

# English with an Accent

## Language, ideology and discrimination in the United States

Second Edition

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# The real trouble with Black language<sup>1</sup>

# 10

It is not the Black child's language which is despised: It is his experience.  
James Baldwin, "Nobody knows my name" (1985b)

A white face goes with a white mind. Occasionally a Black face goes with a white mind.  
Very seldom a white face will have a Black mind.

Nikki Giovanni, attributed

## Grammar: resistance is futile



AAVE has been the focus of formal study for some 40 years, so that there is no lack of material available for anyone who is interested in learning about it. While there is not space to look into that wealth of information in this chapter, a short summary of crucial features of Black language (referred to here primarily as African American Vernacular English, AAVE) will be helpful when considering the speech communities that use these languages in a larger context.<sup>2</sup>

The features of AAVE that distinguish it from other varieties of American English have to do with phonology and the grammatical or syntactic structures, as seen in Table 10.1. However, there are other aspects which are more markedly different. Most important are AAVE's prosodic and rhetorical features (Alim 2004b; Alim and Baugh 2007; Baugh 1983; Green 2002a; Rickford and Rickford 2000; Smitherman 2000, 2003a, 2003b, 2006), in particular, concepts (such as *style*) which do not lend themselves to the quantitative analysis of traditional sociolinguistics.

In *Spoken Soul*, Rickford and Rickford point to more than three decades of research as solid evidence "that listeners are able to identify accurately the ethnicity of Black and white speakers on the basis of tape-recorded samples of their speech, some less than 2.5 seconds long" (2000: 101–102, 241n).<sup>3</sup> Green (2002) provides a detailed look at AAVE pitch range, tone, intonation and syllable structure, all contributing to the understanding of AAVE as a language with a unique rhythm.<sup>4</sup> Work in linguistic profiling adds weight to the common belief that it is usually possible to identify a person's race (and sometimes, ethnicity) on the basis of the spoken word without visual cues (Anderson 2007; Baugh 2003; Chin 2010; Smalls 2004).

Middle-class African Americans may seldom or never use grammatical features of AAVE, but such persons can still signal solidarity with the greater African American community by careful engagement of discourse strategies, intonation contour, and pitch. These strategies are what Smitherman calls the African American Verbal Tradition, which further encompasses speech acts specific to the community such as signification, call-and-response, tonal semantics and sermonic tone (Smitherman 1995b).<sup>5</sup> Smitherman elaborates on this in other publications.

**Table 10.1** Some features of African American English

<i>Feature</i>	<i>*SAE written form</i>	<i>AAVE</i>
Voiced stops /b/ /d/ and /g/ are often devoiced or dropped at the end of words	cab, hand talked	cap, han talk
Final consonant cluster reduction, for example, in word-final position /sp/, /st/, and /sk/ are reduced	test, list	tes, lis
Postvocalic /r/ sounds are deleted	store, fourth	sto, foth
/l/ is often vocalized in word final position, resulting in homonyms	tool : too	too : too
/ai/ > /a/ monophthongization, (found in all southern varieties of English)	I think I've got something in my eye.	Ah think ah've got somethin in ma ah. (cited in Rickford and Rickford 2000: 99)
Merging of simple and past participle forms.	So what we've done is, we have come together	So what we have done is we've come together (Weldon 2004)
Existential <i>it</i>	There's some coffee in the kitchen Sometimes there wasn't any chalk, any book or any teacher	It's some coffee in the kitchen Sometimes it didn't have no chalk, no book, no teacher (Green 2002: 81)
Copula deletion (primarily where other varieties of English can contract <i>is</i> or <i>are</i> )	People're going to look at you like you're funny. She's my sister	People gon' look at you like you funny (Weldon 2004) She my sister
Verb marker for perpetual action	The coffee is cold The coffee is always cold	The coffee cold The coffee bees cold (Smitherman 1988 [1999]: 83)
Perfect participle "done" before a verb referring to something completed in the recent past	I have had enough.	I done had enough. (Rickford and Rickford 2000: 120)
Future tense marked for aspect Future tense "fixing to" + non-finite verb	I am going to eat you, Shine Are you (plural) getting ready/about to eat?	I'ma eat you, Shine (Dundes 1990: 147) Y'all finna eat? (Green 2002: 70)
Negation strategies	He didn't go any further than third or fourth grade  No game lasts all night	He ain't go no further than third or fourth grade (Rickford and Rickford 2000: 122) Don't no game last all night long (Green 2002: 78) <sup>1</sup>
Possessive marker ('s) deleted	That's the church's responsibility	That's the church responsibility (Green 2002: 102)
Syntax – uninverted questions inverted	I asked Alvin if he could go	I as Alvin could he go (Labov 1972a)

Note: <sup>1</sup> Smitherman cites "I cain't kill nothin and won't nothin die," as an example of an idiom that originated in the AAVE oral tradition. It is an excellent example of multiple negation, but it also is not easy to translate. The speaker is referring to his or her own bad luck.

The African American verbal tradition clashes with the European American tradition because there are different – and, yes, contradictory – cultural assumptions about what constitutes appropriate discourse, rhetorical strategies, and styles of speaking. While the African American linguistic style has been described as passionate, emotional, and “hot” and the European as objective, detached, and “cold,” we are seriously oversimplifying if we assert that one tradition is superior. What is not an oversimplification, however, is that African and European Americans have different attitudes about and responses to a speaker depending on whether she uses one style or the other.

(Smitherman 2000: 254)

Since the first edition of this book, serious study of Hip Hop culture has produced a body of interdisciplinary work relevant to this discussion. In terms of language, discourse and communication, much of this work has occurred at the cross-section of linguistics and cultural anthropology (Bucholtz 2003). While the term was first used to reference a musical movement, Hip Hop Studies have expanded beyond the local to the global. In the States, Hip Hop is a reference to an urban, youth-focused culture which has evolved from its origins in African American and Latino communities on both coasts in the 1970s, and which values creativity, color and style.

This is a very large topic and one that cannot be seriously addressed in this chapter, but the relevance of the complex relationship between the languages of African American communities and evolving Hip Hop Nation can hardly be overestimated. What is especially interesting is the way this approach has made it possible to bring almost intangible issues into clearer focus. In his 2004b study and elsewhere, Alim addresses the importance of creativity of “Style. Steelo. Steez. The fact that there are at least three different lexical items to describe the concept of style in Hip Hop Nation Language . . . underscores its importance to the community” (2004b: 2–3). There are suggestions for further readings in this area at the end of the chapter.

### **Style, authenticity and race**

Smitherman looked closely at the distinctive style and rhetorical features of AAVE in her analysis of the African American community’s differing responses to the Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas controversy.

In 1991, George Bush nominated Clarence Thomas, an African American jurist, to the Supreme Court. In the course of confirmation hearings in the Senate a witness rose to lodge a protest. Anita Hill, an African American law professor who had worked under Thomas at the EEOC, came forward to charge Thomas with sexual harassment in the workplace. She provided ample detail and answered the Senate’s questions with dignity and calm. A media frenzy arose around Hill’s testimony and Thomas’s responses; the matter was debated fiercely across the country.

Thomas was confirmed by a 52–48 vote. Many who supported Hill suggested that in a Senate that was 98 percent male, Hill’s charges were never taken seriously (Smitherman 1995a). In her study of reactions to the case, Smitherman found cultural differences in discourse style: Hill’s rhetorical devices were distinctly Anglo, while Thomas

capitalized on and ruthlessly exploited the African American Verbal Tradition for all it was worth. He seized the rhetorical advantage, swaying Black opinion by use of the touchstones of the Oral Tradition and sociolinguistically constructing an image of himself as culturally Black and at one with the Folk.

(*ibid.*: 238–239)

Approaching this same issue from another angle, Weldon's (2008) study of middle-class African Americans again underscores the importance of African American verbal traditions in establishing a linguistic connection to the great African American community. In analyzing a video recording of African Americans talking together during a televised symposium she found that some participants moved back and forth between AAVE and \*SAE by means of phonology and grammar, but the most usual strategy was to employ AAVE rhetorical devices.

Spears, a native speaker of AAVE, provides a more personal view of the rhetorical contrasts between his native variety of English and \*SAE. It is a very useful illustration, and so I quote it in full:

The radical difference between the discursive toolkit of African Americans and other Americans, whites in particular, is revealed by an observation I have made numerous times. Often at social gatherings of blacks and whites (or other nonblacks), everyone begins the evening talking together. The talk is effortless, natural, and unmonitored. There arrives, however, a point late in the evening when many of the black guests in integrated conversation groups begin shifting into black ways of speaking. As this continues, the whites (and other nonblacks) increasingly fall silent, no longer able to fully understand or participate in the conversation that the blacks are carrying on. Their confusion must result from listening to remarks made in English, the common language, whose meaning, intent, and relevance cannot be interpreted, for the simple reason that those remarks require a different communicative competence. These occurrences are instructive for highlighting the difference between linguistic (grammatical) competence and communicative (discourse) competence. They also reinforce the idea that the principal differences between African American speech and that of other American English speakers lie in communicative practices. This is one of several reasons why African American communicative practices require more attention.

(Spears 2007: 100)

This analysis of culturally specific rhetorical styles makes one thing very clear: even when no grammatical, phonological or lexical features of AAVE are used, a person can, in effect, still be speaking AAVE. Thus, while the core grammatical features of AAVE may be heard most consistently in poorer Black communities where there are strong social and communication networks, AAVE prosody, intonation and rhetorical style are heard, on occasion, from prominent and successful African Americans in public forums. These may be individuals who grew up in AAVE-speaking communities but who are bidialectal, or others who grew up with a different variety of English altogether, and still chose to try to acquire AAVE (with differing degrees of success, as seen in Baugh's (1992) examination of the mistakes made by adults who are acquiring AAVE as a second language.

