African American Vernacular English

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African-American Vernacular English (**AAVE**), also called **Ebonics**, **Black English**, or **Black English Vernacular** (**BEV**) is a dialect of American English. Similar to common southern U.S. English, the dialect is spoken by many African-Americans in the United States. AAVE shares many characteristics with various pidgin and creole English dialects spoken by blacks worldwide. AAVE also has grammatical origins in, and pronunciational characteristics in common with, various West African languages.

The term *Ebonics*, which is a portmanteau word of *ebony* and *phonics*, has been suggested as an alternative name for this dialect. However, that name is not widely used in linguistic literature, although it enjoys considerable common use as a result of the controversy surrounding it (see below). Robert L. Williams, a linguistics professor at Washington University, created the term *Ebonics* in 1973, then detailed it in his 1975 book, *Ebonics: The True Language of Black Folks*. AAVE became the subject of contentious debate following the decision in 1996 of the school board of Oakland, California, to declare *Ebonics* a unique language or dialect.

Contents

History and Social Context

AAVE has its roots in the trans-Atlantic African slave trade. Distinctive patterns of language usage among African slaves and, later, African Americans arose out of the need for multicultural populations of African

captives to communicate among themselves, and with their captors, in a hostile and alien environment. Crammed together in holding pens on the West African coast and chained together during the Middle Passage, these captives, many of them already multi-lingual speakers of Wolof, Twi, Hausa, Yoruba, Dogon, Akan, Kimbundu, Bambara and other languages, developed pidgins -- simplified mixtures of two or more languages. Over time in the Americas, some of these pidgins became fully developed creole languages. Significant numbers of African Americans still speak some of these creole languages, notably Gullah on the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia.

As a language is used by isolated and diverging groups of people, the language itself becomes isolated and divergent. Pronunciational aspects of AAVE are in part based on the Southern American English variety, an influence that no doubt has been reciprocal as the dialects diverged. The traits of AAVE which separate it from standard English include grammatical structures that are traceable to West African languages; changes in pronunciation along definable patterns, many of which are found in Creole and pidgin dialects of other populations of West African descent; distinctive slang; and differences in the use of tenses. AAVE also has a substantial vocabulary little understood beyond the African-American community, and has contributed several words with African origins now in common use in SAE: "gumbo," "goober," "yam," "banjo," "bogus" -- and even some slang expressions, such as "hip" and "hep cat."

It is common for an oppressed people (as, for example, African slaves in the Americas) to develop a radically different dialect from that of their oppressors. Such a departure from majority language usage is, of course, a natural consequence of cultural differences. However, sociologists, linguists and psychologists believe that such divergent language development is often a kind of passive resistance to subjugation, oppression or cultural aggression. Language becomes a means of self-differentiation that helps forge group identity, solidarity and ethnic pride. In the case of African-Americans, AAVE has survived and thrived through the centuries also as a result of group societal marginalization -- through segregation, discrimination and often self-imposed social separation.

Most speakers of AAVE are bidialectical in that they command Standard American English (SAE) to varying degrees in addition to AAVE. African Americans who speak AAVE exclusively are most commonly southern and rural, or those with working-class roots. Many African-Americans however, regardless of their socioeconomic status, educational background, or where they may live, use AAVE in informal and intra-ethnic

communication. This process of selective language usage, based on social context, is called code-switching. Some phrases in AAVE have entered popular American culture, and these may be contextually employed by speakers belonging to diverse ethnic groups.

Because of White supremacist beliefs and prevailing cultural biases, Whites commonly believed the aberrant English of African slaves was due to inferior intellect. Such prejudices persist today. AAVE often is perceived by members of broader American society as an indicator of inferior intelligence or low educational attainment. Further, like many other creole dialects, AAVE sometimes has been called "lazy" or "bad" English. Such appraisals may be due to AAVE's substitution of aspect for tense in some cases and certain grammatical and phonological reductions. Some challenge whether AAVE should be considered a dialect at all.

However, such opinions have no basis in fact, and among linguists there is no such controversy.

