

CHAPTER 5: MIGRATION (28:31-38:15)

This section discusses the social and historical context that contributed to the development of African American Language (AAL) during the period of the Great Migration—sometimes called the “Exodus”—from the rural South to the urban North, and it explores the impact of segregation on AAL.



KEY POINTS



The Great Migration

Between 1916 and 1970, approximately 6 million African Americans moved from the Southern United States to the urban Northeast, Midwest, and West in search of better living conditions and work opportunities outside of the Jim Crow South. Before the migration, 90 percent of African Americans lived in the South, largely in rural areas. After the migration, only 53 percent of the African American population remained in the South.

Segregation and language contact in the South versus the North

Linguist Patricia Cukor-Avila explains how the levels of language contact between Blacks and Whites were different in the South and the North in the early 20th century. While the South had Jim Crow laws and institutional segregation, there was language contact. Blacks and Whites often lived close to each other, shopped in the same stores, and worked together as tenant farmers. In the North, there was much less language contact due to de facto segregation which was produced, in part, by a public housing system that confined Blacks to living in small, dense neighborhoods apart from Whites. This situation resulted in little interaction between the majority of African Americans and Whites.

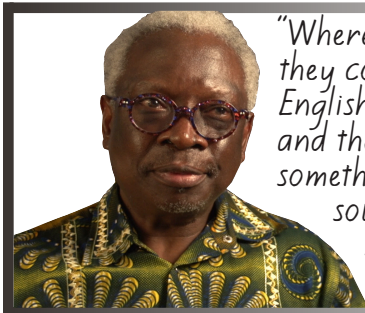
Public housing and the Chicago Black Belt

A prime example of the housing discrimination that produced these segregated and concentrated urban populations of African Americans is the Chicago “Black Belt.” In the early 20th century, the African American population of Chicago was growing rapidly. Whites living in residential blocks formed “restrictive covenants,” legal contracts restricting individuals from renting or selling to Black tenants. These covenants severely limited the housing options for Blacks, forcing them to occupy the same few neighborhoods and forming the Black Belt. By the mid-20th century, 75 percent of the Black population lived in this small chain of neighborhoods spanning thirty blocks on the South Side of Chicago. Because it could not expand horizontally, high-rises were built to confine hundreds of thousands of Blacks into this narrow band of land.

Linguistic isolation and divergence

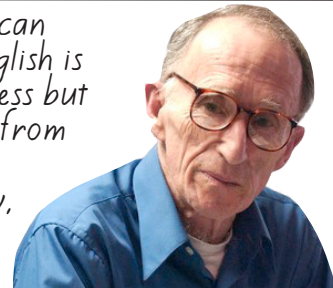
In the film, linguist Arthur Spears says, “Why does Black English exist? Isolation. For a population to develop its own variety of language there has to be some kind of apartness. Whenever people are apart they diverge culturally and linguistically.” During the Great Migration, African Americans brought with them the language varieties they had learned in

the South as they concentrated into urban centers in the West, Midwest, and Northeast. Many African Americans rarely had opportunities for interaction with Whites, creating situations of linguistic isolation. Furthermore, AAL varieties were valued as components of ethnic and cultural identity. Today, AAL varieties continue to diverge from their European American English counterparts, in part, due to persistent segregation and the significance of AAL as an identity marker.



"Wherever there were African slaves they contributed to shaping American English. And then came Jim Crow and then The Great Migration. And something that had emerged in the southeastern part of the United States was spread." -Salikoko Mufwene, linguist

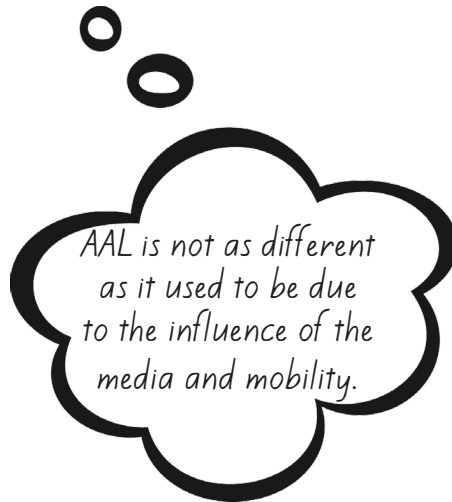
"African American Vernacular English is becoming not less but more different from other dialects." -William Labov, linguist