So some subset of AAVE speakers have learned how to shift toward \*SAE in terms of grammar in order to evade the overt discrimination that comes along with their mother



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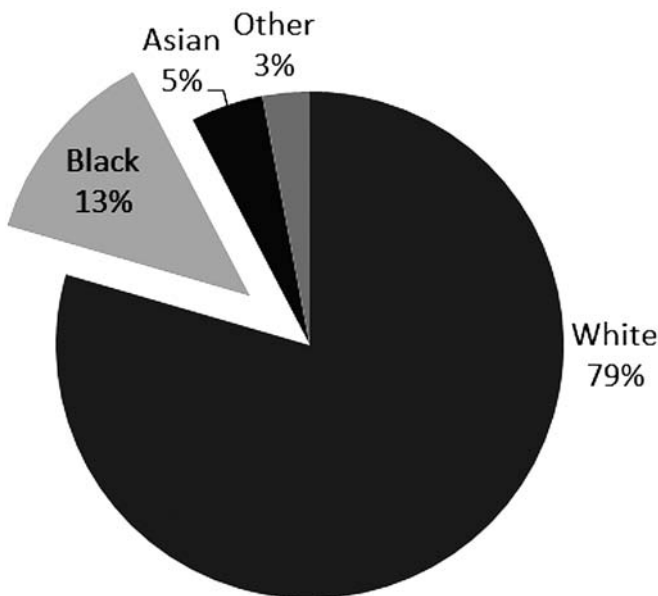
1 tongue. Most of these people will still signal their allegiance to the community by means  
 2 of intonation and other prosodic features. This is almost certainly not a conscious decision,  
 3 but an element of language performance – an attempt to satisfy the expectations of the  
 4 listeners – that is a common feature of human communication.  
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### 7 Defying the definition

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 9 The 1990 census reported that the U.S. African American population grew about 10  
 10 percent between 1980 and 1990, for a count of 29,427,000, or about 12 percent of the  
 11 country's total population. In 2007, the estimated population figures saw some change  
 12 (Figure 10.1). How many Americans of African descent speak African American Vernacular  
 13 English is a relevant but difficult question, in part because there is no definition of AAE  
 14 or AAVE that has wide consensus.<sup>6</sup>

15 Various authors have put the number of AAVE speakers between 80 and 90 percent of  
 16 the African American population (Baugh 1983; Rickford 2000). What can be said with  
 17 more certainty is that AAVE speakers come from all socioeconomic backgrounds and  
 18 circumstances. Further, while not all persons of African ancestry speak AAVE, the  
 19 language is spoken by people who are not African American. Children and adolescents  
 20 learn the language they hear around them, regardless of race or ethnicity. A blond, blue-  
 21 eyed child raised with African American playmates in an African American community  
 22 where AAVE predominates will in fact, learn AAVE – though she may also learn other  
 23 varieties of English at the same time.

24 Stereotypes about AAVE speakers (for example, that it is primarily the language of the  
 25 poor who live in large cities) originate primarily through the information and entertain-  
 26



47 **Figure 10.1** U.S. population by race, 2007 (N = 301,237,703)

48 Source: U.S. Census Bureau

ment industries which have “conveyed the impression that Black speech was the lingo of criminals, dope pushers, teenage hoodlums, and various and sundry hustlers, who spoke in ‘muthafuckas’ and ‘pussy-copping raps’” (Smitherman 1988: 84).

There are dozens of websites that exist only to mock African American English (often referred to as Ebonics).<sup>7</sup> On some of these sites, classic literature has been translated into what is supposed to be Ebonics; on others you will find quizzes to test how Black you are or how well you “speak Ebonics,” as seen in Figure 10.2.

Many of these sites have been closely studied – not to document errors (of which there are many) – but to look at the way an anti-Ebonics ideology is constructed (Hill 1995, 1998; Rickford and Rickford 2000; Ronkin and Karn 1999). For example, the so-called translation of the nursery rhyme “Jack and Jill went up the hill” into Ebonics includes the line “Jack be felt down,” which Ronkin and Karn (1999: 366) cite as a case of the misuse of the passive voice, as well as the hyper-use of habitual “be.” That is, non-AAVE speakers who set out to mock the language show a fondness for adding superfluous instances of “be” in places it does not belong. “Jack be felt down,” is as ill formed in AAVE as the sentence “Jack down were fallen” is ill formed in any variety of American English. Ronkin and Karn provide many similar examples of AAVE that has been mangled (out of ignorance or an attempt at humor) with the apparent purpose of highlighting how very different AAVE is from “good” or “proper” English.

It has been established that AAVE has a rule-governed grammar. As this is the case for all living languages, it could be said that grammar is inevitable, and resistance is futile. To ignore this fact about AAVE is to demonstrate ignorance, condescension and disrespect.



Figure 10.2 How black are you?

Source: Adapted from an on-line poll

Linguists do bear some responsibility for language-focused stereotypes, for the simple reason that for some 40 years, most of the scholarly work on AAVE has focused on the inner-city poor. There were many reasons for this, some of them practical, as in Rickford's observation that the most segregated and poorest African Americans are the most persistent speakers of AAVE and thus provide a great deal of useful data (Rickford 2010: 28). There are also ideological and practical motivations evident in the earliest work on the African American language community:

[S]ociolinguists' validation of [AAVE] as a legitimate linguistic variety [was] a revolutionary viewpoint that challenged generations of racism, linguistic and otherwise . . . Thus the most useful conceptualization of the AAVE speech community at the time, both politically and theoretically, was one in which those speakers whose speech was mislabeled as substandard or even as not really language at all were placed at the very center, as the most competent and systematic speakers of a complete and systematic variety.

(Bucholtz 2003: 402)

To make up for what is, in retrospect, a lop-sided picture of AAVE, linguists have been looking more closely at the wider African American community, most specifically at the middle classes (Anderson and Middleton 2005; Kautzsch 2002; Kendall and Wolfram 2009; Wassink 2004; Weldon 2008). Kendall and Wolfram (2009) lay out a comprehensive blueprint for a more inclusive sampling across the full range of speech acts that compose what might be called the African American linguistic marketplace (Wolfram, forthcoming). This reasonable and perhaps too-long-put-off shift of focus takes into account the growth of an African American middle class and in parallel, the evolution of what has been called African American Standard English (AASE) (Spears 2009: 3), African American English (AAE) or Black Standard English (BSE) (Taylor 1983). Given the tendency to focus too closely on one aspect of the larger picture, Wolfram cautions against absolute dichotomies:

Weldon's study exposes spurious dichotomies such as the nominal distinction between standard and vernacular African American English; it also raises questions about the role of personal presentation and audience in public speeches, including the extent of stylistic shift, performative code-switching, and the persistence of vernacular variants in the speech of some prominent African Americans in more formal public settings with mainstream, public audiences.

(Wolfram 2011)

There is a great deal of regional and social variation in AAVE. The language of African Americans living in the rural South is different from that of the Latino- and Anglo Americans who live alongside them, but it is also different from the AAVE spoken in urban centers in the south (Cukor-Avila 2001; Cukor-Avila 2003; Green 2002; Rickford 2010; Wolfram 2007). With increasing wealth and the growth of the Black middle class, the community becomes more socially complex, and AAVE keeps pace.

Of these grammatical features (which are not exclusive to the African American language community, please keep this in mind), only the use of what as a relative pronoun seems to be disappearing from both urban and rural AAVE. Other features (negative inversion, regularized past form) seem solid regardless of the setting. More relevant still, Wolfram (2004c) identifies a number of features which are new or intensifying in urban AAVE.



**Table 10.2** Some of the differences between urban and rural AAVE, by feature

<i>Feature</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Urban AAVE</i>	<i>Rural AAVE</i>
1. Habitual <i>be</i> + <i>v-ing</i>	I always be playing ball	+	In decline
2. Resultative <i>be done</i>	She be done had her baby	+	Not in evidence
3. <i>ain't</i> for <i>didn't</i>	I ain't go yesterday	+	In decline
4. 3rd person singular -s absence:	She run everyday	+	+
5. Remote <i>been</i>	I been ate it	In decline	+
6. <i>For</i> to complement	I want for to bring it	Not in evidence	+
7. Negative inversion	Didn't nobody like it	+	+
8. Regularized past form	I knowed it	+	+
9. <i>what</i> as a relative pronoun	The man what took it	Not in evidence	In decline

Source: Adapted from Wolfram (2004c)

There is a growing body of research which focuses on what Morgan and DeBerry (1995) claim is another dimension of variation within and between AAVE communities by looking at the way that African American youth active in Urban Hip Hop culture must choose among grammatical, lexical and phonological variables which identify them as aligned with either the West or East coast. In a similar way, Wolfram and his students (2007: 8) have looked at features such as /r/ deletion in postvocalic word final position (mother, manager) to establish that supra-regional features of AAVE are subject to regional influences.

Baugh draws attention to wider implications of terminology and labels:

Ebonics suffers from several definitional detriments that can no longer be dismissed . . . I therefore hope that these remarks expose some of the scholarly and educational perils of attempting to adopt Ebonics as either a technical linguistic term or as an educational philosophy, at least as long as multiple and contradictory definitions [exist]. Just as a house that is divided cannot stand, linguistic terminology that alleges to have scientific validity cannot survive with multiple definitions.

(Baugh 2000: 86)

### Anglo attitudes toward AAVE<sup>8</sup>

African Americans who speak American English without any grammatical or stylistic features of AAVE – for example, those who grow up with no contact of any kind to an African American family or community – certainly do exist, although their number would be very hard to estimate.

It's important to remember that for most Anglos, the primary and sometimes sole experience of African Americans comes through mass media, where Black men and women in power suits sound Anglo or very close to it, for as Smitherman (1997) explains: "Blacks have believed that the price of the ticket for Black education and survival and success in White America is eradication of Black Talk." In the information industry, those who do

1 speak AAVE are seen primarily when someone – usually somebody poor, possibly victim-  
 2 ized and/or suspected of a criminal offence – is interviewed. It is hardly a surprise that  
 3 most Anglos have a skewed impression of AAVE and AAVE speakers (see also the earlier  
 4 Smitherman quote on stereotypes in the media).<sup>9</sup>

5 These practices do not go unnoticed by African American media professionals:

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 7 A few years ago most of the blacks at CNN lodged a protest about the material we  
 8 were using on the air. They complained that every time we did a story on poverty,  
 9 we rolled out “b-roll” showing blacks, and every time we did a story on crime, we  
 10 rolled out “b-roll” with blacks in it. We went back and looked at our file tape and, in  
 11 fact, it was all black.

12 (Westin 2000: 24, as cited in Abraham and Appiah 2006)

13  
 14 We take in ideas and pictures – Black men being arrested, a stockpile of guns – like a daily  
 15 dose of medicine lest we forget the way the world works: More evidence of a gulf between  
 16 them and us, African ancestry and Anglo, criminal and victim.

17 In a parallel way, Anglos rarely hesitate when they are asked their opinions on AAVE.  
 18 Without pause, individuals will tell you what is wrong with the language and the people  
 19 who speak it. Complaints tend to fall into two categories: (1) targeted lexical items or  
 20 grammatical features which cause immediate reaction; and (2) general issues of language  
 21 purity and authority. The purpose is the same, however, no matter the packaging: this  
 22 kind of criticism is the tool of choice when it comes to silencing the peripheralized.

