

This section considers how culture influences our beliefs about language differences. The concept of African American Standard English is introduced.

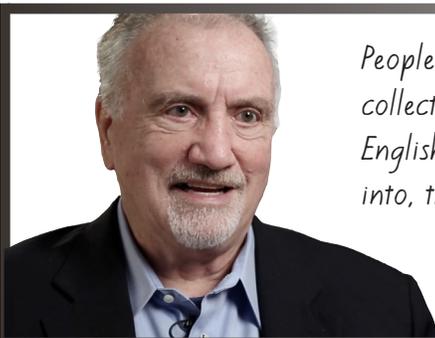


KEY CONCEPTS



Language Socialization Language Socialization is the process of internalizing the norms and ideologies of society. So, through language socialization, we internalize the norms and ideologies about language in the society we grow up in. We get messages about language norms and ideologies from our families, teachers, friends, and all kinds of media (TV, movies, social media, books, etc.) And just like we have social hierarchies (categories of people based on factors like wealth, race, and social status), we have language hierarchies in which we are socialized to think of certain varieties of language as “better” than others.

African American Standard English (AASE) AASE is a standardized variety (composed of many sub-varieties) of American English that has distinctively Black features (often referred to as camouflaged features because they are not recognized as “sounding Black” by non-Black listeners). AASE does not contain stigmatized features that are found in African American Vernacular varieties, such as habitual (also know as invariant) “be” (“She be studying” = “she is always studying”), or negative concord (“He don’t never be sick” = “he’s never sick”).



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 English, 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. And the reality of course, language itself is always right because there’s always a systematicity, a patterning to it.

- Walt Wolfram, linguist



It can be challenging to shift to the idea that all dialects and languages are linguistically adequate, systematic and patterned, since most of us have been socialized our whole lives to think that some dialects are “broken” or inferior while others are “proper” or correct. Consider this analogy: picture the way a vulture flies and the way a hummingbird flies.

Which bird is flying “correctly?”

Each bird’s way of flying functions perfectly for its environment and needs.



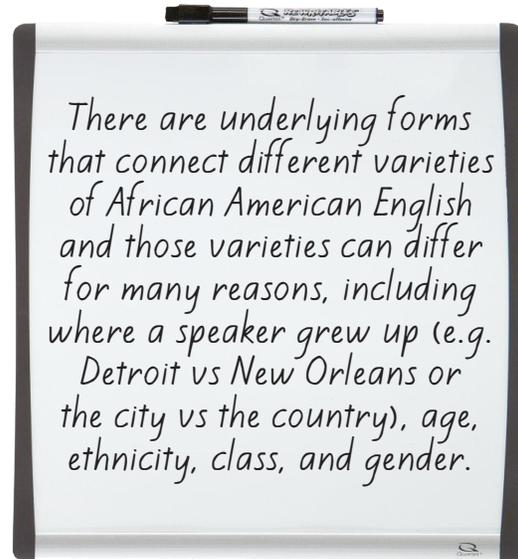
"When people hear the term *Black English*, they associate it with a particular kind, the vernacular kind. There are many, many types of *Black English* here in the United States, and it differs according to region, gender, age group."
-Arthur Spears, linguist



COMMON MISCONCEPTION

the truth is

people may think



LINGUISTIC CONCENSUS: There are many varieties of African American English and most speakers of African American English use multiple varieties.

EXTRA STUFF

CAMOUFLAGE FEATURES

One feature of African American Standard English (AASE) is that speakers of AASE will often use distinctly Black grammatical features that would go unnoticed except by a linguist! It's called grammatical camouflage.

Consider the following comparison from Arthur Spears' chapter on AASE in *The Oxford Handbook of African American Languages*:

Statement: *They've BIN living in Chicago* (AASE speaker)

Meaning: "They've been living in Chicago a long time and still are living there."

Statement: *They've been living in Chicago*. (non-African American dialect speaker)

Meaning: "They've been living in Chicago (no length of time implied) and still are."

Spears further explains that "BIN is pronounced with more emphasis (stress) and, in most varieties, always with a high pitch."



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING

1. What do you think people mean when they say “speak correctly” or “speaking properly?”
2. Have you ever felt embarrassed about the way you communicate? Why or why not?
3. Has anyone ever commented on the way that you communicate? What did they say? Was it positive, negative, or neutral? How did it make you feel? How did you respond?
4. Think about some of the people/places/inputs that most influenced the way you speak today. What were they?

POST-VIEWING

1. What do you notice about how speakers of African American English are portrayed in the media (news, sports, drama, comedy)?
2. In the film, several of the experts describe how messages about language come from our environment, including parents and teachers. Can you recall messages about language styles that you have heard?
3. Why might it be important to learn about the history of a language variety? What are some ways that language can give you access and some ways in which it can be a barrier?

Additional Resources

[Language and Power: Examining Societal Hierarchies](#)