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An Analysis of the Phonological and Syntactic Features of African-American Vernacular English

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An Analysis of the Phonological and Syntactic Features of African-American Vernacular English

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I. Introduction

African-American Vernacular English (AAVE, here after) is a non-standard variety of English, spoken especially among non-middle-class African-Americans. There are many theories about the origins of AAVE, but the major two are found in McDavid (1969) and Stewart (1967).

The former article claims that the language of early black slaves was influenced largely by the English of the White slave owners, and that today's AAVE shows traces of the British dialect still remaining because of their extended cultural and social isolation from the rest of the country. On the other hand, the latter article theorizes that the Pidgin English used by the slaves on the coast of west Africa and the West Indies, as means of communication when trading with the Whites, creolized when it reached the United States. This creolized language is claimed to be the origin of AAVE.

This paper is mainly concerned with the phonological and syntactic features of AAVE. Some of the phonological and syntactic features of AAVE will be discussed by introducing some examples from a literary work, and later the educational issues surrounding AAVE will be examined.

II. Phonological Features

As Smitherman (1985:17) illustrates, there are mainly eight different phonological features in AAVE: Initial /ð/ = /d/, Final /θ/ = /f/, Deletion of middle and final /r/ and /l/, Deletion of final consonants add /es/, Vowel plus /ng/ in thing, ring, rendered as /æng/, and Simple vowels.

The most frequently cited phonological characteristic of AAVE are given by Trudgill (1988:61), as follows:

- 1) A number of African-American speakers do not pronounce non-prevocalic /r/ as in cart or car. Many lower-class African-Americans also demonstrate loss of intervocalic /r/ in words like Carol and Paris (Ca'ol, Pa'is), so that Paris and pass, parrot and pat may be homophonous (i.e. sound the same). Some African-American speakers also show loss of /r/ after initial consonants (e.g. f'om = from, p'otect = protect).
- 2) Many African-American speakers often do not have /θ/, as in 'thing', or /ð/, as in 'that'. In initial position, they may be merged with /t/ and /d/ respectively, so that 'this' = 'dis',

for example. In other positions, /θ/ and /ð/ may be merged with /f/ and /v/, so that pronunciations such as 'b'vjuh' /bəvə/, for 'brother', may occur.

3) In AAVE, simplification of consonant clusters occurs in all environments, even where consonants are followed by a vowel, so that pronunciations like 'los' elephant'-lost elephant, 'wes' en'= west end may occur. This means that, in AAVE, plurals of nouns ending in standard English like -st, -sp, and -sk are often formed on the pattern of 'class': 'classes', rather than 'clasp': 'clasps'. For example, the plural of desk may be 'desses', test may be 'tesses'.

4) A number of other features are characteristics of AAVE pronunciation. They include the nasalization of vowels before nasal consonants and the subsequent loss of the consonant: run, rum, rung=[rŋ]; vocalization and loss of non-prevocalic /l/: 'told' may be pronounced identically with 'toe'; and devoicing of final /b/, /d/, /g/, and possible loss of final /d/: 'toad' may be pronounced identically with 'toe'.

Another well known feature of AAVE is that consonant and cluster simplification takes place particularly at the end of words and when one of the two consonants is an alveolar such as /t/, /d/, /s/, /z/ (cf. Fromkin and Rodman (1983:254)). The application of this rule may delete the past tense morpheme so that past and passed (pass+ed) are both pronounced pass. When speakers of this dialect say 'I pass to the test yesterday', they are not showing an ignorance of past and present, but are pronouncing the past tense according to the rule present in their grammar:

"passed" / pæs + t / → apply rule → [pæs]

Taking both the /l/ deletion rule and the consonant cluster simplification rule into consideration, they also illustrate that 'told', 'toll', and 'toe' have identical pronunciations as follows:

Identical Pronunciations:	told	toll	toe
Phonemic Representation:	/told/	/to/	/to/
Consonant Cluster Simplification:	 ∅		
/l/ Deletion Rule:	∅	∅	
Phonetic Representation:	[to]	[to]	[to]

In addition, they bring to attention that the merging of the past and present tense forms on words such as 'pass' [p^hæs] and 'passed' [p^hæs] is clearly due to the phonological deletion rule rather than a syntactic merging of tenses. However, the deletion rule is optional; it does not always apply, and studies have shown that it is more likely to apply when the final [t] or [d]

does not represent the past tense morpheme, as in nouns like *past* [p^hæs] or *paste* [p^hes] as opposed to verbs like 'passed' or 'chased' where the final past tense [t] will not always be deleted. This has also been found true with final [s] or [z], which will be retained more often in words like *seats* [sit+s] where the [s] represents "plural" than in words like *Keats* [k^hit] where it is more likely to be eliminated. Furthermore, AAVE share with many regional dialects the lack of any distinction between /l/ and /ɛl/ before nasal consonants, producing identical pronunciations of 'pin' and 'pen', 'bin' and 'Ben', 'tin' and 'ten'. Also note that in AAVE, the phonemic distinction between /ay/ and /aw/ has been lost, both having become /a/. Thus 'why' and 'wow' are pronounced [wa]. Another change has reduced the /ɔy/ (particularly before /l/) to the simple vowel [ɔ] without the glide, so 'boil' and 'boy' are pronounced [bɔ].