23 In their criticisms of AAVE, Anglos tend to focus on morphological markers (for  
 24 example, third person singular verb endings as in she sit, he go, she say, he yell) and the  
 25 pronunciation of specific words. One of the most salient points of phonological variation  
 26 which is strongly stigmatized from outside the Black community might be called the great  
 27 ask–aks controversy.

28 The verb “to ask” is commonly defined as meaning to call for information, to request  
 29 a desired thing, or to inquire. There are two pronunciations heard commonly in the U.S.:  
 30 [æsk] and [æks]. In rapid speech, a third pronunciation [æst] is often heard, derived from  
 31 [æsk]. The *Oxford English Dictionary* establishes this variation between [æsk] and [æks] as  
 32 very old, a result of the Old English metathesis<sup>10</sup> asc-, acs-. From this, followed Middle  
 33 English variation with many possible forms: ox, ax, ex, ask, esk, ash, esh, ass, ess. Finally,  
 34 ax or aks survived to almost 1600 as the regular literary form, when ask became the literary  
 35 preference.

36 Most people know nothing of the history of this form, and believe the *aks* variant to be  
 37 an innovation of AAVE speakers. In fact, it is found in Appalachian speech, in some urban  
 38 dialects in the New York metropolitan area, and outside the U.S. in some regional varieties  
 39 of British English.<sup>11</sup> I have heard it from friends and Italian-American relatives in the  
 Hudson Valley. However, if I had pointed the usage out, there would have been broad  
 and angry denial.

Anglo-English speakers are eager and willing to point out this usage, which is charac-  
 terized as the most horrendous of errors:

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 41 On the last day that I met with my adopt-a-class last year, I told the students that they  
 42 will have to learn to read, write, do math, and speak English properly if they are going  
 43 to get a first-rate job and be a success. I told them there was one word that will mark  
 44 them as uneducated . . . A young girl raised her hand and said, “The word is ax.” . . .



Appalachian speech,  
 British English,  
 Hudson Valley (NY)

I asked her if she could pronounce the word properly. She said, “Yes, it is ask.” . . . I felt terrific. By simply raising that one word on an earlier occasion, I had focused their attention on something that I think is important, and I am sure you do as well . . . You were present at Martin Luther King, Jr. High School last week when the opening ceremony was conducted regarding the High School Institute for Law and Justice. A young girl in the class was asked to read her essay. The content of her essay was excellent, but at one point she pronounced the word “ask” as “ax.” I believe that everyone in the room recognizing the mis-pronunciation was distressed and, regrettably, the substance of her essay was [thus made] less important.

(Edward I. Koch, Mayor of New York city, to the  
Chancellor of Education, cited in Koch 1989: 21–22)

I guess what I’d like to say is that what makes me feel that Blacks tend to be ignorant is that they fail to see that the word is spelled A-S-K, not A-X. And when they say aksed, it gives the sentence an entirely different meaning. And that is what I feel holds Blacks back.

(Female call-in viewer, *Oprab Winfrey Show*, 1989)

My husband came here from Germany and he learned how to say a-s-k, so why can’t you?

(Overheard)

All of these criticisms of the stigmatized aks variant assume that its use is the result of ignorance or stupidity following from lack of education or laziness. Why else, this reasoning goes, would someone hold on willfully to such an ugly, contemptuous usage? Most disturbing is the cheerful, almost gleeful acceptance of a single variable as a suitable basis for judging the speaker’s character and intelligence, and from there, to reject the content completely. Former New York Mayor Koch dismisses a presentation which he otherwise finds well done and convincing on the basis of a single sociolinguistic variant; Harper’s prints his letter to the Chancellor of Education without comment.

The authority cited here is the written language: aks is wrong because we write ask. This kind of criticism is particularly illogical, given the large-scale lack of correspondence between sound and symbol in English. The call-in viewer, citing the authority of the written language, provided excellent proof of this. She spoke what is commonly considered \*SAE (albeit with a strong Chicago accent), and like others who speak unstigmatized varieties of American English, she did not aspirate the /h/ in “what”; she pronounced spelled /spelt/, and she left out the /n/ and /t/ in “sentence,” and substituted a glottal stop.

Uninformed or less than factual criticisms are troublesome, but they are overshadowed by other more explicit and unapologetic condemnations of AAVE which extend to unfounded criticisms of African American culture and values. Such criticisms are often openly made, in particular by newspaper columnists, as in a sports column:

Ungrammatical street talk by Black professional athletes, and other Blacks in public professions such as the music industry, has come to be accepted. Indeed, “Moses, you is a baaad damn shootin’ individual” comes a lot closer to proper English usage than many public sentences uttered by Black athletes . . . But there’s a problem here. Black athletes – and Black musicians and TV performers, etc. – are role models for young Black children. We in the media have begun to pass on the street language of Black



Chicago accent

1 “superstars” verbatim . . . and what this is doing is passing the message to a whole  
 2 new generation of Black children that it’s OK to talk that way; more than OK, it’s  
 3 terrific to talk that way . . . the situation is compounded by leading Black characters  
 4 in several network television shows, who use street grammar to advance the feeling  
 5 that they are young and cool.

6  
 7 The dilemma is that it doesn’t make much difference for the Black professional  
 8 athletes, etc., who talk this way – they’re wealthy men who are going to live well off  
 9 their bodily skills no matter if they can talk at all, much less correctly . . . if a Black  
 10 child emulates one of the dumb-talking Black athletes he sees being interviewed on  
 11 TV, he is not going to be thought of as a superstar. He is going to be thought of as  
 12 a stupid kid, and later, as a stupid adult . . . They probably aren’t talking that way  
 13 because they think it’s right; they’re talking that way because it’s a signal that they  
 14 reject the white, middle-class world that they have started to live in the midst of.

15 (Bob Greene’s Sports Column, *Chicago Tribune*, December 3, 1979)<sup>12</sup>

16  
 17 While censure of AAVE is not hard to find, it is not often that such criticisms and the  
 18 underlying assumptions are so openly and unapologetically voiced.

19 Greene identifies two professions which he associates with successful African Americans:  
 20 sports and entertainment. What these people have in common, in his estimation, is the  
 21 fact that they speak AAVE, that they are in the public eye, and that they have the power  
 22 to lead the Black youth of America astray. His point, and it is factually true, is that with  
 23 the exception of these two groups, very few African Americans who achieve mainstream  
 24 economic and social success are able to do it without the necessity of linguistic and to some  
 25 degree, cultural assimilation.

26 What seems to bother Greene so much is the fact that the gatekeeping mechanism is  
 27 not perfect: it does not extend to all African Americans. Some have successfully evaded  
 28 the language of what he freely identifies as that of the Anglo middle class. It is irritating  
 29 to him that these people have managed to become successful without good language, but  
 30 there is something even more upsetting. As a sports journalist, he finds himself compelled  
 31 to pass on the language he hears from athletes, thus becoming complicit in letting the  
 32 secret out to Black children: not all African Americans give in linguistically, and yet they  
 33 still get to the top.

34 Greene makes a series of factually incorrect assumptions. Black children learn AAVE  
 35 not from television actors and sports figures (as Greene surmises), but in their homes, as  
 36 their first and native variety of U.S. English. More importantly, Greene assumes that the  
 37 only role models that African American children have are these sports and entertainment  
 38 individuals, and further, that a good role model will not sound Black. For him, the two  
 39 are mutually exclusive. His message is clearly stated:

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 41 If you’re a Black child, and you’re not one of the 100 or so best slam-dunkers or wide  
 42 receivers in the world, you can go ahead and emulate the way you hear your heroes  
 43 talk. But the chances are that you’ll wind up as the hippest dude passing out towels  
 44 in the men’s washroom.

45 (ibid.)

46  
 47 The stereotypes that underlie Greene’s assumptions are of course very disturbing, but  
 48 there are other issues here which are more subtle and perhaps more damaging.

This is a good example of both explicit threat and unfounded promise in one statement. The threat is real enough: Black children who don't learn white English will have limited choices; what he claims is demonstrably true. But the inverse of this situation, the implied promise, is not equally true: Black children who learn \*SAE will not be given automatic access to the rewards and possibilities of the Anglo middle-class world. Greene actually touches upon the fallacy underlying this promise when he acknowledges (later in his column) that successful Blacks who wear uniforms (airline pilots, army officers) are often taken for service personnel in public places.

Anglo discomfort with AAVE is often externalized in this paternalistic voice. It can be seen to work in a variety of forums, including popular fiction.<sup>13</sup> The novel is one of the most interesting points of access to current language ideology, in that the way that characters in novels use language and talk about language can be revealing. The following excerpt from a romance novel entitled *Family Blessings* provides a typical social construction of an idealized relationship between an \*SAE speaker and an AAVE speaker. Here the hero, a young Anglo police officer, has taken on the job of setting an African American child straight:

“Yo.”

“What you talkin’ like a Black boy for?”

“I be Black.”

“You might be, but no sense talking like a dumb one if you ever want to get anywhere in this world . . .”

. . .

“I could turn you in for dat, you know. Teachers in school can’t even make us change how we talk. It’s the rules. We got our culture to preserve.”

“I’m not your teacher, and if you ask me, you’re preserving the wrong side of your culture . . . listen to you, talking like a dummy! I told you, if you want to get out someday and make something of yourself and have a truck like this and a job where you can wear decent clothes and people will respect you, you start by talking like a smart person, which you are. I could hack that oreo talk if it was real, but the first time I picked you up for doing the five-finger discount over at the SA station, you talked like every other kid in your neighborhood . . .”

“I’m twelve years old. You not supposed to talk to me like dat.”

“Tell you what – I’ll make you a deal. I’ll talk to you nicer if you’ll talk to me nicer. And the first thing you do is stop using that F word. And the second thing you do is start pronouncing words the way your first-grade teacher taught you to. The word is that, not dat.”

(Spencer 1993)

Like Greene’s sports column, the hero in this novel has both threats and promises for the African American child. The kind of authority cited is different: Greene draws on his own mastery of middle-class written English, as exemplified in his profession as a writer; in

1 contrast, this fictional character has nothing more to underscore his pronouncements  
 2 about language than his own observations and the trappings of his own success. This is  
 3 what you can have, he says, if you start sounding like me. If you do not, you do so out of  
 4 stubbornness and stupidity, and there is no hope for you. This character is otherwise  
 5 portrayed as an honest, trustworthy, caring and intelligent individual, to which the author  
 6 adds this dose of linguisticism without apparent second thought.