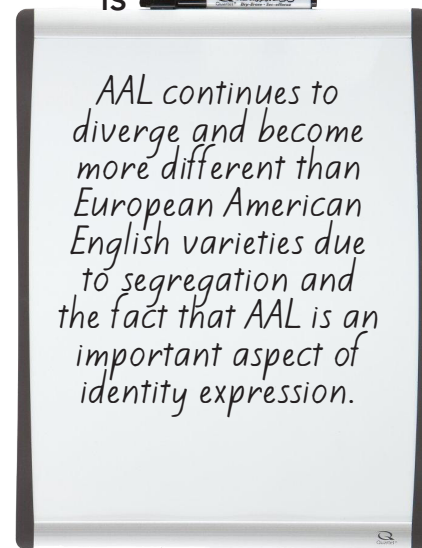
"Only time we saw White people was when we went a town over and they owned the stores, or the mailman." - Professor Griff, musician

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

non-linguists may think



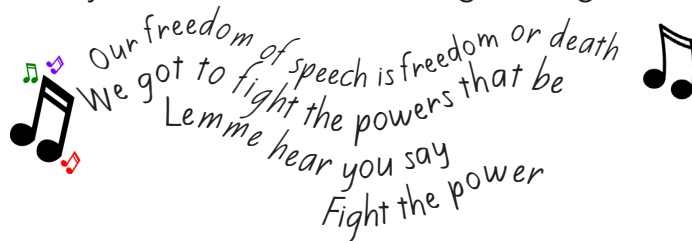
the linguistic consensus is



FUN FACTS



Professor Griff (born Richard Griffin), featured in this section, is a member of the famous and politically charged Hip Hop group Public Enemy. Their best-known song "Fight the Power" was written for and featured in Spike Lee's critically acclaimed film *Do the Right Thing*.



Watch the trailer for *Do the Right Thing*



Listen to "Fight the Power" by Public Enemy



Watch a CBS interview with some of the members of Public Enemy



South Side activist, educator, and civil rights leader, Timuel Black, is interviewed in the film. After surviving the Normandy invasion and the Battle of the Bulge in World War II, Black visited the Buchenwald concentration camp, prompting a lifelong commitment to human rights. Black brought Martin Luther King Jr. to the University of Chicago campus in 1956. He organized Freedom Trains that took thousands of Chicagoans to the March on Washington in 1963, helped end segregation in the Chicago Public Schools, worked as an administrator in the City Colleges of Chicago system, and helped elect the first African American mayor of Chicago.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING

1. Do you think the speech of American English speakers is becoming more similar or more different over time? Are dialects disappearing?
2. What do you think about when you hear the words “migration” and “exodus”? What connotations are similar for the two words? How are they used differently?
3. What impressions do you have about differences in how Whites and Blacks interacted in the North versus the South during the period of American history in which racial segregation was legal? How would you speculate that these differences shaped AAL in the North and in the South during this period?

ACTIVE VIEWING

1. How did segregation function differently in the South versus the North? What was different about the amounts of language contact between groups of Whites and Blacks in the South versus the North? How would you speculate that these differences shaped AAL in the North and in the South during this period?

POST-VIEWING

1. How have migration trends affected the languages and dialects in the United States? How is the Great Migration related to the development of AAL varieties? What were some of the effects of this mass exodus?
2. What are some reasons that people believe language is homogenizing and dialects are disappearing? What factors have contributed to the continued divergence of AAL varieties from other European American varieties?
3. Do you think that having different languages and different dialects divides people in the United States? In other countries? Would a global language, common to us all, be good or bad for people? Explain.
4. Can you think of any cultural or artistic movements brought about or influenced by the linguistic and cultural isolation of the urban centers created during the Great Migration? Hint: think about musical and literary movements.

Additional Resources

Gregory, James N. (2005). *The Southern diaspora: How the great migrations of Black and White Southerners transformed America*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press

This book focuses on the transformations that occurred in the United States when twenty million Black and White Southerners migrated north and west between 1900 and the 1970s, creating new regional diasporas.

Lemann, Nicholas (1991). *The promised land: The Great Black Migration and how it changed America*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

This New York Times bestseller provides an extensive and authoritative historical telling of the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North.