

A short introduction to some of the injustices faced by speakers of African American English.



KEY CONCEPTS



Linguistic Profiling Linguistic profiling occurs when a listener hears (but does not see) someone speaking and makes inferences about the speaker's social characteristics (such as race or social class) based on their accent, dialect, or other speech patterns and then acts – consciously or unconsciously – in discriminatory ways. (“Racial profiling” is additionally based on visual cues) Linguist John Baugh, who features in the Talking Black in America series coined the term in his 2000 article, “[Racial Identification by Speech](#).”

Watch Baugh's TED Talk on linguistic profiling [here](#).

How does a listener identify a speaker?

The nuances of what leads listeners to be able to identify characteristics of a person based on their voice are still a topic of research. However, every voice is a rich signal that offers many acoustic cues that listeners may draw on, including pitch, intonation, vowel quality, and other voice aspects (nasality, breathiness, creak, etc.). Research finds that listeners can do identification tasks even when some of these cues are removed, so it seems that social categorization based on voice is something we are quite adept at.



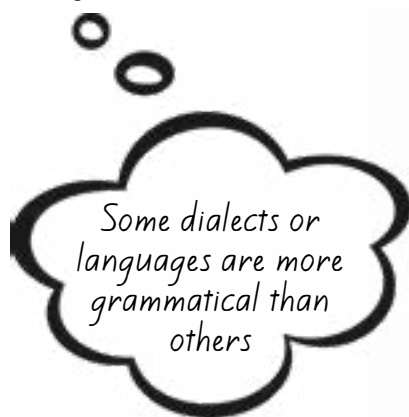
Check out a video clip from the 2014 book, *Talkin' Tarheel*: [What an Accent Tells You](#)



One thing that I want the public to think about is, when you evaluate somebody's speech and you hear them and you say, "Hmm, that's a Black person," what ideologies and stereotypes are coming with that? Can that be a neutral observation, or does all of the racist history of this country have to come along with it?
-Nicole Holliday, linguist

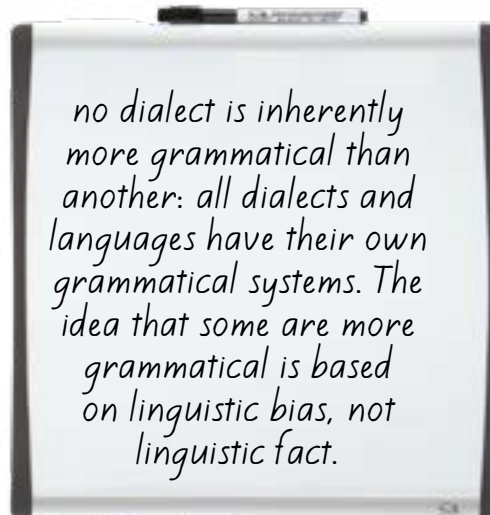
COMMON MISCONCEPTION

people may think



Video: [What are Dialects?](#)

the truth is



LINGUISTIC CONSENSUS: African American English (AAE) is a unique variety of English that is regular and grammatical, like every language. Speakers in the United States have been socialized to perceive AAE as inferior.

EXTRA STUFF



James Baldwin (1924-1987) was a writer and civil rights activist whose words continue to inspire us today. In the Social Justice episode, interviewee Henry Louis Gates mentions the impact that reading Baldwin's [opinion piece](#) in a 1979 issue of the *New York Times* had on him. The archival video of Baldwin seen in the documentary is from a brief and insightful [lecture](#) scrutinizing the continued existence of oppression despite the perceived success of the civil rights movement. To hear more from Baldwin, check out this [YouTube playlist](#).

Dialect or Language?

In the opinion piece mentioned above, Baldwin criticizes classifying Black English as a dialect rather than a language. It is commonly thought that a language is "greater" or "more important" than a dialect.

Partly that's because most of us think of dialects as mutually intelligible variations within the same language (in other words, speakers/listeners can understand each other without much effort).