7 Occasionally there is a public outpouring of pure emotion, without any of the common  
 8 sense arguments, complex rationalizations, or threats and promises which are such an  
 9 integral part of more organized institutionalized subordination tactics. Such outpourings  
 10 are useful, because they get right to the heart of the matter:

11  
 12 I am sitting here just burning . . . the ones that want to speak or care to speak that  
 13 way, *they want to be different. I believe they put themselves that way to be separate.*

14 (European American call-in viewer, *Oprah Winfrey Show*, 1987, emphasis added)

15  
 16 AAVE seems to symbolize African American resistance to a cultural mainstreaming pro-  
 17 cess which is seen as the logical and reasonable cost of equality – and following from that,  
 18 success – in other realms. Alternately, AAVE evokes a kind of panic, a realization that  
 19 desegregation has not done its job. The reasoning seems to be that the logical conclusion  
 20 to a successful civil rights movement is the end of racism not because we have come to  
 21 accept difference, but because we have eliminated difference. There will be no need for a  
 22 distinct African American (or Honduran, or Vietnamese) culture (or language), because  
 23 those people will have full access to, and control of, the superior European American one.

24 When an African American woman tells a reporter about the unifying function of AAVE  
 25 in her community, his response first acknowledges that language as viable, but then he  
 26 rejects her construction of the language as one with a positive function. Instead, he recasts  
 27 AAVE as a willful act of political resistance:

28  
 29 *Woman:* So we gotta have our survival mechanism within our community. And our  
 30 language is it. It lets us know that we all in this thing together.

31 *Reporter:* Black English is not Standard English spoken badly – Black English is revenge.  
 32 (CBS Evening News, December 5, 1985)

33  
 34 The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “revenge” as “The act of doing hurt or harm to  
 35 another in return for wrong or injury suffered; satisfaction obtained by repayment of  
 36 injuries.” Thus AAVE is not seen as first and foremost a positive feature of a vibrant Black  
 37 community. Instead it is willful act of rebellion: destructive, hurtful, and primitive in its  
 38 motivations. The reporter attempts to construct an objective picture and definition of  
 39 AAVE, but then falls back on more traditional views of the excluded and resentful outsider.

40 This kind of reasoning is seen even from linguists on occasion. The ongoing  
 41 convergence–divergence controversy (is AAVE becoming more or less distinct? closer or  
 42 farther away from \*SAE?) might be understood as the unease some have with the idea that  
 43 the African American community has a healthy, thriving, naturally evolving culture of its  
 44 own which resists assimilation despite the near inevitability that disadvantage will follow.

45 Such discussions and tendencies seem to come to the surface most often when the  
 46 subject at hand is African American school performance and reading scores. The  
 47 underlying ideological conflict can be seen very clearly in scholarly work on AAVE in the  
 48 classroom and school system.<sup>14</sup>

William Labov's extensive work on how to improve the lot of African American students demonstrates the disconnect between what he knows to be true (AAVE is a fully functional language) and the common-sense arguments put forth by those who practice linguistic separatism. Two examples from his published work illustrate this tendency.

Labov and Harris's study of language use in Philadelphia produced a lot of important data on the basis of vocalic and verbal system changes and went on to conclude that the city is "separating into two distinct speech communities: white and Black" (Labov and Harris 1986: 20). The data was laboriously gathered and carefully analyzed, but the conclusions drawn are less than neutral. Labov's stance on the convergence–divergence controversy leans clearly toward assimilation. Consider the suggestions here:

[I]t should be possible to *bring children closer to the systems used by other dialects* without changing their personalities and their friendship patterns. From everything we have seen so far, this kind of deep-seated change can happen if white and Black youth are in contact in the early years. The way will then be open for the group to shift as a whole, with the convergence that is the result of mutual influence. If the contact is a friendly one, and we achieve true integration in the schools, the two groups may actually exchange socially significant symbols, and Black children will begin to use the local vernacular of the white community. But even without such a thorough integration, we can expect that the children will learn from each other, and the present trend towards separation may be reversed.

(*ibid.*: 21; emphasis added)

Let's take this apart.

- 1 Labov proposes that AAVE-speaking children shift toward other varieties of English as a first step toward better performance in school and an improvement in reading scores for the disempowered. He sees this as an important and even primary goal.
- 2 What is needed to make this shift happen is early contact between AAVE speakers and speakers of other (unnamed) varieties of English.
- 3 The result of early contact – handled correctly – would be true integration, in which the two groups really interact.
- 4 True integration will bring about linguistic convergence and the shift away from AAVE, which would be better than what is now happening (the two varieties are becoming less alike).

In a talk Labov gave at a conference in 2006 called "Unendangered Dialects, Endangered People," he is more specific about some of his points: "[AAVE] is [the AA community's] great resource, an elegant form of expression which they use when they reflect most thoughtfully on the oppression and misery of daily life" (Labov 2010b: 24). He goes on to propose a causal relationship between segregation and the existence of AAVE: "AAVE has developed its present form in the framework of the most extreme racial segregation that the world has ever known" (*ibid.*). Labov anticipates criticism, and makes a statement designed to forestall any more objections or suggestions that he is denigrating the language of the AAVE speaking community: "In no way have I suggested that AAVE is a cause of the problems of African American people" (*ibid.*).

Labov's position is that in the broadest sense, segregation is responsible for the current troubles in the African American community. Many would agree with this general

1 statement. But he moves beyond this observation to draw other conclusions. Desegregation  
 2 is crucially important; from desegregation will follow linguistic assimilation and the gradual  
 3 disappearance of AAVE:

4  
 5 If the mixed populations of our Philadelphia schools should actually be integrated,  
 6 we may even reach a time when young black children use elements of the white  
 7 vernacular . . . At that point, AAVE as a whole might be in danger of losing its own  
 8 distinct and characteristic forms of speech. I expect that some among us would regret  
 9 the loss of the eloquent syntactic and semantic options that I have presented here.  
 10 But we might also reflect at that time that the loss of a dialect is a lesser evil than the  
 11 current condition of an endangered people.

(ibid.: 25)

12  
 13 Consider the way AAVE is seen here. It is not the language of a vibrant, active community;  
 14 it is the product of segregation. Labov uses words like *resource* and *elegant*, but he seems  
 15 to be seeing its use as restricted to those times when African Americans “reflect most  
 16 thoughtfully on the oppression and misery of daily life” – a very narrow and pessimistic  
 17 view of AAVE (for a closer reading and rebuttal of many of the points in Labov’s 2007  
 18 paper, see Rickford 2010.)<sup>15</sup> Labov equates regressive and discriminatory practices with  
 19 the existence, persistence and spread of AAVE. The end to segregation brings – in Labov’s  
 20 view of the world – linguist assimilation, loss of AAVE, improved reading scores and  
 21 generally a happier, more congenial U.S. Each of those points has been challenged  
 22 multiple times in this book. It is hard to imagine a better example of the insidious nature  
 23 of language ideology and the way it digs itself into otherwise open minds.

24 Anglo attitudes toward AAVE are complex, because AAVE taps into the most difficult  
 25 and contentious issues around race. AAVE makes Americans uncomfortable because it is  
 26 persistent, and because it will not go away, no matter how extreme the measures to  
 27 denigrate and exclude. Official policies around this (and other) stigmatized varieties of  
 28 language are policies of patronage and tolerance rather than acceptance. The irony is that  
 29 AAVE is the distinctive language of a cultural community we don’t want to acknowledge  
 30 as separate; at the same time, the only way we know how to deal with our discomfort about  
 31 AAVE is to set it apart.

### 32 33 34 **African American attitudes toward AAVE**

35  
 36 Within the African American community, discussions around AAVE seem to embody  
 37 some of the most difficult and painful issues of identity and solidarity. To begin with, it  
 38 must be stated that it is hard to find any African American, regardless of profession, politics  
 39 or personal belief, who would deny the practical necessity of bidialectalism and selective  
 40 assimilation to \*SAE norms. The fact that African American children with aspirations out-  
 41 side their own communities must learn a language of wider communication (Smitherman  
 42 1995b) is acknowledged as a fact of life. Opinions on this range from sober utilitarianism  
 43 and resignation to righteous anger:<sup>16</sup>

44  
 45 Pragmatic reality forces the burden of adjustment on groups who are outside positions  
 46 of influence and power. It does little good to claim that street speech is a valid dialect  
 47 – which it is – when the social cost of linguistic and other differences can be so high.

(John Baugh, linguist)



[O]ur position is quite clear. We believe that for people to excel they must acquire and use to their advantage the language of power and the language of finance. Standard American English is that. I admit it is not fair, but I did not create those rules. We only assist people in working their way up through them.

(Dr. Bernadette Anderson, accent reduction therapist)

The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language. There are certain things I cannot say without recourse to my language. It's terrible to think that a child with five different present tenses comes to school to be faced with those books that are less than his own language. And then to be told things about his language, which is him, that are sometimes permanently damaging . . . This is a really cruel fallout of racism. I know the Standard English. I want to use it to help restore the other language, the lingua franca.

(Toni Morrison, author, poet, Nobel Prize winner)

Language is political. That's why you and me, my Brother and Sister, that's why we sposed to choke our natural self into the weird, lying, barbarous, unreal, white speech and writing habits that the schools lay down like holy law. Because, in other words, the powerful don't play; they mean to keep that power, and those who are the powerless (you and me) better shape up mimic/ape/suck-in the very image of the powerful, or the powerful will destroy you – you and our children.

(June Jordan, poet, writer, political activist)

Studies and interviews with African Americans indicate that while anger is rarely openly voiced, arguments for bidialectalism based on personal experience are quite common:

I have some associates that find it very difficult to work and maintain any kind of decent job, because of the fact that they cannot adequately speak, so to speak, the normal language.

(Man on the street, *CBS National News*, December 5, 1985)

But my opinion always has been that you have to learn to survive in the real world, and if you speak Black English, there's no way you're going to survive. There's no way you're going to get a job that you really want. There's no way that you're going to make an income that's going to make you live right.

(Female university staff, interviewed for Speicher and McMahon 1992: 399)

Clear and logical arguments for bidialectalism are made regularly, and still this issue does not rest its head. But this cannot be surprising. To make two statements: *I acknowledge that my home language is viable and adequate* and *I acknowledge that my home language will never be accepted* is to set up an irresolvable conflict.