Let us now examine a conversation between two children, Jimmy and David, (both 10 years of age) with an adult in their neighborhood, to explore some phonological features of AAVE:

Jimmy: Hey Ms. Smith, d'ya evvah whatch Kung Fu on TV wif that dude....
wha's his name?

David: He have my name, Jimmy. He David, too.

Smith: Yes, I've watched it a few times. It's really an exciting show.

David: Did you evvah see how he throw all dose dudes aroun', an' how he use his legs?

Jimmy: Yeah. You know what he can really fight. He don't fight to be mean dough [though]. He fight go be good, and he'p people. An' he always duh good guy.

David: You know what? He one of dose pries' or somefin'. Hey Ms. Smith, what is he? I can't remembah what dey call'.

Smith: Have you ever heard of the word 'monk'?

Jimmy: No, what dat?

David: It's one dose pries', I think, ain't it? Yea, it one dose pries' dat live wif ovvah pries', dose monks. He live in a convent like.

Jimmy: In wha's dat?

David: Ah man, ain't you know what dat is? It's dey have people dat people like pries' an' nuns live dere.

Jimmy: No, but ain't he live in duh desert? He always walkin' on desert on TV.

David: No, but he ain't live in duh desert. He don't walk dere all duh time. He don't live dere. He jus' be walkin' dere sometime', He move aroun' a lot, you know. He travel all different places.

Jimmy: I'm wonderin' where he learn everyfin'.

David: He learn' in duh convent when he young, I think. Dat's where day say on TV one time. (Labov 1972:64)

As Whiteley (1971:100) points out, on the phonological level, several features of AAVE are evident in this interaction. One of the most obvious is the use of 'dah', 'dat', 'dose', 'dere', and 'dey'. Jimmy and David constantly use a [d] sound for the voiced Standard English [ð] sound at the beginning of words such as 'the', 'that', 'those', 'there', and 'they'. Furthermore, David uses a [v] sound for voiced [ð], for example, 'ovvah' for 'other'. Another phonological characteristic is "r-lessness" or the dropping of r's after vowels. This is not shown consistently in the spelling used here, but at the end of words where it is especially noticeable, it is indicated by the spelling '-ah', as in 'evvah' (ever) and 'remembah' (remember). In addition, the simplification or weakening of consonant clusters at the end of words is noticeable. All speakers of English tend to reduce word-final consonant combinations such as -st, -sk, and -nd by pronouncing the last consonant weakly or not at all (e.g. las' for last, des' for desk, han' for hand), and the more informal, rapid and casual the speech, the stronger this tendency. On AAVE the tendency is even stranger, and some words are regularly pronounced without the final consonant, such as jus' and roun' in this conversation.

Sometimes this weakening of final consonant clusters result in AAVE plural forms which differ from the usual English plurals for particular words. Nouns that end in a cluster such as -st, -sk, or -sp may lose the final consonant and then make the plural as though the singular ended in -s. Since nouns ending in a sibilant (i.e. friction of sounds) in English add an extra syllable, spelled -es, to make the plural, as in glass: glasses, these AAVE plurals will have an extra syllable. For example, many speakers of AAVE will say 'desses' as the plural of 'des(k)'. In the sentence 'Sometime dey even have contesses to see who bettah' the plural 'contesses' is based on the singular contes' in which the final -t has been dropped completely. In the conversation between Jimmy and David, the word 'priest' is pronounced without the final -t, but some feeling of final -t apparently persists because David seems to say 'pries' and not 'priesses' for the plural. We can not be completely sure, however, because the use of the plural ending is optional in AAVE, and David may be simply using the singular.

III. Syntactic Features

The syntactic characteristic of AAVE is identified by Trudgill (1983:64), as the following:

- 1) Many AAVE speakers do not use -s in third-person singular present-tense forms, so that forms such as 'he go', 'it come', 'she like' are usual.
- 2) Another syntactical feature of AAVE is the absence of the copula-the verb to be- in the present tense. For example, sentences like 'she real nice', 'They out there', 'He not American', 'If you good, you going to heaven' may occur. However, there is an argument that copula deletion may be a phonological innovation of AAVE which

continues the older process of deletion, thus: he is > he's > he; they are > they're > they.