On the other hand, two speakers of different languages wouldn't be able to understand each other, right? That's often true, but not always. For example, most Danish (Denmark) and Norwegian (Norway) speakers can understand each other pretty well.

The truth is that the designation of a communication system as a language versus a dialect relies on a sociopolitical framework more than a purely linguistic one.

For more, check out this animated [TED Ed video](#)



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING

1. Do you think you have an accent? Why or why not?
2. Imagine you are speaking to someone you don't know on the phone. How accurately do you think you could guess their race, ethnicity, gender, or age? How are you able to do so?
3. What do you think your voice gives away about you? Do you think people make assumptions about you based on how you sound?

POST-VIEWING

1. What are some of the ways that speakers of Black English may be discriminated against?
2. Is there anything wrong with making inferences about who is speaking when you can't see them?
3. How does linguistic profiling differ from racial profiling? In what ways are they similar?
4. Have you experienced any judgement based on the way that you speak?

Additional Resources

More information about the Language & Life Project and their work on language diversity can be found on the website, languageandlife.org

This article by Patricia Rice from Washington University at St. Louis highlights John Baugh's work: [Linguistic profiling: The sound of your voice may determine if you get that apartment or not](#)

Read about [how employment law handles linguistic profiling](#).

Here is an article that considers some of the reasons why African American English is misunderstood, written by JSTOR Daily's resident linguist, Chi Luu: [Black English Matters](#)

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

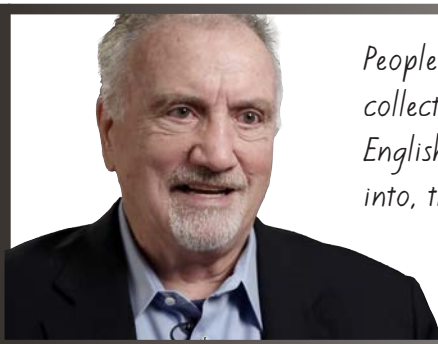


KEY CONCEPTS



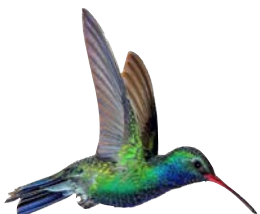
Language Socialization Language Socialization is the process of internalizing the norms and ideologies of society. So, through language socialization, we internalize the norms and ideologies about language in the society we grow up in. We get messages about language norms and ideologies from our families, 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



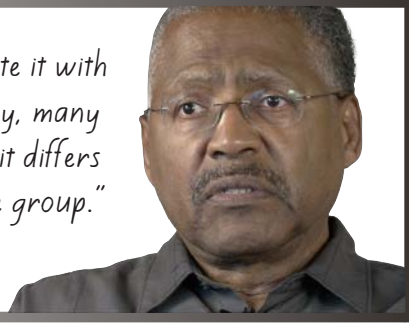
It can be challenging to shift to the idea that all dialects and languages are linguistically adequate, systematic and patterned, since most of us have been socialized our whole lives to think that some dialects are “broken” or inferior while others are “proper” or correct. Consider this analogy: picture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



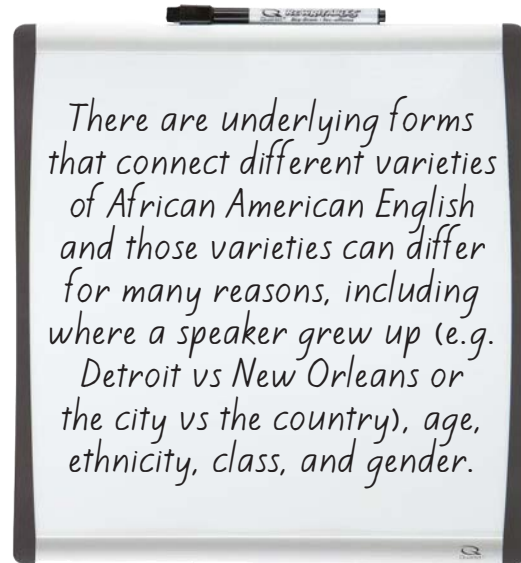
"When people hear the term Black English, they associate it with a particular kind, the vernacular kind. There are many, many types of Black English here in the United States, and it differs according to region, gender, age group."
-Arthur Spears, linguist



