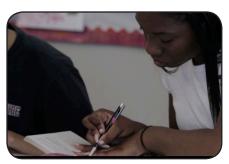
CHAPTER 3: EXCLUSION (9:17-17:27)

This section discusses issues of language devaluation and exclusion that come from misconceptions characterizing African American Language (AAL) as a collection of errors rather than a systematic language variety. Linguists explain several rule-governed patterns of AAL and some of the controversies surrounding the language.



KEY POINTS



Rule-goverened and systematic

Linguist Arthur Spears says, "All stigmatized languages usually have this false reputation of having no structure or having no grammar." However, all language varieties are rulegoverned, patterned, and systematic on multiple levels—phonological (speech sounds), lexical (vocabulary), grammatical, and pragmatic (meanings). The film describes two grammatical patterns of AAL that are often viewed as "mistakes" or "errors."

Habitual be

In this construction, be means something that occurs habitually or frequently.

Examples:

John <u>be</u> studying <u>Saturday nights</u> (habitual)

John is sitting down right now

John be sitting down right now (speakers would not use a sentence like this because it is not a habitual context)

Absense of be

In places where is or are can be contracted (e.g., she's, they're) in general American English, these words can be absent in some varieties such as AAL.

Examples:

He nice (He is nice)

He running (He is running)

I nice (Speakers would not use a sentence like this)

I running

And to further illustrate this pattern, the sentence from the previous features, "John <u>is</u> sitting down <u>right now</u>" may also be said as "John sitting down right now."

Common grammatical and pronunciation features (from Wolfram and Schilling 2016)

While by no means an exhaustive list, these examples represent some of the common features shared by many vernacular speakers of AAL varieties. A more extensive list can be found in Rickford 1999.

present tense, third-person -s absence

e.g. She walk (for she walks)

She raise (for she raises)

possessive -s absence

e.g. man_hat for man's hat

Jack_car for Jack's car

general plural -s absence

e.g. a lot of time for a lot of times

some dog for some dogs

Remote time stressed béen to mark a state or action that began a long time ago and is still relevant

e.g. You béen paid your dues a long time ago.

I béen known him a long time ago

had + verb for simple past tense in narrating past events

e.g. They had went outside and then they had messed up the yard.

Yesterday, she had fixed the bike and had rode it to school.

ain't for didn't

e.g. He ain't go there yesterday

He ain't do it.

reduction of final consonant clusters when followed by a word beginning with a vowel

e.g. lif' up for lift up

bus' up for bust up

skr for str initial consonant clusters

e.g. skreet for street

skraight for straight

use of [f] and [v] for final th

e.g. toof for tooth

smoov for smooth

Linguistic socialization and language ideologies

Linguist Walt Wolfram states, "People have the impression that African American English is nothing more than a collection of errors because that's how they've been socialized; if it's not standard, it's wrong. So, we have this framework that all of us have been indoctrinated into that there's a right and a wrong in language." When in reality, "Language itself is always right, because there's always a systematicity, a patterning to it." People are socialized to accept many beliefs as common sense without question or explanation. These unchecked commonsense assumptions are called ideologies. Existing dominant systems and media representations reproduce the ideologies that certain language varieties are good and right while others are wrong and bad. Schools often teach that there is one correct grammar and anything else is automatically labeled as a grammar mistake or error. Television, movies, and literature often depict the good characters with standard dialects and the bad characters with non-standard dialects, perpetuating harmful language ideologies. Many people never question why certain dialects are treated this way, why certain features are labeled as 'mistakes,' who benefits from such a system, and who is disadvantaged and excluded by it.

What is standard English?

'Standard' English is difficult to define. There is not a singular standard variety. The United States has no language academy to decide what is standard. Accordingly, 'standards' are the forms promoted by academics and upheld by dominant societal groups as 'proper,' 'correct,' and 'good.' Basically, if a person's language variety does NOT have socially stigmatized features,

then it is considered 'standard.'

Privileges of standard varieties

People who speak non-stigmatized varieties enjoy a number of privileges, many of which are invisible. Speakers of standardized English varieties are often characterized as intelligent, competent, and non-violent. Their language is used as the primary medium of education and the de facto language of standardized assessments. Their language is valued within social and political institutions of power, providing greater access to opportunities and social mobility.

Devaluation of non-standard varieties

AAL is a commonly rejected and highly stigmatized language variety that has been the subject of controversial debates throughout U.S. history. Speakers of non-standard English varieties are often characterized as uneducated, lazy, and/or violent. Their language is not used as the primary medium of education. Their language is devalued within social and political institutions of power, suppressing access to opportunities and social mobility.

Linguistic discrimination

Linguistic discrimination is the unfair treatment of an individual based on her or his language use. In the film, linguist Tracey Weldon says, "A lot of times people assume that there is some linguistic basis for the stigma against a variety and they're not aware that it really is about the people." People often justify discrimination against a dialect and its speakers with the false belief that the dialect is bad English or reflective of some sort of deficiency (e.g., educational, intelligence, moral, etc.). A common theme of many stigmatized varieties is that they are spoken by marginalized groups (e.g., working-class people, racial minorities, women). Racism and classism are often hidden beneath a false linguistic justification.