Alice Walker, who in her novels about African Americans often uses language issues to illustrate the emotional cost of assimilation, has put it more succinctly: "It seems our fate to be incorrect," she said in a 1973 interview. ". . . And in our incorrectness we stand" (O'Brien 1973: 207). The day-to-day pressure to give up the home language is something that most non-AAVE speakers cannot imagine, and it is here that novelists provide insight into a cultural phenomenon which is otherwise inaccessible to Anglos:

1 Darlene tryin to teach me how to talk. She say US not so hot . . . peoples think you  
 2 dumb. What I care? I ast. I'm happy. But she say I feel more happier talkin like she  
 3 talk . . . Every time I say something the way I say it, she correct me until I say it some  
 4 other way. Pretty soon it feel like I can't think. My mind run up on a thought, git  
 5 confuse, run back and sort of lay down . . . Look like to me only a fool would want  
 6 you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind.

7 (Walker 1982)

8  
 9 "I done my homework. You already seen it," Shoni said.

10 "I did my homework. You already saw it," LaKeesha said.

11  
 12 "That too," Shoni said. Both sisters laughed. "Why you all the time be trying to get  
 13 me to talk white?"

14 "It's not white; it's correct." She didn't feel as sure as Esther and Mrs. Clark were  
 15 when they said it. Sometimes she was a little afraid that she was talking white, that  
 16 she could lose herself in the land where enunciation was crisp and all verbs agreed.  
 17 And at home, especially on weekends, it was hard to hold on to that language of  
 18 success and power . . . "When you go to work, you have to know the right way to  
 19 speak," she added, looking in Shoni's eyes as if she was sure of what she was saying,  
 20 even though she wasn't.

21 (Campbell 1994)

22  
 23 Pressure to assimilate to \*SAE norms originates from outside and from inside the African  
 24 American community. In both of these excerpts, Black girls and women encourage each  
 25 other to acquire the white language, a language, they are told, which will bring them not  
 26 only success and power, but happiness ("But she say I feel more happier talkin like she talk").  
 27 To accept this proposition in the face of direct personal evidence to the contrary is the  
 28 challenge that these fictional characters, like all AAVE speakers, must somehow meet.

29 Evidence of real resistance to linguistic assimilation is hard to find outside of fiction.  
 30 The most cited example is surely James Baldwin's moving editorial "If Black English Isn't  
 31 a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" (*New York Times*, July 29, 1979). The writings of  
 32 June Jordan call clearly for the recognition of the validity of AAVE. Another rare instance  
 33 is found in the highly autobiographical account of the Simpson murder trial by the African  
 34 American prosecutor, Christopher Darden:

35  
 36 [It] isn't to say all Black people sound alike; of course not. But who can deny that we  
 37 have our own dialect and our own accent? . . . It seemed to me that by the time I got  
 38 to college, we were given a choice. We could learn to speak more mainstream, to  
 39 sound more white, or we could be proud of our heritage and acknowledge that culture  
 40 extends to language as well as paintings and books. I was proficient in English. I could  
 41 read it and write it expertly, and I knew the rules for speaking it. And so I felt no need  
 42 to change the way I spoke, to ignore the heritage and the background that formed  
 43 my diction, my speech patterns, and the phrases I used.

44 (Darden and Walter 1996: 77)

45  
 46 The push-pull AAVE speakers must reconcile comes into real focus with the first day of  
 47 school, where the dominant philosophy is one that promotes code-switching. Children  
 48 are not to be deprived of their home language (in theory); instead they learn an additional

language (which might be called Standard English or academic English or “the language of wider communication”) which is to be used outside the home and community. On the surface this looks to be a balanced and fair approach, but it does not bear up to close examination. Stanley Fish’s series of essays on higher education, his description and rationalization of this approach reveal it for the separate-but-equal policy it is:

If students infected with the facile egalitarianism of soft multiculturalism declare, “I have a right to my own language,” reply, “Yes, you do, and I am not here to take that language from you; I’m here to teach you another one.” (Who could object to learning a second language?) And then get on with it.

(Fish 2009)

A growing body of work challenges the institutionalized belief that giving up AAVE is necessary for African American students to succeed in traditional academic settings (Young 2007; Young and Martinez 2011). Quite to the contrary, Young *et al.* believe that a reliance on code-switching is counterproductive:

[Code-switching] actually facilitates the illiteracy and failure that educators seek to eliminate, promotes resistance to standard English rather than encourage its use, and further stifles the expression of lucid prose from people whose first language is something other than English.

Young and Martinez propose that the reasoning behind code switching represents “acceptance, advocacy, and teaching of an outmoded view of literacy that stems from dominant language ideology, a belief that places a colonial vision/version of language above all others, if not ideologically, definitely practically” (ibid.). Code-meshing, in contrast, does not set up artificial boundaries between varieties of English,<sup>17</sup> nor does it try to reconcile a policy of affirming a child’s right to his or her own language<sup>18</sup> with a policy that devalues AAVE (for example) and privileges \*SAE.

Most efforts to seek public validation of AAVE are less visible, and still are met with a great deal of resistance. An African American journalist responds in an opinion piece to such a group organized in the Midwest:

In Madison, Wisconsin, for example, some Blacks are trying to push the value of BEV, according to a recent report in the *Wisconsin State Journal*. They want to change the way professionals, teachers and the government view the lazy verbiage of the ghetto.

The group argues that Black English is merely different, not a disability.

I disagree with that. I think it is dysfunctional to promote BEV – or even legitimate it with an acronym. And the dysfunction exists not so much among the students as with their ill-equipped African American “leaders” and educators.

(Hamblin 1995)

Some successful African Americans (for example, John Baugh and Bernadette Anderson, above) acknowledge the schism between promises and threats, but are resigned to the fact that there is nothing practical to be done about it. Others rationalize linguistic subordination in a number of ways. Denial – the simple refusal to admit to the existence of AAVE – is not uncommon: “There is no such thing as Black English. The concept of

1 Black English is a myth. It is basically speaking English and violating the correct rules of  
 2 grammar” (Male audience member, *Oprah Winfrey Show*, 1987).

3 We have seen that AAVE is not accepted, and may never be accepted as a socially viable  
 4 language by the majority of U.S. English speakers. Thus, for AAVE speakers one of the  
 5 two statements (I acknowledge that my home language is viable and expressive and  
 6 sufficient to all my needs and I acknowledge that my home language will never be accepted)  
 7 cannot stand. One of these positions must be challenged or amended if the conflict is to  
 8 be resolved.<sup>19</sup> Extreme examples of this are available, even in print:

10 Although we were surrounded in New York by a number of poorly spoken and  
 11 frequently stereotypical Black and poor Southern dialects, my siblings and I soon  
 12 learned to hear it for what it was – the language of the street, the language of Black  
 13 trash. The language that went right along with Saturday-night knife fights to settle  
 14 a grudge.

15 (Hamblin 1995)

16  
 17 Rachel Jones (1990) does not deny the existence of AAVE, but she does refuse to admit  
 18 that any successful African American might speak it. In her view, Malcolm X, Martin  
 19 Luther King, Jr., Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, James Baldwin, Andrew Young, Tom  
 20 Bradley and Barbara Jordan do not talk Black or not Black; they “talk right.” For Jones,  
 21 the fact that most of these African Americans depend on AAVE intonation, phonology,  
 22 and rhetorical features to mark their spoken language for solidarity with the Black  
 23 community is irrelevant. In this way, the definition of AAVE becomes very narrow: it  
 24 encompasses only the grammar of the language in so far as syntactical and morphological  
 25 rules are distinct from \*SAE.

26 The rationalizations found here and elsewhere are well-established steps in the language  
 27 subordination process. Note the appeal to written language norms as a source of authority,  
 28 the mystification of grammar and disinformation in the following:

29  
 30 What Black children need is an end to this malarkey that tells them they can fail to  
 31 learn grammar, fail to develop vocabularies, ignore syntax and embrace the mumbo-  
 32 jumbo of ignorance – and dismiss it in the name of “Black pride.”

33 (Rowan 1979: 36)

34  
 35 Here Rowan, a journalist, has stated his belief that AAVE speakers must be taught  
 36 grammar because, apparently, they do not acquire any to start with; that they have  
 37 insufficient lexicons; and that their language functions without syntax. These statements  
 38 are misinformed, and lean primarily on that part of the mystification process which would  
 39 have native speakers of a language hand over authority:

40  
 41 I’m a Northwestern student presently, and I got to be a Northwestern student because  
 42 of my grammar and because of the way I can speak. Black English may have had its  
 43 place back in the times of slavery, back in the times when we had no way of educating  
 44 ourselves . . . now we do have a way of educating ourselves, and I think by speaking  
 45 the way [an AAVE speaker] speaks, you are downgrading society. You are saying that  
 46 you don’t want to educate yourself. We have a different way to educate ourselves  
 47 today.

48 (Female audience member, *Oprah Winfrey Show*, 1987)

There is an interesting equation in this young woman's statement. She tells the audience that she was able to study at a prestigious university because of the variety of English she speaks; that is, because she does not speak AAVE. From this we might conclude that any \*SAE speaker can gain admittance to Northwestern on that basis alone, which is an obvious error. People are admitted to a university on the basis of grades, test scores, and essays, among other things; performance in school and on standardized tests follows in great part from a command of the written language, a skill not acquired equally well by all \*SAE speakers. The audience member has moved from spoken language to written language without even making note, and she then moves on to the assumption that education, if effective, will negate language differences, which must equal poor language, which in turn "downgrades society."

It is worth noting that another young African American woman in the audience, an AAVE speaker, points out to this Northwestern student that there is a material difference between written and spoken languages, but her statement is ignored.

The association of AAVE with slavery is not an uncommon one, and it is perhaps the most difficult one to address. The exact origins of AAVE are unclear, and the source of great debate among linguists. That the African American diaspora was crucial in the development of the language is undeniable, but it does not follow from this historical fact that the language is now dysfunctional or has no good purpose. Later in the *Winfrey* taping, Smitherman points out that the language developed as a vehicle of solidarity in a time of oppression.

This excerpt is a particularly interesting one in ideological terms:

I do not approve of Black English. In the first place, I do not understand it; in the second place, I think the objective of education is to lead out. I think that in our society – though we ought to take advantage of the cultural differences that really make Americans American – we ought to eliminate those differences which are either the basis or result of divisiveness in our society.

(Donald McHenry, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations,  
in *Jet* 1980: 57(25): 40, cited in Starks 1983: 99–100)

The statement is interesting in the way it is similar to the criticisms of Anglos. First, this is the only time I have been able to document an African American citing communication difficulties as a reason to reject AAVE. Even those most vehemently negative about the language generally admit that it is comprehensible, or do not touch on this issue at all. McHenry also draws in arguments often heard in the debate on bilingualism and the English-Only movement. These include questions about what it means to be an American citizen, and the often-stated fear that the nation-state cannot survive willful refusal to assimilate to supra-regional norms. This is not a new complaint; in 1966 the Superintendent of Public Instruction of California went on record with his prediction of complete breakdown of communication: "Correct English just has to be taught to the next generation unless we want a reply of the Tower of Babel bit around 1984" (cited in Drake 1977: 91).