In the late 1990s, the formal recognition of AAVE as a distinct dialect and its proposed use as an educational tool to help African American students become more fluent in SAE became a controversial subject in the U.S.. See: Ebonics.

History of AAVE as a Creole

When settlers arrived in Africa to abduct slaves, they found that the African languages exhibited very little mixing. Dillard (1972) attributes to slave ship Captain William Smith:

> As for the languages of Gambia, they are so many and so different, that the Natives, on either Side of the River, cannot understand each other. ... [T]he safest Way is to trade with the different Nations, on either Side of the River, and having some of every Sort on board, there will be no more Likelihood of their succeeding in a Plot, than of finishing the Tower of Babel.

However, some slaveowners often acquired a preference for slaves from a particular tribe, so language mixing aboard ship was sometimes minimal. There is evidence that enslaved Africans, in fact, retained a great deal of their native languages until almost 1700. Wolof became the basis of a sort of intermediary pidgin among Africans, and it is this language that comes to the fore in tracing the African roots of AAVE.

As the African pidgin that would become AAVE was beginning to spread, two more dialects were developing and diffusing: Pidgin Portuguese and Pidgin French. The Portuguese variety in particular was becoming very

popular in Europe and The New World. African-American creoles that have undergone the least interference over the last few centuries (e.g., Saramaccan) show evidence of Portuguese features and vocabulary.

By 1715, the African pidgin was widely enough known to make its way into Daniel Defoe's novels, in particular, *The Life of Colonel Jacque*. Cotton Mather claimed to have been very familar with his slaves' speech. He knew enough to affirm that one of his slaves was from the *Coromantee* tribe. Mather's imitative writing showed features present in many creoles and even in modern day AAVE.

By the time of the American Revolution, African-American creoles had not quite established themselves to the point of mutual intelligibility among varieties. Dillard (1972) references a recollection of "slave language" toward the latter part of the eighteenth century:

> Kay, massa, you just leave me, me sit here, great fish jump up into da canoe, here he be, massa, fine fish, massa; me den very grad; den me sit very still, until another great fish jump into de canoe; but me fall asleep, massa, and no wake 'til you come; ....

It wasn't until the time of the Civil War that the language of the slaves became familiar to a large number of educated whites. The abolitionist papers before the war form a rich corpus of examples of plantation creole. Thomas Wentworth Higginson published book titled *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (1870). In the book, he details many features of his soldiers' language. In particular, this book contains the first reference to the distinction between stressed BÍN and unstressed bin.

After the Emancipation, some freed slaves traveled to West Africa, taking their creole with them. In certain African tribal groups, such as those in East Cameroon, there are varieties of Black English that show strong resemblances to the creole dialects in the U.S. documented during this time period. The languages have remained relatively the same due to the homogeneity within tribal groups. As a result, they can act as windows into a past state of creole English.

The Ethnic Boundary for Speakers of AAVE

In southern parts of the United States, particularly South Carolina and Georgia, the language varieties used between Caucasians and African-Americans converge somewhat. However, there remain significant differences arising from several factors.

Socioeconomic class is a factor worth considering. Certainly in urban areas, large numbers of blacks often are concentrated in the working class. Perhaps linguistic similarities "clump" inside a particular class in order to form an identity. They do, but significant differences persist even when socioeconomic status, education, and geography are relatively well controlled (Rickford 1999).

A significant boundary element turns out to be the structure of the origin language of the speaker. White speakers usually come from roots related to Standard English, whereas, historically, Black speakers come from African origin languages. Although vocabulary easily diffuses, more syntactic structure is acquired at younger ages, so it doesn't diffuse across cultural boundaries as easily. Even phonological features diffuse more easily than syntax, especially in adolescence, during the period where adolescents are identifying heavily with their peers.

We see that if a syntactic boundary is to be crossed that it must be done at young ages. Young children tend to spend a good proportion of their time with their parents, so the impression that genetics plays a role can be incorrectly perceived. However, in the abscence or low frequency of interracial couples, this fact helps to preserve the ethnic boundary between speakers.