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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](#)

This chapter explores the experiences of students who speak non-mainstream dialects within an education system primarily designed for speakers of Standard American English. Experts also examine how a lack of understanding of Black Language and culture can lead to the misdiagnosis of speech and language disorders, as well as behavioral misunderstandings that result in unfair consequences for these students.



KEY CONCEPTS



The Ebonics Controversy The Ebonics controversy—also known as the Ebonics debate—began in December 1996, when the Oakland (CA) School Board passed a resolution recognizing African American English (AAE) as a language. The resolution proposed using AAE in classrooms as a bridge to help students learn Standard English. The decision drew national attention, much of it negative, and sparked widespread debate among educators, linguists, policymakers, and the public.

More information about the Ebonics program and the surrounding controversy can be found in the “Extra Stuff” and “Additional Resources” sections.

Communication Disorder The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) defines a communication disorder as “an impairment in the ability to receive, send, process, and comprehend concepts or verbal, nonverbal and graphic symbol systems.”

School-to-Prison Pipeline This term emerged within education circles to highlight how school discipline policies disproportionately impact students of color, often pushing them toward involvement with the criminal justice system.

Culturally Sensitive Education Also known as culturally responsive teaching, this approach emphasizes valuing and incorporating students’ cultural backgrounds to create an inclusive, respectful, and equitable learning environment.

“Where American educational policy is failing is that it doesn’t know enough about the relationship between culture and education and achievement, and there is this tendency to think that one-size-fits-all works in a country of 330 million people with, you know, tens and tens of millions of school-age kids.”

- Prudence Carter, sociologist



“We have an overrepresentation of Black and brown youth in special education and it connects to the school-to-prison pipeline. And so once we begin to track them into the special education system when they don’t belong there, we affect their intrinsic motivation to academically succeed.”

- Shameka Stanford, Speech-language pathologist

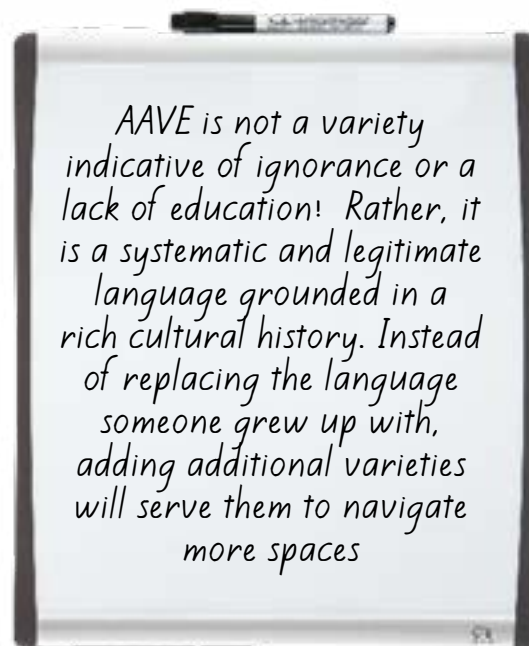


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LINGUISTIC CONSENSUS: Black Language has a rich history and culture. Speakers can add other varieties to their repertoire without having to “lose” or replace it.

EXTRA STUFF



Early in the Education segment, we see a short clip from a 1997 C-SPAN hearing on the topic of “Ebonics.” Psychologist [Dr. Robert Williams](#), one of many who testified before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee (which oversees education funding), shares childhood memories of how teachers and counselors made assumptions about him based on the way he spoke—assumptions that shaped the course of his education.