McHenry restates the common belief that the only way to achieve the ideal society is to become a homogenous one, and to this end we must eliminate not all differences, but those which are unacceptable and divisive. The conflict between the wants of peripheralized groups and the needs of the majority are raised here quite clearly. But there is a question which is not addressed: the connection between language and those basic human rights which are protected by law from the tyranny of majority rule.

1 There is no doubt that there is great internal conflict in the African American com-  
 2 munity centered around AAVE. Those who are bidialectal feel the need to justify their  
 3 choice to be so; Blacks who are not comfortable speaking AAVE are often defensive about  
 4 their language, and protective of their status as members of the Black community. The  
 5 greater African American community seems to accept the inevitability of linguistic  
 6 assimilation to \*SAE in certain settings, but there is also evidence of mistrust of Blacks  
 7 who assimilate too well:  
 8

9 Suspicion and skepticism are common Black reactions to Black users of LWC [the  
 10 language of wider communication, or \*SAE] rhetorical styles. These perceptions exist  
 11 simultaneously with the belief that one needs to master LWC in order to “get ahead.”  
 12 I call it “linguistic push-pull”; Du Bois calls it “double consciousness.” The farther  
 13 removed one is from mainstream “success,” the greater the degree of cynicism about  
 14 this ethnolinguistic, cultural ambivalence. Jesse Jackson knows about this; so did  
 15 Malcolm X and Martin Luther King; so does Louis Farrakhan. The oratory of each  
 16 is LWC in its grammar but AVT in its rhetorical style.

(Smitherman 1995b: 238)

17  
 18  
 19 On occasion, African Americans have gone on record with their own experiences as  
 20 bidialectal speakers. Those experiences are seldom benign:  
 21

22 Hearing the laughter . . . and being the butt of “proper” and “oreo” jokes hurt me.  
 23 Being criticized made me feel marginal – and verbally impotent in the sense that I  
 24 had little ammunition to stop the frequent lunchtime attacks. So I did what was  
 25 necessary to fit in, whether that meant cursing excessively or signifying. Ultimately I  
 26 somehow learned to be polylingual and to become sensitive linguistically in the way  
 27 that animals are able to sense the danger of bad weather.  
 28

29 The need to defend myself led me to use language as a weapon to deflect jokes about  
 30 the “whiteness” of my spoken English and to launch harsh verbal counter-attacks.  
 31 Simultaneously language served as a mask to hide the hurt I often felt in the process.  
 32 Though over time my ability to “talk that talk” – slang – gained me a new respect from  
 33 my peers, I didn’t want to go through life using slang to prove I am Black. So I decided  
 34 “I yam what I yam,” and to take pride in myself. I am my speaking self, but this doesn’t  
 35 mean that I’m turning my back on Black people. There are various shades of Blackness;  
 36 I don’t have to talk like Paul Laurence Dunbar’s dialect poems to prove I’m Black. I  
 37 don’t appreciate anyone’s trying to take away the range of person I can be.

(Aponte 1989)

38  
 39  
 40 It seems that African Americans who speak \*SAE are not immune from a different kind  
 41 of trouble: Aponte’s experiences and reactions to those experiences are perhaps the best  
 42 possible illustration of push-pull, and his story seems to be a common one. Blacks who  
 43 speak primarily AAVE are subject to ongoing pressure to assimilate to \*SAE norms in a  
 44 number of settings outside their communities; in fact, they are threatened with exclusion  
 45 if they do not. Blacks who do not speak AAVE may be treated with skepticism and distrust  
 46 by other African Americans. Language ideology becomes a double-edged sword for those  
 47 who are monodialectal – threats originate from inside and outside the home language  
 48 community.

At this point it is necessary to consider that there are many persons of African descent resident in the U.S. who are immigrants from the Caribbean and from Africa, and who come to this country speaking another language entirely. Within the indigenous African American community there is a complicated set of reactions to these immigrants which can be overtly negative, in ways which are not always visible to outsiders. Edwidge Danticat's (1994) novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* brought these issues into the consciousness of the public. Her story of the Haitian experience in the U.S. makes clear how important a role language plays in the negotiations between African Americans and immigrants of African descent:

My mother said it was important that I learn English quickly. Otherwise the American students would make fun of me or, even worse, beat me. A lot of other mothers from the nursing home where she worked had told her that their children were getting into fights in school because they were accused of having "HBO" – Haitian Body Odor. Many of the American kids even accused Haitians of having AIDS because they had heard on television that only the four H's got AIDS – heroin addicts, hemophiliacs, homosexuals and Haitians. I wanted to tell my mother that I didn't want to go to school. Frankly, I was afraid.

(NPR, *All Things Considered*, September 30, 1994)

Her experiences (as well as documented experiences of other Haitian immigrants) indicate that there is a hierarchy among immigrants who come into the African American community, and the Haitians are very low in the pecking order. How AAVE fits into the complex issue of acquisition of English for native speakers of Haitian Creole and other Caribbean and African languages is something which has not yet been explored in depth, but which deserves to be studied both as a linguistic issue and a social one.

It would be useful, in this context, to look at the way prominent African Americans deal with the conflict inherent to the choice between languages. In the first edition of this book I provided a close reading of a 1987 *Oprah Winfrey* taping entitled "Black English." Much of that discussion had to be left out of this second edition, because Harpo Productions (Winfrey's production company) decided to no longer allow me to use extended examples. I have edited that discussion to stay within the bounds of fair use, but for anyone who would like to read it in its entirety, I suggest locating a copy of the first edition.

The second example I include here is an episode related by Shelby Steele in his 1991 book *The Content of Our Characters*.<sup>20</sup> The *Oprah Winfrey* taping was live, with an audience that was primarily African American. The experts invited to contribute to the conversation were two black women (Dr. Geneva Smithermann, a linguist specializing in AAVE) and Dr. Bernadette Anderson, a professional accent reduction specialist. The third guest was a white male, a professional radio news broadcaster.

It is important to remember that Oprah is not impartial on this subject. She has demonstrated her comfort speaking AAVE in a number of contexts, while she uses a more formal English in most public situations. During this filming she acted as a host to her invited guests, a facilitator to the audience discussion, and simultaneously as a participant with opinions of her own. The introductions she reads from cue cards are perhaps not entirely her own formulations; her statements may sometimes be made in a spirit of fostering discussion. But in general, it is clear that she is willing to give her opinion on the questions at hand: on occasion she claims the floor when audience members want to speak. Her comments are peppered with formulations such as *I know, to me, I think, I don't*

1 *understand*. She also uses constructions like *if you don't know, you must know, don't you know*,  
 2 in those instances where she puts her own opinions forth. Her tone is not coercive, but it  
 3 does border on the frustrated and pleading at times.

4 At the time the segment in question was filmed, Winfrey's stance on AAVE was a  
 5 complex and conflicted one. At first glance, it might seem that she stands firmly on the  
 6 side of standardization and linguistic assimilation. As has been seen with other African  
 7 Americans, she does not directly deny the existence of AAVE (which she consistently calls  
 8 "so-called" Black English, perhaps because she is uncomfortable with the term rather than  
 9 the language itself), but she challenges AAVE using many of the strategies seen earlier in  
 10 this book.

11 She first attempts to relegate AAVE to the realm of the secondary: "Are we talking  
 12 about correct English or are we talking about dialect?"; when audience members protest  
 13 this, she regroups by defining for them the difference between Black English and \*SAE,  
 14 a difference which turns out to rest exclusively on subject-verb agreement. She defines  
 15 \*SAE very simply: in \*SAE, verbs and subjects agree. She asks the audience if a person  
 16 should feel ashamed for speaking \*SAE, for choosing "to speak correctly."

17 Winfrey seems to have a definition of AAVE which focuses only on grammatical  
 18 agreement and excludes phonology and rhetorical devices. She identifies Martin Luther  
 19 King, Jr., Whitney Young, Mary McCleod Bethune as speakers not of Black English, but  
 20 of \*SAE. Once again, Jesse Jackson is raised as an example of someone who speaks AAVE  
 21 but knows how to shift in his public discourse to a style appropriate for the most formal  
 22 settings. The fact that Jesse Jackson strongly marks his public discourse with AAVE  
 23 rhetorical devices, and sometimes uses AAVE grammatical strategies regardless of his  
 24 audience, does not come up.

25 She quotes Jackson's famous statement that "excellence is the best deterrent to racism"  
 26 but fails to discuss her equation between lack of excellence and the primary language of  
 27 the African American community.

28 Winfrey focuses the discussion of Black English on the social repercussions this  
 29 language brings with it in the world outside the African American community. She seems  
 30 truly distraught and dismayed when young African Americans in the audience tell her that  
 31 they want to use their own functional language and reject pressure to assimilate. Here,  
 32 Winfrey's own status as a successful business woman and employer of many seems to push  
 33 to the forefront. Given her own position, she does not understand young Blacks who still  
 34 voice their resistance to assimilation. In fact, she challenges a white panelist on this count:  
 35 "Let me ask you, why would you want to tell Black people or make Black people believe  
 36 that corporate America is going to change for them?"

37 Winfrey justifies her rejection of AAVE based on the documented history of its  
 38 reception. However, when call-in viewers or audience members who agree with this basic  
 39 premise move on to openly deride AAVE, she momentarily switches allegiance. In four  
 40 cases there are comments from whites which cause her to pause and come to the defense  
 41 of AAVE or AAVE speakers. She sometimes does this with humor, but there is also  
 42 tangible uneasiness when the discussion moves beyond grammar to statements which are  
 43 at the very least intolerant, and in some cases tip over the line into racism.

44 The arguments put forth by those who call in (none of whom are AAVE speakers) to  
 45 the show fall into four categories:

- 46  
 47 1 African Americans choose to set themselves aside; if they are excluded, it's because  
 48 they want to be.



- 2 African Americans are ignorant because they can say the word “ask,” because to say “aks” is to confuse the listener. Here Winfrey points out that if the caller understands the word “aks” in context, what exactly is the problem?
- 3 African Americans are ungrateful. If they don’t want to speak proper English, they should go back to Africa. Winfrey’s objection here is quick and to the point when she repeats a point made by Dr. Smithermann: What country do Black people go to?
- 4 African Americans have a right to speak incorrectly if they want to, but other people shouldn’t be forced to suffer and listen to it. Winfrey asks for clarification: how does AAVE cause the speaker to suffer?

