

Notes on African American Vernacular English – Andrew McIntyre

Some basic information about AAVE

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is a dialect (ethnolect) of English spoken by a certain percentage of the African American community (estimates vary between 40% and 70%), particularly working class urban communities and to some extent in bidialectal urban middle class communities.

AAVE was formerly called *Black (Vernacular) English*

Terms not used by linguists:

Ebonics

African Language Systems

Slang

Much AAVE grammar, phonology and vocabulary is like Standard English, but there are a few salient differences:

Ain't nothin' went down.

= Nothing happened

He workin' in the fiel'.

= He is working in the field.

He be workin' in the fiel'.

= He works in the field.

Origins: two main hypotheses are under debate:

-Originated as a creole during slavery period. Some input from West African languages.

-Influenced by the white Southern American dialects of the slave owners and other people around them.

It might be that some compromise view is correct.

We see below that AAVE is a good example of a highly **stigmatised** variety. It has had to endure much ignorant and unfair criticism from ill-informed observers.

The Oakland Schoolboard Controversy (1996-1997)

Oakland Schoolboard: Responsible for schools in Oakland, California.

In this area there are many AAVE speakers.

Schoolboard put out a resolution in 1996. Main points:

- (a) AAVE is a legitimate form of language, not bad English. (They said it is a separate language, not a dialect of English. This is not assumed by linguists and is not important for their overall proposal.)
- (b) Rather than dismissing AAVE as bad, lazy etc., teachers should use it to improve the children's Standard English. Specifically:
 - i. Comparison between AAVE and Standard English, to help them to appreciate both, and to learn SE.
 - ii. Use of AAVE as language of instruction (presumably they didn't intend it to be the main classroom language, since their goal was to teach the children Standard English, and since there were non-AAVE children in the classes).
- (c) Funds earmarked for helping speakers of other languages (e.g. Spanish) should be equally available to AAVE speakers.

The resolution caused a huge kerfuffle, with many journalists and public figures expressing (often ill-informed) opinions on AAVE and the schoolboard resolution.

Some common misunderstandings:

- a) The Oakland Schoolboard wanted teachers to *teach* AAVE.
- b) They had given up on teaching Standard English.
- c) AAVE is a garbled version of Standard English, not a separate dialect with its own grammatical rules.

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The way the Schoolboard's statement was written worsened matters:

-The **statement was badly worded**. E.g. it says that AAVE is "genetically based (?&\$?) and not a dialect of English" This makes it sound like crackpot nonsense.

-It is claimed that these and other views are supported by "**numerous validated scholarly studies**", **none of which were cited**. It would have been a good idea to cite some of these studies, since not all of the views of the board are accepted by proper researchers (e.g. the claim in the previous paragraph).

-The resolution's chances of being taken seriously were reduced by its use of **pseudo-scientific-sounding terms** for AAVE like *African Language Systems*, *Pan-African Communication Behaviours*, *Nigritian Ebonics*.

-Cynics might say that the main motivation for treating AAVE as a separate language was to allow AAVE-speaking teachers to get the same **pay benefits** as e.g. Spanish-speaking teachers:

All classroom teachers and aids who are bilingual in Nigritian Ebonics (African-American Language) and English shall be given the same salary differentials and merit increases that are provided to teachers of the non-African American LEP pupils in the OUSD.

Samples of negative reactions to AAVE

'the patois of America's meanest streets'

http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1997-01-02/news/1997002027_1_table-manners-xavier-house-teachers

"If Ebonics has any credibility at all, it is as the dialect of the street — the dialect of the pimp, the idiom of the gang-banger and the street thug, the jargon of the school dropout, a form of pidgin English that reeks of African-American failure. ... In essence, Ebonics is the ultimate residue, the greasy ring around the social bathtub, which I predicted would come about when a society succumbs to a lesser set of rules for some of its people."

Ken Hamblin, African American TV show host

www.worldcat.org/wcpa/servlet/DCARead?standardNo=0684807564&standardNoTy pe=1&excerpt=true

"Ralph A. Wright, an African American teacher from Jefferson High, said black English should be left at the classroom door because it 'is a sloppy language and it encourages sloppy thinking.'" <http://www2.nau.edu/~jmw22/LATimes13197.html>

"I understand the attempt to reach out to these children, but this is an unacceptable surrender borderlining on disgrace. . . . It's teaching down to our children and it must never happen," Jesse Jackson.

Jackson later admitted he had misunderstood the Oakland resolution:

"They're not trying to teach Black English as a standard language. They're looking for tools to teach the children standard English so they might be competitive"
<https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=2OQxAAAAIBAJ&sjid=mW8DAAAIBAJ&pg=6455,8926366&hl=de>

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"a language that has no right or wrong expressions, no consistent spellings or pronunciations and no discernible rules." (African American columnist William Raspberry, Washington Post article *Ebonics Debate: Who will benefit?*)

For what it's worth, here is some unfiltered hate speech on Youtube:

"this ridiculous black talk is testimony to the general uneducated nature of the black populace"

"I'm fine with other cultures speaking their own way but this is street trash.. white or black. Let me repeat myself, WHITE OR BLACK. I would never hire a person in my company who even remotely spoke in such ways, even outside of the work place. The only excuse for talking this way is if you really are ignorant. I have black friends who would never lower themselves to this street language."

www.youtube.com/watch?v=RrTSYhGtaqw

Some features of AAVE and demonstrations that it is rule-governed

It is easy to refute frequent claims that AAVE has no grammar rules, like the quote from W. Raspberry above, and claims that the grammar and phonology of AAVE is intrinsically bad. An initial point is that if AAVE had no grammatical and phonological rules, it would have died out because its speakers would not be able to understand each other.