Although many language experts offered insights at that hearing and throughout the broader Ebonics controversy, misunderstandings about the topic still persist in the media and among the general public. The full hearing is available on [C-SPAN’s website](#).

The first film in our Talking Black in America series explores the Ebonics controversy in more depth—you can watch that segment of the film [here](#).

Language Difference or Language Disorder?

In the film, speech-language pathologists (SLPs) explore how a lack of understanding about language continues to negatively impact students’ educational experiences today. One example they highlight is the misidentification of young children who speak African American (ctnd)



English. These children are sometimes referred for special services—such as speech and language therapy—that they do not actually need.

To address this issue, we created a [short documentary](#) explaining why the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) is committed to educating its SLPs on the crucial distinction between a language difference (such as speaking a dialect that differs from Standard American English) and a language disorder, which may warrant therapeutic intervention.

For further insight from an SLP, check out [this article](#).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING

1. Do you feel like you speak differently at home or with friends than the way you speak in class?
2. Have you (or someone you've known) hesitated to speak up in class because of not wanting others to hear the way you speak?

POST-VIEWING

1. Recall in the video when the young girl was having her language choices tested by a speech therapist. What biases might be present in a test like this? What are the potential lasting consequences for a student who undergoes this type of testing?
2. Are there contexts in which you code shift, or change your speaking style? Where and when?
3. Do you think that having different language styles in the classroom is beneficial? Would it be better to have one style, used by all people? Why or why not?
4. Can you think of an instance in popular media where African American English was used? How about books you've read for school? How were the speakers of African American English portrayed?

Additional Resources

[Black English and "Proper" English: The impact of language-based racism](#) from the Reading Partners Website

[African American English Articulation Differences and Language Characteristics](#) - Tips to Increase Effectiveness for Speech Language Pathologists

From Kappan Online, a publication about K-12 education: [Lessons from the media's coverage of the 1996 Ebonics controversy](#)

Following the previous segment focused on education, this segment considers ways that language differences affect people's right to fair treatment in the areas of criminal justice and healthcare. At the end, one expert discusses how one type of social media has been used as a tool to address injustice.



KEY CONCEPTS



Trial of George Zimmerman Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African American boy, was walking back from a 7-Eleven to his father's fiancée's townhouse in Sanford, Florida, on a rainy night in 2012. His appearance drew the suspicion of neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman, setting off a chain of events that led to Trayvon's death and a high-profile trial that sparked national debates about gun laws, racial profiling, and justice.

In the 20 minutes leading up to his death, Trayvon was on the phone with his friend Rachel Jeantel, who became a key witness for the prosecution. Jeantel speaks African American (Vernacular) English, as well as Haitian Creole and Spanish. During the trial, her speech, demeanor, and cultural background were widely criticized and mocked in the media and by the public—providing a powerful and painful example of linguistic prejudice in the courtroom and beyond.

Black Lives Matter The Black Lives Matter movement was founded in 2013 by three Black female organizers—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin. The movement began as a social media hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter, and quickly grew into a global call to action.

In recent years, Black Lives Matter has led demonstrations around the world to protest police brutality and systemic racism, which continue to disproportionately affect the Black community.



"I was just at the doctor last week and I will intentionally speak in standard English and as eloquently as possible, because that's somewhere where I know from personal experience that they're gonna look at you as less intelligent, and that's just a place where I don't want to gamble with that."

