

CHAPTER 1: TALKING BLACK (0:00-5:47)

This section introduces the concept of 'Talking Black' and some of the language's distinguishing features. It examines the difficulty of defining "talking Black" and introduces different terms proposed for referring to African American speech. It shows differences between varieties used by African American speakers but also observes a core of features that may be shared by many speakers.



KEY POINTS



What is 'Talking Black?'

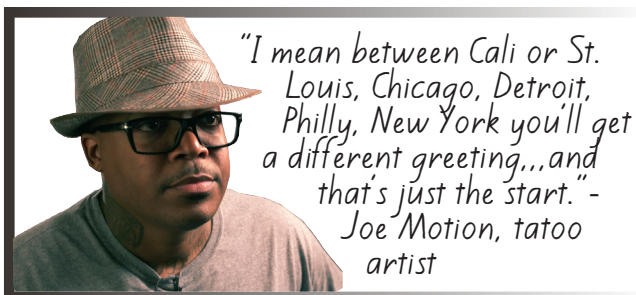
African American Language (AAL) is difficult to define because it is not a singular variety of language made up of a bounded set of linguistic features. For linguists, it is common to think about the language variety not as a single entity but as a continuum where some speakers are more vernacular and others are more standard. It is also important to acknowledge that speakers can navigate along this continuum as the social context dictates. This is sometimes called 'style shifting', 'code switching' or 'code shifting'. A comprehensive definition of African American speech would also take into account the differences in varieties across regions, classes, generations, genders, and individual speakers. These considerations make it very difficult to define, even for linguists.

Labeling language varieties

A number of terms have been used to refer to these language varieties, including *Nonstandard Negro English*, *Black English*, *Afro-American English*, *Ebonics*, *African American (Vernacular) English*, and *African American Language (AAL)*. The changing labels reflect cultural trends, sociopolitical situations, and race relations throughout U.S. history. In this guide, we tend to use African American Language (AAL) except when quoting from the film or when the context dictates a different term (such as talking about the Oakland Ebonics controversy).

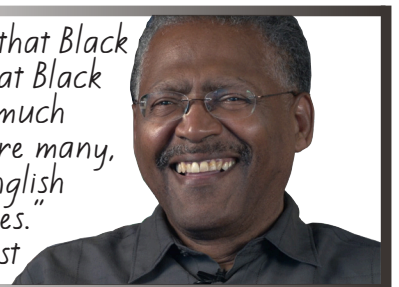
Core features and differences

In the film, everyday speakers and linguists explain that there are regional differences as well as core aspects shared by many speakers of African American Language. A speaker in the rural South might use different features than those in the urban North. Speakers of differing socioeconomic classes might also use different features.



"I mean between Cali or St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit, Philly, New York you'll get a different greeting...and that's just the start." - Joe Motion, tattoo artist

"Many people assume that Black English is one thing, that Black people speak it pretty much the same way. There are many, many types of Black English here in the United States." - Arthur Spears, linguist

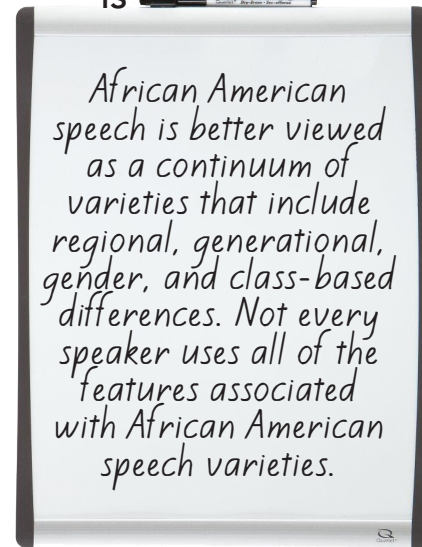


COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

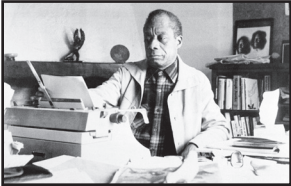
non-linguists may think



the linguistic consensus is



FUN FACTS

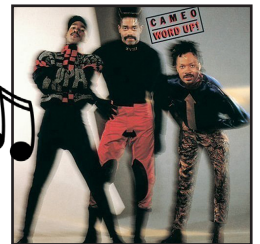


Early in the documentary we hear the voice of James Baldwin, an African American writer, political activist, and subject of the Academy-Award nominated documentary, *I Am Not Your Negro*. The recording is from an interview he did with Studs Terkel in 1961.

New York City politician Larry Scott Blackmon, is depicted in this section. His father, Larry Ernest Blackmon is the founder and frontman of the funk band, Cameo, whose famous song "Word Up!" is mentioned in the documentary.



Word up (up, up), it's the code word
No matter where you say it
you know that you'll be heard



Listen to "Word Up"
by Cameo



Check out this interview with
some of the members of
Cameo on The Morning Blend



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING

1. How would you describe the way that you speak? Do you have a name or label for it? How would others define the way that you speak? *TEACHER TIP: If students are unsure where to start, consider creating a list of words on the board to describe dialects. Start with terms like "nasal" or "twangy" and try to build a vocabulary students can use.*
2. Has anyone ever commented on the way that you speak? What did they say? Was it positive, negative, or neutral? If so, how did it make you feel? How did you respond?
3. Have you ever thought about whether a stranger might be able to guess your race, ethnicity, gender, or age just from the sound of your speech?

ACTIVE VIEWING

1. What are some of the descriptions of talking Black given by both linguists and speakers of AAL varieties in this section?
2. Does 'talking Black' mean the same thing to everyone? What disagreements are presented around the concepts of sounding or talking Black?

POST-VIEWING

1. In the film, Keith Cross says, "They say a picture is worth a thousand words, but you know, I feel like I grew up in an environment where a person could use a few words and it felt like a thousand pictures." Do you agree? Have you ever felt that way about language? Can you describe a situation where the way something is said paints a more vivid picture than the actual words being said? *TEACHER TIP: It may be useful to demonstrate the importance of intonation, rhythm, and pitch through a piece of literature with dialogue such as [Their Eyes Were Watching God](#) by Zora Neale Hurston or the [The Color Purple](#) by Alice Walker.*
2. What is 'Talking Black'? Why is it difficult to define? Why might some individuals consider it an insult to be told they do or do not sound Black?
3. Do you think it is possible to determine someone's ethnicity from the way they talk? Are you better at identifying some ethnicities than others? Why do you think this might be? What can you tell about a person besides their ethnicity just by listening to their voice?
4. What are some of the different terms or names used to refer to the language varieties spoken by or associated with Black communities? What label do you prefer, and why? Do you think African American speech is best thought of as a dialect or as a language?
5. What are some regional differences of AAL? Can you think of features that are distinct to the dialects of other geographical regions? What about your speech might someone from another region find distinct?
6. What is significant about the cities and regions in which this documentary takes place? Why do you think so much of the documentary was filmed in cities?

Additional Resources

Green, L. J. (2002). *African American English: A linguistic introduction*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

This textbook, aimed at students, describes the patterns of AAL at each level of language-sound system, word formation, sentence structures, and discourse routines. It includes discussions about the role of AAL in education, secular and religious realms, literature, and media. Each chapter is paired with exercises for students.

Wolfram, W., & Schilling, N. (2016). *American English: Dialects and variation* (3rd ed.). Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons.

This text discusses the social and linguistic factors that have contributed to dialect variation in American English. It explains the functions of dialects and the principles of language variation while using language that is accessible to students and a general audience. It includes an extensive glossary and appendix of dialect features.