Overall, Winfrey’s stance is complicated by her own place in corporate institutions, where there are gatekeeping mechanisms she subscribes to and openly promotes. For example, she asserts that employers (of which she is one) have the right to demand that employees represent employers as they wish to be represented, a right which she believes extends to language. When audience and panel members point out her fallacies in common-sense arguments, or present counter-arguments, Winfrey has one of three strategies:

- 1 She appeals to the authority of those panel or audience members who support her position, primarily to Dr. Anderson, the accent reduction specialist.
- 2 She counters with more common-sense but factually fragile arguments.
- 3 Or she cuts away completely, as when an audience member stands to admonish other African Americans to reject the idea that they are ignorant or don’t speak right.

Winfrey’s discomfort with the underlying conflict reaches its peak when audience members attempt to use her and her language as an example of the necessity of assimilation and the rewards which follow. It is interesting that the African American guests who hold up Winfrey’s language as a model never point out that Winfrey herself, like so many other African Americans prominent in the public eye, is often heard to use AAVE intonation when speaking with Black guests, and that she relies on AAVE rhetorical devices on many occasions.

Winfrey would like the issue to be a simple one of grammatical relations, which would allow her to make decisions as an employer which would be free of racial implications. Ideally, she believes, education should neutralize language distinctions stemming from differences in race and class. She has the best interest of her community and people in mind, and a clear picture of the steps necessary for African Americans to achieve economic and social equality. She seems to see a role for herself here, in educating those who come after as a part of the process called dropping knowledge within the African American community. She has traveled this road herself, after all. She has made choices, some of which raise hard questions: “Does it mean that you are ashamed because you choose to speak correctly, you choose to have your verbs agree with your subject?”

When she is confronted with evidence that there is a connection between identity and language choice, that negative reactions against AAVE have not to do with the message, but the messenger, her ability to rationalize her choices and the reality of linguistic assimilation is challenged.

Shelby Steele provides very different insights into the conflicts which face African Americans. Steele is one of a group of prominent scholars and writers who form the core of an African American conservative think tank, who have been public in their criticism of the civil rights establishment. Some of the central ideas of this body of work include

1 the supposition that human nature is more important than race, and that national interest  
 2 is more important than ethnic affiliation. His *The Content of Our Characters* is interesting  
 3 here because he addresses, in a limited way, the issue of language. His discussion illustrates  
 4 the way that rationalization works in the language subordination process. Steele's current  
 5 position on AAVE, although never clearly stated, seems to be assimilationist. What he  
 6 relates in his essay is the logic which allows him to make the transition from accepting his  
 7 own language as viable and functional to rejecting it.

8 As a teenager, Steele was a speaker of AAVE in public situations which included non-  
 9 AAVE speakers. The story he tells here is probably a fairly typical experience for young  
 10 Blacks when they establish social contacts outside the African American community. Here,  
 11 an older white woman continually and repeatedly corrects both AAVE grammatical and  
 12 phonological features in his speech:

13  
 14 When I was fourteen the mother of a white teammate on the YMCA swimming team  
 15 would – in a nice but insistent way – correct my grammar when I lapsed into the Black  
 16 English I'd grown up speaking in the neighborhood. She would require that my verbs  
 17 and pronouns agree, that I put the “g” on my “ings,” and that I say “that” instead of  
 18 “dat.” She absolutely abhorred double negatives, and her face would screw up in pain  
 19 at the sound of one. But her corrections also tapped my racial vulnerability. I felt racial  
 20 shame at this white woman's fastidious concern with my language. It was as though  
 21 she was saying that the Black part of me was not good enough, would not do, and this  
 22 is where my denial went to work.

23  
 24 Steele's initial reaction is anger at the woman's rejection of “the Black part of me [as] not  
 25 good enough.” This episode seems to have been his first direct experience with language-  
 26 focused discrimination. Thus he confronts the conflict between the experience of being  
 27 discriminated against and his experiences with AAVE as a viable and functional language.  
 28 As a 14-year-old, then, Steele was not yet convinced that AAVE was an inappropriate or  
 29 bad language. Corresponding to his anger toward the woman is a recognition of the link  
 30 between it and his race (“the Black part of me”). On this basis, his early conclusion is that  
 31 the woman who has corrected him is racist.

32 Now, he does something perhaps unusual. He confronts the woman through her son,  
 33 and she seeks him out angrily to have a conversation about her motives in correcting his  
 34 language:

35  
 36 A few days later she marched into the YMCA rec room, took me away from a Ping-  
 37 Pong game, and sat me down in a corner. It was the late fifties, when certain women  
 38 painted their faces as though they were canvases . . . it was the distraction of this mask,  
 39 my wonderment at it, that allowed me to keep my equilibrium.

40 She told me about herself, that she had grown up poor, had never finished high school,  
 41 and would never be more than a secretary. She said she didn't give a “good goddamn”  
 42 about my race, but that if I wanted to do more than “sweat my life away in a steel  
 43 mill,” I better learn to speak correctly. As she continued to talk I was shocked to realize  
 44 that my comment had genuinely hurt her and that her motive in correcting my  
 45 English has been no more than simple human kindness. If she had been Black, I might  
 46 have seen this more easily. But she was white, and this fact alone set off a very specific  
 47 response pattern in which vulnerability to a racial shame was the trigger, denial and  
 48 recomposition the reaction, and a distorted view of the situation the result. This was

the sequence by which I converted kindness into harassment and my racial shame into her racism.

First note that his original position has reversed on a number of levels:

PRIOR TO CONFRONTATION	AFTER CONFRONTATION
her racism	her simple human kindness
his anger, resentment	his racism
wrongdoing denied	acceptance of wrongdoing
acknowledges AAVE	rejects AAVE
draws a link between race and language	denies a link between race and language

This is an interesting example of how ideology functions to cloak the truth. Steele is recounting the way in which he was made aware of his position as subordinate, and chose to change his allegiance to the dominant group. There is no doubt that he is sincere about the story that he tells, or that he truly believes the common-sense arguments he puts forth. But he uses a number of coercive strategies to manufacture consent from his audience, and they bear consideration. One is the way that Steele attempts to make his readers believe that there is a commonality of opinion regarding language. He knows, as they surely do, that AAVE is an inadequate language:

If she had been Black, I might have seen [the truth] more easily. But she was white, and this fact alone set off a very specific response pattern in which vulnerability to a racial shame was the trigger, denial and recomposition the reaction, and a distorted view of the situation the result.

Steele assumes that his readers will share some basic beliefs:

- that there is a right and a wrong way to use English;
- that it is appropriate for more established and knowledgeable persons to direct younger ones to that better language;
- that questions of right and wrong in language move beyond race.

Further, Steele explains his inability to see these facts as a function of his immature view of the world and his unwillingness to accept personal responsibility (“If she had been Black, I might have seen this more easily”). His youthful AAVE speaking self relies on denial of the basic truth about language; his mature and reasonable self (the one who is like his readers) knows the truth of the matter. Thus, by linking the last logical proposition (questions of right and wrong move beyond race) to the first two (there is a good and a bad language, and it is appropriate to censure users of bad language), he coerces a certain degree of acceptance of his language ideology.

Steele relates this conversation with the mother of a friend as a kind of epiphany, in which he becomes aware of truths not just about himself, but about people in general. In this way Steele himself and this woman function as imaginary formations (Haidar and Rodríguez 1995). Imaginary formations are understood as the way the subject (Steele), his interlocutor (the readers), and the object of their discourse (the woman who corrected him, and her motivations) are represented not as individuals, but as symbols of larger

1 groups or types. In this analytical approach, a person perceives and projects him or herself  
 2 primarily as a representative of their specific place in the social structure. Thus, Steele  
 3 represents himself as a successful African American who has moved beyond denial and  
 4 racism to take responsibility for his own life.

5 More interesting, perhaps, is the imaginary formation of the white woman who leads  
 6 him to accept the necessity of rejecting his home language. This woman is by her own  
 7 account (and one he obviously does not disagree with) someone with little to recommend  
 8 her: she has never finished high school and will never achieve a great deal of economic  
 9 success; she even looks clownish. She has not accepted or recognized sources of authority  
 10 or knowledge, beyond a history of personal difficulty and sacrifice. But because she is an  
 11 \*SAE speaker, she feels authorized to correct his language because if she does not do so,  
 12 he is doomed to a life “in a steel mill.” She tells him these things not because she has any  
 13 investment in him (she denies such a motivation), but out of some greater urge to do good,  
 14 an urge which is sufficient authority for Steele. This woman represents the hard-working,  
 15 well-meaning middle American \*SAE speaker who knows best, and whose authority is not  
 16 to be questioned. She was the mother of a friend, but she has transcended that role to  
 17 become an imaginary formation.

18 There are various ways individuals attempt to neutralize Smitherman’s “linguistic  
 19 push–pull” and Du Bois’ “double consciousness” (Du Bois 1897 [2007]), but Steele takes  
 20 a step which moves beyond denying or limiting AAVE. Whereas Winfrey was clearly  
 21 unable to go along with criticisms of AAVE which devalued the messenger rather than  
 22 the message, Steele accepts the criticism of the messenger as appropriate, along with  
 23 rationalizations and beyond that, safeguards which anticipate challenges. If you question  
 24 or reject the common-sense arguments which underlie his position, you are practicing  
 25 denial and recomposition. The rejection of arguments for linguistic assimilation is thus  
 26 projected as racist.

27 What do Oprah Winfrey and Shelby Steele – along with all the other African Americans  
 28 who have spoken out on the matter of the languages of the African American community  
 29 – have in common? Perhaps only two things can be pinpointed with any surety: the need  
 30 to resolve the conflict, and the complexity of their responses. It seems that in every case,  
 31 opinions are formed by personal experiences outside the African American community  
 32 which are often overtly negative. It cannot be denied that some of the most scornful and  
 33 negative criticism of AAVE speakers comes from other African Americans.

34 Consider Oprah Winfrey, who insists on the necessity of \*SAE verb paradigms, for  
 35 example. Despite her firm stand on these issues, she does not advocate for the abandon-  
 36 ment of all AAVE rhetorical features, intonation or lexical choice, as she herself uses these  
 37 on occasion and she points to other African Americans who do the same as good language  
 38 models. \*SAE speakers, on the other hand, in particular Anglo \*SAE speakers, have a much  
 39 lower tolerance for non-grammatical features of AAVE than some seem to realize,  
 40 something that needs to be examined in the larger context of linguistic profiling. This is  
 41 an area which requires further study and research, because it is not until speakers become  
 42 aware of differences in perceptions that the underlying conflicts can be addressed.