-Cierra Harris, student

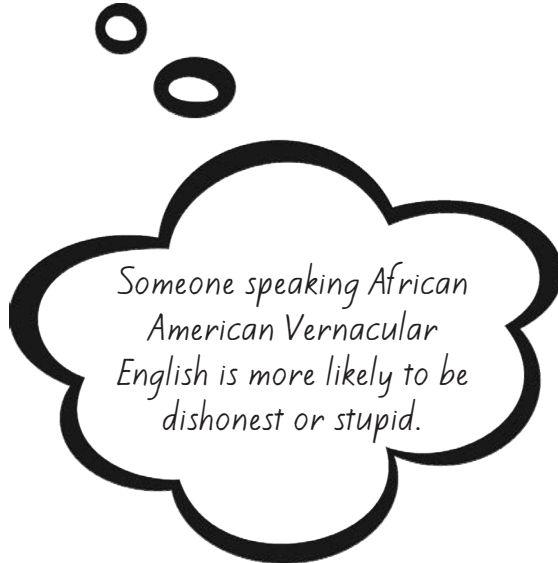
"It's important to remember that linguistic profiling is always at play. So every case, every time someone goes into a courtroom, how they're using language determines how trustworthy they are, how much we believe what they're saying to us and it can affect their perception of criminality. So someone might come in with an accent, tell the full truth and get a heavier sentence because of how they sound, not necessarily what they've done or what they've said."

-Kelly Elizabeth Wright, linguist

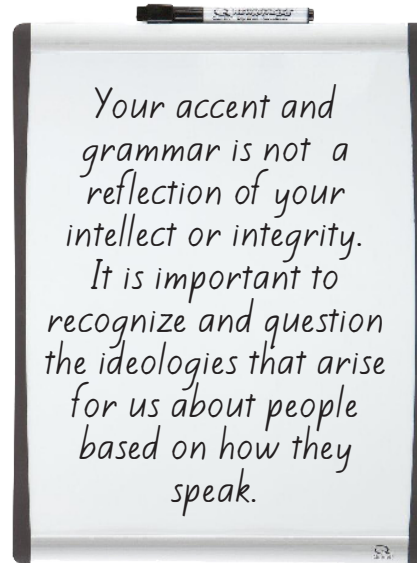


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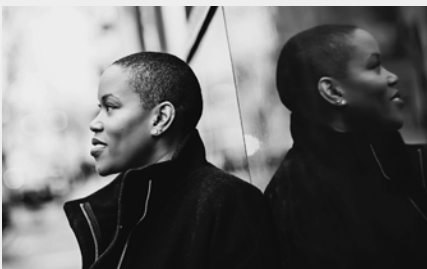
LINGUISTIC CONSENSUS: People have been socialized to believe that African American Vernacular English is an inferior or uneducated way to speak and this, in turn, influences how much they value and trust someone speaking it.

EXTRA STUFF

Transcription of Testimony

The film highlights a well-known case in which a witness's testimony was deemed unreliable by the jury—largely because of the way the witness spoke. Another serious concern arises with court stenographers, who are responsible for producing the official transcript of courtroom proceedings. Over the years, sociolinguists have uncovered numerous instances where transcription inaccuracies created misleading records of sworn statements, sometimes contributing to miscarriages of justice.

For additional research about this phenomenon, see [this article](#).



"We stay on ready..."

Dr. Meredith Clark speaks about Black Twitter's essential role in the Black Lives Matter movement in the Social Justice film. She weighed in on that topic and more in the film [Black Twitter: A People's History](#). You can watch the trailer [here](#).

Dr. Clark is also a Research Lead with [Archiving the Black Web](#) project.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING

1. Do you think that the way people speak can affect how trustworthy they seem?
2. Could language bias affect how suspects are treated within the criminal justice system? How?

POST-VIEWING

1. What are some of the ways language can play a role in criminal justice?
2. Which of the following roles in the criminal justice system do you think it is most important to have some knowledge of language/dialect differences; police officer, lawyer, judge, court transcribers? Why?
3. Imagine you have a different cultural background than your doctor. How might it affect the care you receive?
4. Can you think of other contexts in which language bias can play a critical role in terms of someone's health and safety?

Additional Resources

Check out this article by John Baugh on [linguistic diversity and disparate health outcomes](#).

Interrogating Justice is a non-profit, non-partisan think tank. Read the article [Black English Exacerbates Racist Practices in Justice System](#) to consider examples of errors in court transcription due to language differences.

