa Pig is giving their kids British accents. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/jul/19/peppa-pig-american-kids-british-accents>

California, researchers underwent a study to find out the role of AAVE among school children. The researchers found that school children believed that their upbringing on AAVE made learning to read and write Standard American English difficult. Coupling with this, the researchers also found that since teachers were unable to properly use AAVE, it became difficult for students to understand what they were saying. The proposed solution was to, in essence, trample black voices by introducing programs that enforced Standard American English, as well as requesting students to keep slang to a minimum.⁴ Through this example, we see how AAVE is weaponized against black voices, when the proper solution would have been to recognize the differences in dialect and embrace the students' status as bidialectical. Oakland is far from the only place AAVE is targeted; through input from social medias, AAVE is recontextualized into a pseudo version of itself, thereby silencing AAVE voices.

Social media is no stranger to AAVE. One BuzzFeed article demonstrates how the internet can fan the flame of an internet-influenced inauthenticity. On social media, AAVE-influenced memes are an important aspect of internet culture. These memes are divorced from their original context, thereby divorcing AAVE from its original owner.⁵ Smokoski argues in her dissertation,

Hill (2011) writes that “AAE is the most important source for new slang (and eventually, unmarked colloquial usage) in White AE.” (169). It does not address now-unmarked colloquial usage like, for example, “Back in the day,” which according to Cutler (2002) “is a formulaic expression that usually references past events... relevant to hip hop” (194), but which is now almost fully deracialized. Understanding stylization requires shared cultural knowledge of the salient features of other varieties and the people who typically speak them, and since stylizers of AAVE may be familiar with it only as it is represented in the media, their knowledge of the variety may be limited and their image of its speakers may rely heavily on stereotypes. Dialect stylization can be understood as moments of ‘intentional inauthenticity,’ when a speaker fleetingly voices an ‘other.’⁶

These memes, this Otherness, all collapse into the disidentification of black culture with black culture. Whether intentional or not, black voices are smothered through this disidentification. However, it would be a mistake to blame the individual for this issue.

TikTok is the 7th largest social media app, retaining its audience of 1 billion active users with the highest engagement rate of any social media app on the market.⁷ TikTok uses an AI-powered system to track a user's clicks and engagement and sends the videos it thinks the user has the most likely chance of interacting further with.⁸ Through this AI-powered system, TikTok became one of the most effective tools on the planet to grow a trend.⁹ This creates a system where certain messages can be reinforced, and others be trampled. For example, a TikTok user @tarathesexeducator mentions how a piece of black slang can be repurposed as "TikTok phrases."¹⁰ Just like the memes before, this black slang is decontextualized in the same manner. The TikTok "For You Page" accelerates this process; since TikTok is designed around trends, black slang will appear more and more frequently. By seeing black slang used, users will voice an Other, thereby further accelerating the problem. As users see black slang appear more frequently, the user will passively absorb the dialect used in these videos. As such, a new pseudo-dialect is created, a mismatch of AAVE and Standard American English.

It is through this process that black voices are silenced. When a slang is recontextualized, it reduces the identity of the prior owner. Social media's role in this process demonstrates that it is one ideological process that subjugates African Americans. This is why, when you spend time around adolescents, you hear words and phrases like "finna" and "spill the tea," instead of "gonna" and "spill the beans." Social media has created an entirely new, lobotomized dialect that actively hinders black voices and propagates ignorance.

- ¹ Von Mengden, F., & Coussé, E. (2014). The role of change in usage-based conceptions of language. *Evie Coussé & Ferdinand Von Mengden (Eds.)*, 1–19.
- ² Nycz, J. (2019). Media and Second Dialect Acquisition. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 39, 152-160. doi:10.1017/S0267190519000060
- ³ Rickford, John R., 'African American Vernacular English in California: Over Four Decades of Vibrant Variationist Research', Jennifer Bloomquist, Lisa J. Green, and Sonja L. Lanehart (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of African American Language* <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199795390.013.32>,
- ⁴ Ogbu, J. U. (1999). Beyond Language: Ebonics, Proper English, and Identity in a Black-American Speech Community. *American Educational Research Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1163537>
- ⁵ Thompson, S. (2021, September 7). So Much Modern Slang Is AAVE. Here's How Language Appropriation Erases The Influence Of Black Culture. *BuzzFeed News*.
<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/sydneethompson/aaave-language-appropriation>
- ⁶ Smokoski, Hanna L., "Voicing the Other: Mock AAVE on Social Media" (2016). *CUNY Academic Works*. https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/708
- ⁷ Backlinko. (2022, January 5). *Backlinko*. <https://backlinko.com/tiktok-users>
- ⁸ Matsakis, L. (2020, June 18). How TikTok's "For You" Algorithm Works. *WIRED*.
<https://www.wired.com/story/tiktok-finally-explains-for-you-algorithm-works/>
- ⁹ Grome, J. (2022, April 13). The Way Of TikTok Marketing And Why It Works So Well. *Forbes*.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2022/04/13/the-way-of-tiktok-marketing-and-why-it-works-so-well/?sh=125393f8498e>
- ¹⁰ tara michaela on TikTok. (n.d.). TikTok.
https://www.tiktok.com/@tarathesexeducator/video/7150382510055148843?_r=1&_t=8bUuCBuPRUc