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.
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?

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

**PRE-VIEWING**

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.

Listen to “Word Up” by Cameo

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

**COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS**

non-linguists may think

AAL is just one speech variety with one set of linguistic features.

**FUN FACTS**

African American speech is better viewed as a continuum of varieties that include regional, generational, gender, and class-based differences. Not every speaker uses all of the features associated with African American speech varieties.
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

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.

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.