Final consonant cluster reduction: Final consonants are omitted in clusters where both consonants have the same voicing and place of articulation; this phonological constraint has been argued to have been inherited from the West African languages which the first slaves taken to America spoke (Green 2002:107ff)

post → *pos'*

field, *desk*, *test*, *handd*, *kindd*, *contactd*, *maskd*

This is a rule-governed process. Clusters are not simplified if not final and if cluster is not uniformly voiced:

acceptable (vs. *accep'*)

pant vs. **pan*

If consonant cluster reduction means that AAVE is bad, then Standard English is also bad, since it contains many words with sounds that were pronounced in earlier periods of the language:

knight, *knot*, *gnome*, *gnostic*

right, *though*

bomb, *thumb*, *aplomb*

wrong, *thing*

Final consonant devoicing: Final plosives are devoiced, so that /b,d,g/ become /p,t,k/(Green 2002:116):

cab, *feed*, *pig* sound like *cap*, *feet*, *pick*

If this shows that AAVE is bad, then German is also bad:

Rad/Rat, *Tod/tot*, *Bad/bat*, *Bund/bunt*

Negative concord and negative inversion (auxiliary with incorporated negative particle precedes subject):

Ain't **no** hangman gonna put a rope around me. (Jimi Hendrix)

Ain't **nothin** went down.

'Nothing happened.'

Can't **nobody** beat em.

'Nobody can beat them.'

Didn't **nobody** see it.

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'Nobody saw it.

Don't **nobody** say **nothin** about that .

Wasn't **nobody** there but me an' him.

We have already seen that criticisms of negative concord as 'illogical' are unfair. (See also the Pullum article on this.)

Copula (the verb *be*) is used/omitted in some very non-standard ways:

(1) He workin/sick. = He is working/sick.

(2) He be workin/sick. = He is working/sick. (habitual)

(3) He been married. = He has been married for a long time.

This might be the main reason for remarks like the following:

"a language that has no right or wrong expressions ... and no discernible rules."

(African American columnist William Raspberry, Washington Post article *Ebonics Debate: Who will benefit?*)

Copula omission in (1) is subject to rules, for instance:

-Omission not possible with non-finite *be*:

(4) a. You have to be cool. b. *You have to cool.

c. You will be here. d. *She will here.

-Omission not possible in past tense:

(5) I was here yesterday. *I here yesterday.

-Omission not possible with the form *am*:

(6) I'm here. // *I here.

-Omission impossible if copula is moved in front of the subject:

(7) Is that right? // *That right?

-Omission of copula impossible if it is sentence-final:

(8) You ain't no leader. He is. // *He.

Copula omission corresponds closely to contracted *is/are* in standard English cf. (8) (vs. the fact that **He's*. is not a possible sentence). See the Pullum article for more details.

In fact, since AAVE has obligatory copula in some contexts, it might be more accurate to speak of a **zero copula** in (1) than of an omitted copula.

People who think that zero copulas prove that AAVE is 'bad', 'lazy', 'ruleless' etc. would, if they were consistent, apply the same description to **other languages that have zero copulas** in at least some situations (e.g. Russian, Irish, Hungarian, Hebrew, Arabic, Japanese, Turkish, Indonesian).

But, needless to say, AAVE detractors are unaware of such facts.

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A comment on the remote past

- (8) He been married. = He has been married for a long time.
(9) They been wakin up too early. = They were waking up too early a while ago.
(10) They been left = They left a long time ago

This use of *been* seems to have part of its diachronic explanation in the omission of *have* in the auxiliary cluster *have been*.

Notice that this kind of auxiliary omission used to exist in German, cf. the omission of *hatte* in the position marked # below:

- (11) Mit aller Entschiedenheit, die er seiner Stimme zu geben vermocht #, hatte er das Ansinnen zurückgewiesen. (Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrucks*)

The following remark from Adelungs 1781 *Deutsche Sprachlehre*¹ shows that this kind of auxiliary deletion was even considered poetic or elevated:

“Außer diesem Falle können die Hülfsörter *haben* und *sein*, wenn sie hinten stehen sollten, und die Deutlichkeit nicht zu sehr leidet, in der höhern und dichterischen Schreibart, um der kernvollen Kürze willen weggelassen werden. [...] Das Hülfswort *werden* kann niemahls verschwiegen werden ”³

As a conclusion to our selective overview of the properties of AAVE, we can now see that criticisms of AAVE like the following are very unfair:

“[In AAVE] you can say pretty much what you please, as long as you're careful to throw in a lot of be's and leave off final consonants.”

William Raspberry, *Washington Post*
www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1996/12/26/to-throw-in-a-lot-of-bes-or-not-a-conversation-on-ebonics/50747855-f3e1-4802-a90a-ba029601b4f9/

Sources

Green, Lisa. 2002. *African American English: A linguistic Introduction*. Cambridge University Press. (Available online; Google it)

Pullum, Geoffrey K. 1999. African American Vernacular English is not Standard English with mistakes. In *The Workings of Language: From Prescriptions to Perspectives*, ed. by Rebecca S. Wheeler, 39-58. Westport, CT: Praeger.

The most important documents related to AAVE (e.g. the Oakland Schoolboard Resolution and the statement by the Linguistic Society of America) are available from www.linguistlist.org/topics/ebonics/

¹ Cited from Breidbach (2005:47) *Live fast and die young: The short life of Early Modern German auxiliary ellipsis*. Utrecht: LOT.