The most important factor effecting the resistance of diffusion accross ethnic boundaries is the identity each culture conciously maintains. There are implicit standards about how a "good White boy" ought to talk. Conversely, if a Black person begins to take on too White a dialect, they are stigmatically categorized as an "oreo". Because of the historical underdog status of the Black culture, Black communities remain close, and "defects" are more emphatically shunned.

Educational Issues

Teaching children whose first language is AAVE poses problems wider than simply what techniques to add to the pedagogy. This topic foots a suite of contraversial political issues. Foremost, America is divided on whether to even recognize AAVE as a legitamate dialect of English, as discussed in the Ebonics article.

When teaching anyone a language or dialect with which they are unfamiliar, it is important to differentiate between understanding and pronunciation. For instance, if a child reads "He passed by both of them" as "*he pass by bowf uh dem*", a teacher must determine whether the child is saying "passed" or "pass," since they are

homonyms in AAVE phonology. Appropriate remedial strategies in such a case would be different from effective strategies in the case of an SE speaker who read "passed" as "*pass*".

A strategy was introduced by Baratz and Stewart (1969) that introduced AAVE speakers to reading using "dialect readers"—sets of reading nearer to the child's dialect than SE text. This helps the child focus on translating symbols on paper into words without worrying about learning a new language at the same time. Simpkins, Holt, and Simpkins (1977) introduced a comprehensive set of dialect readers, called *bridge readers*, which included the same content in three different dialects: AAVE, a *bridge* version, which was closer to SE without being prohibitively formal, and a Standard English version. The bridge program showed very promising results, but didn't become widely adopted for various political reasons mostly related to the failure to recognize AAVE as a dialect of English.

Grammatical features

Note: The following pronunciations are written in SAMPA. See the SAMPA chart for reference.

Phonological features

- Reduction of certain diphthong forms to monophthongs, in particular, [aI] to [a] and [oI] to [o]. For example, "boy" pronounced as "boh".
- Pronunciation of unvoiced [T] (as in SE **th**ing) as either [t] or [f]. The former usually occurs leading a word, and the latter otherwise.
- Pronunciation of voiced [D] (as in SE **th**en) as [d] when leading a word or [v] otherwise. For example, "bro**th**er" as "bru**v**a".
- AAVE is non-rhotic, so [r] is usually dropped if not followed by a vowel. However, the [r] may also be dropped in other cases, e.g. "story" realized as "sto'y".
- Realization of final *ng* as *n*, e.g. "tripping" as "trippin".
- More generally, reduction of vocally homogeneous final consonant clusters. That is, *test* becomes *tes* (they are both voiceless), *hand* becomes *han* (they are both voiced), but *pant* is unchanged, as it contains both a voiced and an unvoiced consonant in the cluster (Rickford, 1997).
- In certain cases, transposition of adjacent consonants, particularly when the first is [s]. For instance "ask" realized as "aks" or "gasp" as "gaps".

Aspect marking

The most distinguishing feature of AAVE is the use of forms of *be* to mark aspect in verb phrases. The use or lack of a form of *be* can indicate whether or not the performance of the verb is of a habitual nature. In SAE, this can be expressed only using adverbs such as *usually*. It is disputed whether the use of the verb "to be" to indicate a habitual status or action in AAVE has its roots in various West African languages.

Syntax	**Name**	**SE Meaning / Notes**
He talkin.	Simple progressive	He is talking.
He be eatin rice.	Habitual/continuative aspect	He eats rice frequently/habitually. Better illustrated with "He be eatin rice all day."
He be steady preachin.	Intensified continuative	He is preaching in an intensive/sustained manner. He is in a preaching trance.
He bin (unstressed) talkin to her.	Perfect progressive	He has been talking to her.
He BÍN had that house.	Remote phase (see below)	He has had that house for a long time, and still has it.
He done did it.	Emphasized perfective	He already did it. "He did it" is perfectly syntactically valid, but "done" is used to emphasize the completed nature of the action.
He finna leave.	Immediate future	He’s about to leave. *Finna* is a contraction of "fixin’ to".
I was walking home from school, and I **had** tripped and fell.	Preterite narration.	"Had" is used to *begin* a preterite narration. Usually it occurs in the first clause of the narration, and nowhere else.

