

CHAPTER 7: TRANSFORMATION (49:09-59:30)

This section discusses the evolution of African American Language (AAL) and differences that exist between generations of speakers as well as some of the current changes occurring in AAL varieties.



KEY POINTS



Language evolves

All languages change over time. There are both language internal (changes that come from within the linguistic system) and language external (changes that relate to social and psychological conditions) causes of those changes. Some of the external factors influencing language change include geographical divisions, social barriers, and language contact situations.

Generational differences

One way of studying language change is by examining the variation in speech among different generations of speakers. Young people often use language features that distinguish them from older groups. In the film, linguist Patricia Cukor-Avila explains that the peer group has the most influence on the speech of young people.

Urbanization

One type of change occurring in AAL varieties is urbanization. Features of AAL varieties spoken in large urban metropolises are influencing the AAL varieties in smaller, rural regions. Linguist Walt Wolfram explains that “rural kids who used to be much more regionalized want to sound more urban because it’s more hip and so the old time rural styles of African American which tend to be more closely aligned with Southern White varieties are now moving away and becoming much more urban and actually, in some ways, much more like the urban North than some of the Southern urban areas.”

Reasons AAL will continue to exist

AAL is changing and transforming, but it is not disappearing. There are many factors contributing to its continued existence and development. Older generations of AAL speakers continue to use AAL when raising their children. These children will acquire AAL as their first language. The divergence of AAL from its European American English counterparts is further advanced by segregated communities. Many AAL speaking communities continue to lack access to standard varieties due to de facto segregation. Moreover, AAL is linked to culture and identity expression, making it a valuable resource of authentic identity expression for many individuals and communities.

Embracing AAL

For much of U.S. history, AAL has been characterized as a language of ignorance, laziness, and violence. However, some newer narratives characterize AAL as cool, a cultural object of

value. Linguist John Baugh points out that for a long time, the sole cause of parody of AAL by White people was racism and mockery whereas now there are people who want to imitate AAL because they think it is cool. While it is heartening to see that positive perceptions of AAL are now possible, it is important to embrace AAL for more than just its “coolness” or “hipness” factor. Greater education and public awareness regarding AAL will allow people to understand it and embrace it as a valuable, systematic, legitimate, culturally and historically grounded language variety.

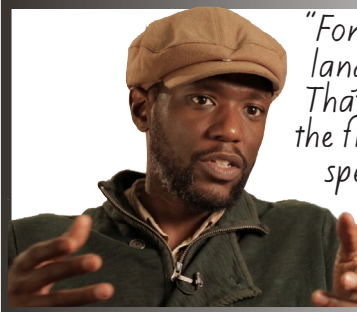


Listen to the powerful spoken-word TedTalk by Jamila Lyiscott celebrating “3 Ways to Speak English”



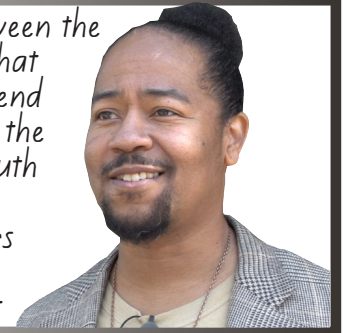
“We know as linguists... that who’s the most important for the young people are their peers. It doesn’t matter how older people speak around you, it’s the peer group that’s the main influence.” -Patricia Cukor-Avila, linguist

“People of African descent have been moving from the beginning of time. And interacting and transforming. I think there’s some things that are constant and I think it’s also constantly transforming.” Renee Blake, linguist



“For me Black language is natural. That’s the language, the first language I speak, it’s my first language.” -Keith Cross, educator

“It’s a big divide and it’s between the elders and the youth. And what happens is, the elders don’t tend to want to understand what the youth are doing, and the youth are growing up in a world different than what the elders grew up in.” -Derrick Abyss Graham, musician and artist

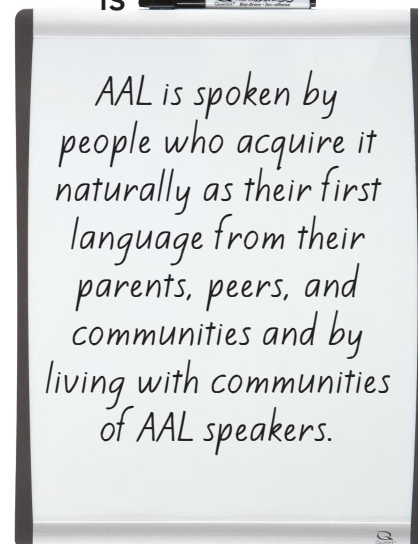


COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

non-linguists may think



the linguistic consensus is



FUN FACTS

DJ Nabs began his DJing career in Atlanta with WVEE radio before producer Jermaine Dupri helped him form a collaboration with Kris Kross. Later he became So So Def Recordings' exclusive DJ backing up Da Brat, Xscape, Jermaine Dupri, and Bow Wow. After years of touring with legendary artists such as Mariah Carey, Ciara, Ludacris, and Michael Jackson, DJ Nabs returned to Atlanta as a full-time radio personality on Hot 97.5.



The song that linguist Renée Blake talks about hearing on the train in the final part of the film is Sir Mix-a-Lot's song "Baby Got Back." It was the second best-selling song in the United States in 1992 after Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You," selling over 2 million physical copies.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING

1. Does language change as people do? Can you give an example of how language has changed over time? Can you think of any words or phrases that just recently became popular?
2. Can you think of any words or phrases that you use with your peers that your parents wouldn't understand (or, at least, didn't use growing up)?
3. What are your impressions of how language differs between urban and rural communities?
4. Do you think that AAL has influenced the way other cultures in America speak? In what ways?
5. Do you think of Hip Hop as a form of art specifically for African Americans or for all cultures? What does it mean that White suburban teens are consistently the nation's largest consumers of Hip Hop music?

ACTIVE VIEWING

1. What group has the most influence on the speech of young people? Why do you think this is so? Can you think of specific examples of peer influence on your speech?

2. According to John Baugh, how have some of the imitations of Black speech by White speakers changed over the years?

POST-VIEWING

1. Why are urban city centers so influential on the current development of AAL varieties?
2. What influence do peer groups have on speech patterns? Why do peer groups have such a strong influence on speech patterns?
3. What are some reasons that varieties of AAL will continue to exist?
4. What are some benefits of embracing varieties of AAL?
5. Have any of your opinions or conceptions of 'Talking Black' changed after seeing this film? Have you learned anything new about AAL? About language in general?
6. In the film, Derrick Abyss Graham says, "It's a big divide and it's between the elders and the youth and what happens is the elders don't tend to want to understand what the youth are doing and the youth are growing up in a world different than what the elders grew up in." What are some differences between how younger and older generations speak? Do you think these changes over time are good or bad?
7. Do you believe that the older ways of doing things should be changed or should be preserved? Why? Can you think of some language examples of things that have been preserved and some things that are changed?

Additional Resources

Alim, H. S. (2009). *Roc the mic right: The language of Hip Hop culture*. New York, NY: Routledge. This is the first book-length analysis of the role of language in Hip Hop culture and the creative and complex discursive practices which have influenced the Hip Hop genre.

Kozol, J. (2012). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools*. New York, NY: Broadway Paperbacks.

Over two years Kozol visited schools across the nation and interviewed students, teachers, and administrators. This book reveals his findings, that the divides between differing economic classes and racial groups are not only extreme but increasingly widening within the school system.

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.