3) The most important characteristic of AAVE is the so-called 'invariant be': the use of the form 'be' as a finite verb form. For example, occurring in sentences such as 'He usually be around', 'Sometimes she be fighting', 'Sometimes when they do it, most of the problems always be wrong', 'She be nice and happy', and 'They sometimes be incomplete'. At first sight, this use of 'be' appears to be no different from its occurrence in certain British dialects, where 'I be', 'he be', etc., correspond to standard English 'I am', 'he is'. There is however, a crucial difference between AAVE and all other varieties of English. As the adverb 'usually' and 'sometimes' in the above sentences show, invariant 'be' is used in AAVE only to indicate 'habitual aspect'- it is used only to refer to some event that is repeated and is not continuous. There is, therefore, a verbal contrast in AAVE which is not possible in standard English:

AAVE	Standard
He busy right now.	He's busy right now.
Some time he be busy.	Sometimes he's busy.

In standard English, the verb form is the same in both cases whereas the verb forms are distinct in AAVE because, while the first sentence does not refer to some repeated non-continuous action, the second does. In AAVE, constructions such as 'He be busy right now' and 'He be my father' are not grammatical sentences. (The latter would imply, 'He is only my father from time to time.') There are, however two other respects in which the aspectual system of AAVE differs from that of standard English. AAVE and standard English have in common a present perfect verb form, 'I have talked', and past perfect form 'I had talked'. But AAVE has, in addition, two further forms: 'I done talked' which has been called 'completive aspect', indicating that the action is completed; and 'I been talked', the 'remote aspect', indicating an event that occurred in the remote past.

4) Three final grammatical characteristics of AAVE are: AAVE question inversion, 'existential it', and 'negative auxiliary pre-position'. Rules for question inversion in indirect questions in AAVE differ from those in standard English, and result in sentences such as 'I asked Mary where did she go and I want to know did he come home last night!. Existential 'it' occurs where standard English has 'there'. For example, 'It's a boy in my class name Joey; It ain't no heaven for you to go to; Doesn't nobody know that it's a God'. This last sentence also illustrates negativized auxiliary pre-position. In AAVE, if a sentence has a negative indefinite like 'nobody', 'nothing', then the negative auxiliary (doesn't, can't) can be placed at the beginning of the sentence: 'Can't nobody do nothing about it'; and 'Wasn't nothing wrong with that' (with statement intonation).

Let us now look back at the conversation between Jimmy and David in the previous section and examine the syntactical features of AAVE. First of all, as Whiteley (1971:100) advocates, the omission of the -s ending, marks the third-person-singular in verbs. In place of standard English 'he learns', the speaker of AAVE often says 'he learn'. This is not just a weakening of consonant clusters, because the ending is also omitted after vowels, and in the case of words like 'have' and 'do' that have special forms for the third person singular (has, does), AAVE does not just drop the final -s of these forms but uses the full 'have' and 'do'. There are a number of examples of this phenomenon in the previous dialogue: 'He have my name', 'He throw all dose dudes aroun', 'He fight to be good', 'He live in a convent', 'He move aroun' a lot', and 'He travel all different places'. Another characteristic that we can examine is the use of the verb 'to be'. It is often absent from places where it would normally exist in standard English, the forms are different from those of standard English, and there is at least one use of the verb 'to be' in AAVE which has no equivalent in standard English. The omission of the verb 'to be' or 'copula deletion', as mentioned earlier, is a very important characteristic of AAVE.

In all varieties of American English, speakers contract forms of 'be' in some sentences; for example, 'She's married' instead of 'She is married'. AAVE takes the process a step further and lets the 'is' be omitted completely. The two boys' conversation has examples of both contraction and deletion (Ferguson 1981:102):

Contraction	Deletion
Wha's his name?	He-David, too.
Dat's right.	He-always duh good guy
Dat's duh dude's name	He-one of dose pries'
Wha's dat?	What-dat?

In the sentences where the 'is' or other form of 'be' is not contracted in general American English usage, it is not deleted in AAVE. There are several examples in the dialogue: 'What is he?', 'You know what that is?'. The special use of 'be' which is found only in the English of African Americans is illustrated toward the end of the boys' conversation. Jimmy says 'He always be walkin' on a desert on TV', and David replies 'He jus' be walkin' dere sometime'. This use of 'invariant be' refers to repeat actions over a considerable extent of time, and the distinction between 'he walk', 'he walkin' and 'he be walkin' has no exact parallel in Standard English. Incidentally, these three verb forms typically have different negatives:

He walk	He don't walk	[momentary]
He walkin'	He ain't walkin'	[progressive]
He be walkin'	He don't be walkin'	[habitual]

Whiteley(1971:100)

Another grammatical feature is the pattern of negation. Standard English generally requires one negation in a clause, but AAVE prefers the pattern of multiple negation where negation keeps being repeated throughout the clause or sentence. Therefore, AAVE may have ‘I ain’t see nothin’ like dat no place’.

In Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, we also see examples of double negation and copula deletion. For instance, the use of double negation is seen in (1985:54): ‘I don’t want none of your damn food, she say’. In line 19: ‘she busy looking’, the ‘be’ verb is omitted.

Both sections II and III can be summarized in the following Tables 1, 2 and 3.

Table 1: 1) Homonyms created

Standard Pronunciation	AAVE Pronunciation
called	call
told	toll, toe
door	doe
ask	aks
that	dat
with	wid, wif
road	row
find	fine

Table 2: 2) Possessive, plural and tense forms

	Standard Pronunciation	AAVE Pronunciation
Possessive	Jerry’s hat	Jerry hat
Plural	three minutes	three minute
Past tense	talked	talk
Present tense plural	talk	talk
Present tense 3rd-person- singular	talks	talk

Table 3

Grammatical Variable	Standard	AAVE
Past Marker	Just about everyone got drowned.	Just about everybody go drown.
Possessive Marker	Billy’s mother said, “I don’t know where he is.”	Bill mother say, “I don’t know where he is.”
Plural Marker	I only have four cents.	I only have four cent.
Verb Form	I drank the soda pop.	I drunk the soda pop.
Indefinite Article	I want an orange.	I want a orange.
Subject Expression	George is a stone player.	George, he is a stone player.
Linking Verb	They’re at the hotel.	They at the hotel.

Negation	The guy said he hadn't heard anything about something like that.	The dude say he ain't hear nothing 'bout nothing like that no way.
Preposition Use of "Be"	He is at the school. He is home all the time.	He over to the school. He be home.
"Be" and verb	I don't want anyone to pick out my clothes.	I don't want nobody be picking out my clothes for me.

(cf. Smitherman 1981:218)

IV. Implications for Education

Since there are quite large differences between AAVE and Standard English, children who are native speakers of AAVE (a non-standard variety), will have certain difficulties in learning. For example, those children may read 'your brother' as 'you bruvver', or form sentences like 'Mary hat' for 'Mary's hat'. This is called dialect interference in reading or writing. In order to teach these children effectively, the teacher must have the knowledge of phonological and syntactical systems of the student's native language; in other words, the knowledge of the linguistic differences between AAVE and standard English. By presenting the nonstandard forms when teaching, rather than ignoring them as inappropriate forms, the AAVE students will have the opportunity to investigate their own language, and if they understand the regularity, they may find it easier to comprehend the systematic differences between nonstandard and standard, since the differences will not be random.

Smitherman (1977:234) applauds one of the most far-reaching educational changes in recent years - the reconstructing of the curriculum to include African-American (and other ethnic) studies in the educational curriculum. This is based on the belief that AAVE students need to study their own language and culture as well as the mainstream to prevent them from acquiring a distorted picture of the real world of the United States. On the other hand, the white students need to know about non-mainstream language and culture to prevent similar distortion.

It is clear then, that the linguistic study of systematic differences between dialects will contribute to AAVE students' understanding of the use of standard English. It is extremely important for the AAVE students (or other nonstandard English-speaking students) to learn the standard forms of language so that when they go out into the real world, they have the knowledge of switching to standard English from nonstandard. In other words, the ability of code-switching: switching from one language variety to another when the situation demands. At the same time, it is important to use their own language variety since there are nuances that cannot be expressed in standard forms. Since every language variety is unique and precious, students must be encouraged to be proud of their own language and treasure it, and continue handing it down to the next generation. Teachers must be trained in the linguistic systems

(phonological, morphological, and syntactical features) of nonstandard varieties of English, so that they will be able to understand the students' problems and help to prepare them for the outside world, its expectations, and demands.

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アフリカ系アメリカ人英語の音韻的・統語的特徴の考察 〈論文要旨〉

アメリカ合衆国ではアフリカ系アメリカ人を巡る様々な問題が存在する。彼等の言語を巡る問題もその1つである。本稿ではアフリカ系アメリカ人英語の音韻的・統語的特徴を考察し、その規則性を明らかにする。そして、アフリカ系アメリカ人が自分達の言語と標準英語の両方を深く理解するためにも、教師がそれぞれの特徴を把握しクラスルームで紹介する必要性があることにも触れる。