Watch a Public Service Announcement from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development depicting an example of linguistic profiling and discrimination



Oakland School Board Resolution (1996) and U.S. Senate Ebonics Hearing (1997)

In 1996, the Oakland Unified School District school board passed a resolution that acknowledged "Ebonics" (another term for AAL) as a legitimate language system and authorized some instruction in the structures of Ebonics for students who spoke it as their primary language so that they could better master the structures of academic English. The resolution generated an enormous amount of controversy around three issues (1) whether Ebonics is a language or a dialect of English (2) whether federal funds designated for bilingual education could be used for Ebonics-based programs (3) the misinterpretation by the public that classroom instruction would take place in Ebonics. The controversy revealed the breadth and intensity of public misinformation about language varieties and resulted in a special U.S. Senate Hearing on Ebonics and Education because there were issues of educational funding involved. Many linguists made statements supporting the recognition of AAL as a legitimate language system and the educational benefits of incorporating information about AAL in the classroom.





COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

non-linguists may think



the linguistic consensus

S Continues

AAL is systematic and patterned, as are all language varieties. It is acquired naturally by growing up around family, peers, and community members who speak AAL.

FUN FACTS

EBONY & phonics

The word Ebonics was coined by African American social psychologist Robert Williams in 1973 at a conference on "Cognitive and Language Development of the Black Child." It is a blend of the words ebony (black) and phonics (the science of speech sounds).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING

- 1. If you heard someone say the sentence "She be studying every day" what would you think about it? Does it follow a grammatical pattern? What is the meaning of this sentence?
- 2. Have you ever thought someone sounded unintelligent from the way they spoke—not based on the content of their message but the way in which they said it? What were some of the qualities of their speech that made you think they were uneducated?

ACTIVE VIEWING

1. Does AAL follow grammar rules? What are some grammatical patterns of AAL discussed in

the film? Even without knowing the technical label of the rule, can you describe the pattern?

POST-VIEWING

- 1. Some speakers grow up learning and speaking a variety of English that is considered mainstream or standard while others grow up learning a variety that is considered non-standard and carries many negative associations. Why is it important to acknowledge the language privilege experienced by people who speak a standardized variety? What advantages do native speakers of standard varieties have? In school? In the job force? In access to services or opportunities?
- 2. Why are certain varieties denounced while others are praised? Why do we associate language varieties with character traits like uneducated or smart? How do the characterizations of certain languages relate to the social and historical situations of the people who speak them? TEACHER TIP: Write British English, Southern American English, and African American English on the board. Ask students what descriptions they associate with each variety. You can give them a prompting list (intelligent/posh, dumb/ignorant, thuggish/lazy) or ask them what comes to mind. Why are these associations so strong and easy to produce?
- 3. Keith Cross poses the question, "What does Standard English accomplish that these so-called versions of substandard English don't accomplish in terms of communication?" What do you think? Are the language varieties themselves keeping certain people from opportunities? Or is it something else?
- 4. Linguist John Rickford says, "In language, nothing is ever just random, you can just leave it out or put it in. No, there is a very strict set of rules." Why is it important to understand that AAL and all language varieties are rule-governed and systematic?
- 5. Just as you can have racial or gender discrimination, you can have linguistic discrimination against people for the way they speak. What are some ways linguistic discrimination affects people? Why do you think it is so difficult to combat linguistic discrimination? How do you think people feel when they are repeatedly told their dialect is inferior?
- 6. How is language used to reproduce stereotypes in the media, in television, and films? Think about how certain accents and dialects contribute to stereotypes and caricatures. Can you give an example of a particular character? TEACHER TIP: If students have trouble generating answers, ask them to describe the accents or dialects of the villains in superhero or Disney films.
- 7. Do you think it would be appropriate for students to study AAL and other non-standard varieties in the classroom? In what classes? What are some possible benefits of learning the grammar of a language variety different than your own?

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.

Lippi-Green, R. L. (2012). English with an accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States, (2nd ed.). London, UK: Routledge.

This captivating text explores the ways in which social attitudes and ideologies about accents are perpetuated in the media and institutionalized. It explores how people with non-standard and non-prestigious accents face discrimination and decreased access to opportunities.

Filson, N. (2017). Examining how people talk about dialects: Difference vs. deficit. Retrieved from: http://routledgetextbooks.com/textbooks/9781138777453/chapters.php

On the companion website to Reaser et al.'s Dialects at School: Educating Linguistically Diverse Students, one can find a number of activities designed for classroom use. This particular activity guides students through the process of analyzing 'difference vs. deficit' perspectives in response to YouTube vignettes about dialects and in relation to the Oakland Ebonics' Senate Subcommittee Hearing.

Original Oakland Resolution on Ebonics. Retrieved from https://linguistlist.org/topics/ebonics/ebonics-res1.html

A copy of the Original Oakland Resolution on Ebonics can be found here on linguistlist.org.

Perry, T. & Delpit, L. (Eds.) (1998). The real Ebonics debate: Power, language, and the education of African American children. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

This collection explores the intersections of race, language, and education in the United States through scholarly papers, interviews, and personal testimonies regarding the Oakland Ebonics controversy.

Reaser, J., Adger, C. T., Wolfram, W., & Christian, D. (2017). *Dialects at school: Educating linguistically diverse students*. New York, NY: Routledge.

This book highlights the major language-related issues in the educational field. It provides advice and suggestions for teaching students with non-standard dialects, teaching about dialect variation, and distinguishing between dialect differences and language disorders. Chapters also include classroom-based samples illustrating the application of these principles and activities and exercises for students.

Rickford, J.R. (1996, December). Writings on the "Ebonics" issue. Retrieved from http://web.stanford.edu/~rickford/ebonics/

This website provides a collection of writings on the Oakland Ebonics controversy. It includes responses by linguists, op-eds, and a list of further resources for understanding the controversy and related linguistic topics.

Rickford, J.R. (1999). African American Vernacular English: Features, Evolution, Educational Implications. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc.

This book brings together sixteen essays in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) by a leading expert in the field, one who has been researching & writing for a quarter of a century.

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.