From the Philadelphia Enquirer: [Study Says Court Reporters Not Accurate with Dialect](#)

An article from the New York Times asks: [Why are Black Students Punished So Often? Minnesota Confronts a National Quandary](#)

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.



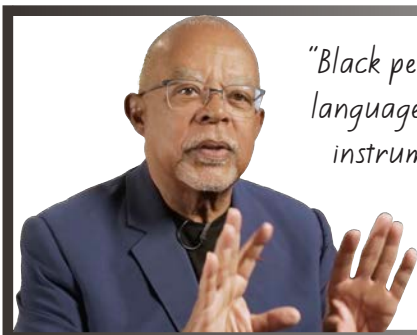
KEY CONCEPTS

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:

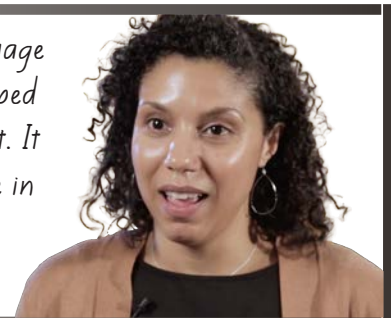
Cakewalk, n. Something that is considered easily done. This word has its origins in an African American dance contest tradition in which Black people would perform a stylized walk in pairs, judged by a plantation owner. The winner would receive some type of cake.

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!'.



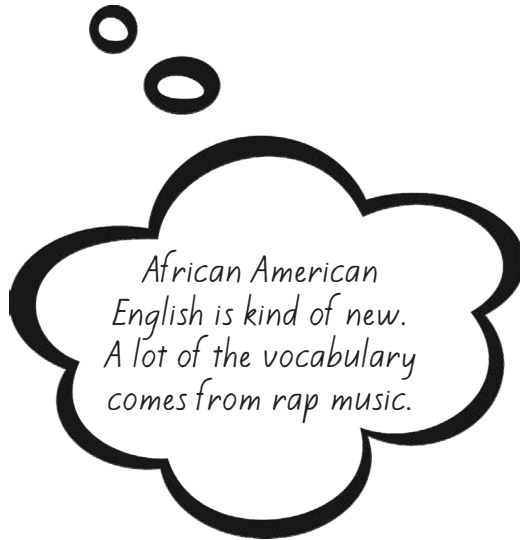
"Black people were as inventive in their use of the English language as they were in the way they used musical instruments and European musical forms. It was just another outlet for their uniqueness and their creativity, at the level of sublime genius."
-Henry Louis Gates, historian

"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

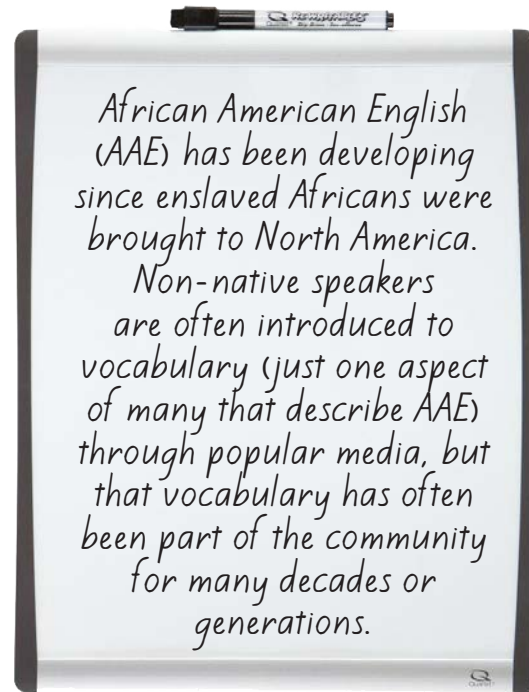


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LINGUISTIC CONSENSUS: Although written records are not sufficient to fully document the development of African American English, linguists today understand far more about this complex and dynamic variety than they did just 50 years ago.

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](#)