Remote Phase Marker

The aspect marked by stressed BÍN has been given many names, including *Perfect Phase*, *Remote Past*, *Remote Phase* (Fickett 1970, Fasold and Wolfram 1970, Rickford 1999, respectively). This article uses the latter of the

three.

With non-stative verbs, the role of BÍN is simple: it places the action in the distant past, or represents total completion of the action. A decent translation is adding "a long time ago" as an adverbial phrase onto the sentence. For example, *She BÍN tell me that* translates as "She told me that a long time ago."

However, when BÍN is used with stative verbs, or when it is used with gerund forms, BÍN represents that the action began in the distant past and that it is continuing now. Rickford (1999) suggests that a better translation when used with stative verbs is "for a long time".

For instance, in response to "I like your new dress", you might hear *Oh, I BÍN had this dress", meaning that the speaker has had the dress for a long time, and that it isn't new.*

To illustrate the difference between the simple past and the gerund when used with BÍN, consider the utterances:

I BÍN bought her clothes means "I bought her clothes a long time ago."
I BÍN buyin her clothes means "I've been buying her clothes for a long time."

Negation

In addition, negatives are formed differently from standard American English:

- Use of *ain'* as a general negative indicator. It is used in place of SE "am not", "isn't", and "aren't".
- Negation agreement, as in *I didn't go nowhere*, such that if the sentence is negative, all negatable forms are negated. This can be traced to West African languages, but is usually stigmatized in Standard English (although this wasn't always so; see double negative).
- If the subject is indefinite (e.g. *nobody* instead of *Sally* or *he*), it can be inverted with the negative qualifier (turning *Nobody knows the answer* to *Don't nobody know the answer*, also adding multiple negation). This emphasizes the negative, and is not interrogative, as it would be in SAE.

Lexical features

AAVE uses the lexicon of SE, particularly informal and southern dialects. There are some notable differences, however. In particular, certain English words share the sound of words from West African languages, and we can see the connection.

- **bogus** is derived from Hausa *boko*, meaning deciet or fraud.
- **cat** is the suffix -kat from Wolof, which denotes a person.
- **dig** comes from Wolof *deg* or *dega*, meaning "to understand/appreciate".
- **hip** is derived from Wolof *hepi*, meaning "to be aware of what's going on".
- **honky** may come from Wolof *honq*, meaning red or pink.

Other grammatical characteristics

Some of these characteristics, notably double negatives and the use of *been* for "has been", are also characteristic of general colloquial American English.

Linguist William Labov carried out and published the first thorough grammatical study of African American Vernacular English in 1965.

- Present tense verbs are uninflected for person: there is no -s ending in the present tense third person singular. Example: *She write poetry* (="She writes poetry")
- There is no -s ending indicating possession—the genitive relies on adjacency. This is similar to many creole dialects throughout the Caribbean Sea. Example: *my baby mama* (="my baby's mama")
- The word *it* denotes the existence of something, equivalent to Standard English *there* in "there is", or "there are". Examples *It's a doughnut in the cabinet* (="There's a doughnut in the cabinet") and *It is no spoon* (="There is no spoon").
- Altered clause order in questions: *She tryin' to act white. She think who the hell she is?* (="She's trying to act white. Who the hell does she think she is?")

References

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See also

- Ebonics, for coverage of the 1990s U.S. controversy
- American slavery
- Languages in the United States
- Slang

External links

- Urban Dictionary (*http://www.urbandictionary.com/*)
- An example of AAVE speech (*http://fsweb.berry.edu/academic/hass/ejohnson/12_5AAVE.mp3*)
- AAVE page from UNE's Language Varieties site (*http://www.une.edu.au/langnet/aave.htm*)
- Dialect Readers Revisited (*http://www.edu-cyberpg.com/Linguistics/DIALECT_READERS_REVISITED.html*)