

This section highlights some of the ways Black English is celebrated for its creativity and cultural contributions, and introduces the *Oxford Dictionary of African American English (ODAAE)*—a new reference work that provides information on the meaning, pronunciation, spelling, usage, and history of words from African American English.



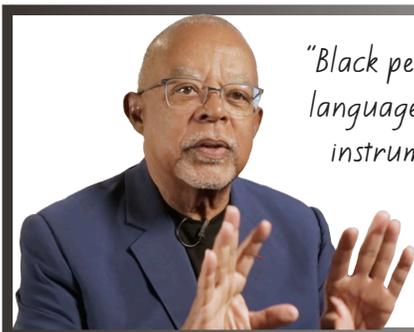
## KEY CONCEPTS

**The Oxford Dictionary of African American English (ODAAE)** In 2022, Oxford Languages and Harvard University's Hutchins Center for African & African American Research launched a three-year project to compile a dictionary of African American English. The project documents words and phrases along with their meanings, pronunciations, spellings, usage, and historical context. Each entry is supported by quotations from real-life examples of the language in use. The dictionary is a work in progress. You can find more information on the ODAAE website.

Here are a couple of examples of entries from the ODAAE:

**Cakewalk**, n. Something that is considered easily done. This word has its origins in an African American dance contest tradition in which Black people would perform a stylized walk in pairs, judged by a plantation owner. The winner would receive some type of cake.

**Snappin'**, v. Playfully taunting or teasing. For example, two people might be snappin' on each other with 'Yo mama' jokes, such as 'Yo mama so nice, she'd give you the hair off her back!'



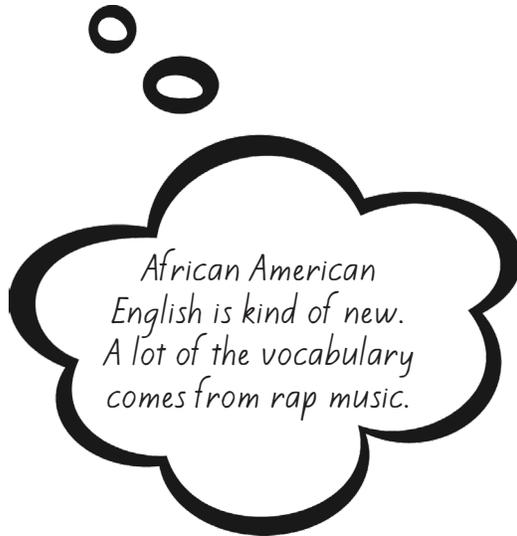
*"Black people were as inventive in their use of the English language as they were in the way they used musical instruments and European musical forms. It was just another outlet for their uniqueness and their creativity, at the level of sublime genius."*  
-Henry Louis Gates, historian

*"If you think about the type of situation that African American Language originated in, it's like you took the worst situation possible and developed these linguistic features that I think are quite beautiful and eloquent. It doesn't really seem like a social justice issue, but I think having pride in the way that you speak natively can be a social justice issue as well"*  
-Sabriya Fisher, linguist

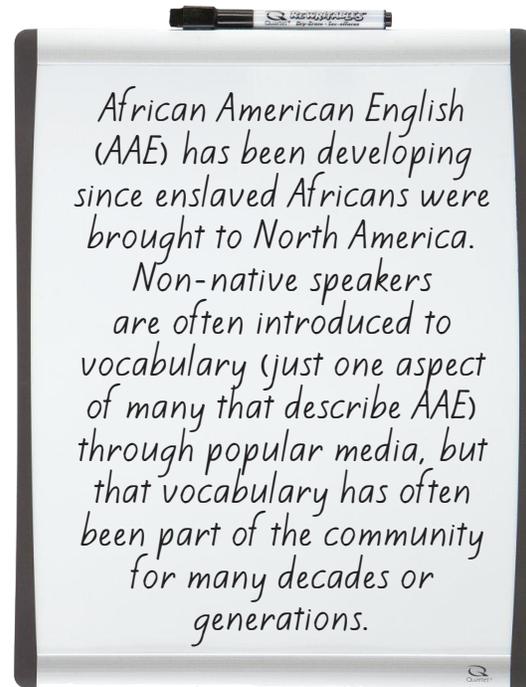


## COMMON MISCONCEPTION

people may think



the truth is



**LINGUISTIC CONSENSUS:** Although written records are not sufficient to fully document the development of African American English, linguists today understand far more about this complex and dynamic variety than they did just 50 years ago.

## EXTRA STUFF

There's much more to the Oxford Dictionary for African American English (ODAAE) that is introduced near the end of the film. Through their website you can [sign up](#) to receive news about the ODAAE, [submit a word suggestion](#), and [watch](#) a short Language and Life Project documentary about the ODAAE.

Check out the website:

[The Oxford Dictionary of African American English](#)



As the credits roll, the voice of President Obama can be heard saying, "We have shown the world we can float like butterflies and sting like bees. We can rocket into space like Mae Jemison, steal home like Jackie, rock like Jimi, stir the pot like Richard Pryor..." You can watch this speech, given to commemorate the grand opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, in its entirety [here](#).

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## PRE-VIEWING

1. What are some ways to appreciate language differences?
2. We often talk about creativity when it comes to art. What does it mean to be creative with language?

## POST-VIEWING

1. Can you think of examples of words or phrases that have become popular in the general population that have origins in African American Language? Why might it be important to know the origins of these words or phrases?
2. How do you think having a dictionary of African American English could affect how the language is used by people?
3. At the end of the film, in speaking about African American English, Elaine Richardson says, "You know, it's about African American resistance, it's about African American identity, African American history and culture. It's a ongoing experience." Does any part of that statement resonate for you? What do you think it means?

## Additional Resources

American Radioworks presents [Say It Plain Say It Loud: A Century of Great African American Speeches](#)

[The Importance of African American Speech: A Q+A with Dr. Walt Wolfram](#)

[Celebrating Black History Month: Black Pioneers in Language](#)

From Edutopia: [Celebrate Linguistic Diversity in the Classroom with Language Portraits](#)

From the Diversity for Social Impact website: [Linguistic Diversity: What Is It, How To Encourage It, And Why Is It Important](#)