## 43 **Where we at**

44  
 45  
 46  
 47 The observations and conclusions in this chapter will make many people unhappy and  
 48 others mad. Our common culture tells us constantly that to fulfill democratic ideals the

nation must be homogeneous and indivisible. In the 1960s, the courts put an official end to racial segregation in schooling, housing, public places, and the workplace. What does it mean then to say that there is an African American culture distinct enough from other American cultures to have its own variety of English, a variety that persists in spite of stigmatization of the most demeaning and caustic kind, and despite repercussions in the form of real disadvantage and discrimination?

AAVE is a source of controversy between the African American community and the rest of the country, and within the African American community itself, because it throws a bright light on issues that are too difficult or uncomfortable to deal with. Equal rights and equal access are good and important goals, but the cost is high. Perhaps it is too high. Clearly, AAVE speakers get something from their communities and from each other that is missing in the world which is held up to them as superior and better. But the conflict remains. “We’re not wrong,” says an exasperated AAVE speaker in response to criticism. “I’m tired of living in a country where we’re always wrong.”

The real trouble with Black English is not the verbal aspect system which distinguishes it from other varieties of U.S. English, or the rhetorical strategies which draw such a vivid contrast, it is simply this: AAVE is tangible and irrefutable evidence that there is a distinct, healthy, functioning African American culture which is not white, and which does not want to be white. James Baldwin, who wrote and spoke so eloquently of the issues at the heart of the racial divide in this country, put it quite simply: “the value [of] a Black man is proven by one thing only – his devotion to white people” (Baldwin 1985b: 5).

The real problem with AAVE is a general unwillingness to accept the speakers of that language and the social choices they have made as viable and functional. Instead we relegate their experiences and capabilities and most damaging, their potential to spheres which are secondary and out of the public eye. We are ashamed of them and because they are part of us, we are ashamed of ourselves.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

- This chapter does not include a discussion of the AAVE speech or expressive language features which are so distinctive. Examples include verbal routines and rituals such as preaching, signifying, boasting, toasting, and call-and-response. Pick one of these and consult the works cited here to compose a brief description with examples.
- What misconceptions did you have about AAVE before you began reading this chapter and/or any additional reading? Do you think these readings and discussions will have any long-term effect on your own beliefs and reactions?
- If you are a native speaker of AAVE and you are comfortable doing so, take questions from your classmates who are unfamiliar with that language. You must be the one to offer this possibility to the class, so that there is no hint of coercion.
- Discuss the concept of Hip Hop Nation and the role of language as a tool in that social movement (Smitherman 1999 provides a good starting place).
- Read Jordan’s (1995b) “Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan” and prepare to discuss the following issues: (a) How does Jordan’s classroom method compare to Young’s code-meshing approach? How similar or different are her methods and philosophy compared to code-meshing? (b) Do you think her position on

AAVE in the classroom is visionary, self-deceptive, naïve, bellicose, ethically sound, unrealistic, all/some/none of the above?

- What would it take to implement a code-meshing approach in public school classrooms? Can you anticipate criticisms or objections and respond to them before the fact?
- Compare Price's (2009) sports column to the excerpts from Greene's sports column discussed in this chapter. In both cases, professional sports broadcasters are expressing negative, even racist opinions about professional athletes who are also native AAVE speakers. The journalists who are quoted in Price's column are African American; Greene is not:

Let's be honest. Many of these guys are just flat-out uneducated, which just speaks to the hypocrisy of the "student-athlete" system. If they tried to go up there and speak properly – without major training – some would be too uncomfortable, nervous and self-conscious to say anything worthwhile . . . this problem has to be fixed before they get to college – or they've got to undergo some training once they get there. I suspect, though, that some whites are sometimes too scared to correct them for fear of being called racists for "criticizing the way Blacks talk."

- (a) How is it that these African American journalists feel entitled or obligated to criticize the athletes' language?
  - (b) Do you think it's correct to say that Anglos don't voice similar criticisms because they are afraid of being called racist?
  - (c) If Greene's column is racist, as suggested in this chapter, are the African American journalists also being racist?
- Consider the central question of critical language theory: *How do people come to invest in their own unhappiness?* Or, as Woodson puts it more emphatically (and perhaps, controversially): "Here we find that the Negro has failed to recover from his slavish habit of berating his own and worshipping others as perfect beings" (Woodson 1933: 84). How do these statements relate (a) to each other; and (b) to Greene's and Price's columns?
  - Read Toni Cade Bambara's short story "My Man Bovanne," which is told from the point of view of a middle-aged African American woman in conflict with her adult children. Note how AAVE is used for the dialog of some characters but not others. Bambara is a native AAVE speaker, and made those decisions consciously.
    - (a) Given the overall theme of the story, how does the variable use of AAVE serve to illustrate the conflict?
    - (b) How many features of AAVE described in this chapter can you identify in "My Man Bovanne?" Are there other features that are not described here?

## Notes

- 1 African American scholars who study AAVE across types of language communities tend to use the term "Black Language" rather than "Black English" (the term used in the first edition of this chapter). Alim (2004a: 17) uses the term Black Language "to denote both language structure and language use. Viewing Language this way allows us to conceptualize BL as a distinct set of structural features and communicative norms and practices."

- 2 Suggestions on where to start if you are interested in learning more about the history and grammar of AAVE follow at the end of the chapter. 1  
2
- 3 This subject will come up again in a later chapter with the discussion of Baugh's work on linguistic profiling in the housing industry (2000). 3  
4
- 4 Other varieties of American English have distinct intonation patterns. See Dumas (1999) on stress patterns in Southern Mountain English. 5  
6
- 5 There is a complicated relationship between AAVE and other varieties of U.S. English, few aspects of which can be explored here. One important and divisive issue is the selective appropriation of AAVE lexical items into other varieties of English. Appropriation and its counterpart, supportive assimilation, are subjects which need to be explored systematically and objectively. This subject was raised also in the discussion of African Americans and linguistic profiling in animated film. 7  
8  
9  
10  
11
- 6 Linguists tend to use the term African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or African American English (AAE), but there are many other variants that are widely used; Black English Vernacular (BEV) is probably one of the most common. 12  
13  
14
- 7 For further reading on Mock Spanish, see the recommendations at the end of this chapter. 15  
16
- 8 As far as I am aware, there is no body of work on how Latino or Asian communities hear or interpret AAVE, or what values are attached to AAVE speakers. As I cannot extrapolate that information from the available data, I have to restrict my analysis to Anglos. 17  
18  
19  
20
- 9 The representation of African Americans in entertainment was touched upon in Chapter 6, but the subject is a very large and complex one. Any real examination would have to include consideration of age-grading. 21  
22  
23
- 10 Metathesis is the process by which letters, sounds or symbols are transposed, as in the change of Old English *brid* to Modern English *bird*. 24  
25
- 11 The movie *My Cousin Vinny* is set in the South, with two main characters who are Italian-American New Yorkers with very strong accents. This is one of the few fictional treatments that purposefully draws attention to stigmatized features of Anglo English that I'm aware of, and well worth watching. 26  
27  
28  
29
- 12 At the end of this chapter you will find another news column on the subject of athletes' use of AAVE. 30  
31
- 13 Eagleton has argued that literature has a singular relationship to the ideological process. He finds it to be: 32  
33
- the most revealing mode of experiential access to ideology that we possess. It is in literature, above all, that we observe in a peculiarly complex, coherent, intensive and immediate fashion the working of ideology in the textures of lived experience of class-societies. 34  
35  
36  
37
- (1976: 101) 38
- The representation of spoken dialect in written fiction is a very large and complex topic. See especially the work of Dennis Preston on this issue. 39  
40
- 14 Labov has produced a tremendous body of work on AAVE, from multiple angles. He has been deeply involved in attempts to improve AAVE speakers' academic achievement and reading scores by means of individualized reading programs. His concern for the well-being of the students and their community is genuine and deeply felt, but it is also rife with SLI potholes. 41  
42  
43  
44  
45
- 15 Academics in a dozen different disciplines have taken up the question of explaining and proposing solutions for solving the reading-related problems of the African American children. Language and grammar are rarely mentioned, but poverty plays 46  
47  
48

- 1 a central role (Cavanaugh 2007; Hochschild 2003; Hodgkinson 2002; Ludwig *et al.*  
2 2001; Taylor *et al.* 2003).
- 3 16 See Baugh (1983: 122); *Oprah Winfrey Show* (1989: 2); LeClaire (1994: 123–124);  
4 Jordan (1989).
- 5 17 This is relevant not just to speakers of stigmatized varieties of English, but also to  
6 those who would generally be said to speak \*SAE. Graff notes that his middle-class,  
7 middle-American students' attempts to write formally resulted in awkward, turgid  
8 prose because they were forced to abandon the language they knew for one that was  
9 foreign to them (Graff forthcoming).
- 10 18 Both academics and educators have written widely on the subject of affirming the home  
11 language of students (Freeman 1975; Kinloch 2005; Parks 2000; Scott and National  
12 Council of Teachers of English 2009; Sledd 1983; Smitherman 1995b).
- 13 19 There is a third option for individuals who speak stigmatized language varieties, and  
14 that is simple avoidance and isolation. Rather than subject themselves to mockery or  
15 rejection, sometimes speakers of such languages will simply refuse to engage. This is  
16 true in all language communities.
- 17 20 I am thankful to John Baugh for directing my attention to Shelby Steele's writings,  
18 which he also analyzed in part in his 1994 NWAVE presentation at Stanford.

### 20 Suggested further reading

- 21 Alim, H.S. (2006) *Roc the Mic Right: The Language of Hip Hop Culture*. London and New  
22 York: Routledge.
- 23 Alim, H.S. (2009) Hip Hop Nation Language. In A. Duranti (ed.) *Linguistic Anthropology:  
24 A Reader*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- 25 Alim, H.S. and Baugh, J. (eds.) (2007) *Talkin Black Talk: Language, Education, and Social  
26 Change*. Multicultural Education Series. New York: Teachers College Press.
- 27 Dyson, A. (2009) The Right (Write) Start: African American Language and the Discourse  
28 of Sounding Right. *Teachers College Record* 111(4): 973–998.
- 29 Green, L. (2002) *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*. New York: Cambridge  
30 University Press.
- 31 Jordan, J. (1995) Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie  
32 Jordan. In P. Elbow (ed.) *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence  
33 Erlbaum.
- 34 McWhorter, J.H. (1998) *The Word on the Street: Fact and Fable about American English*.  
35 New York: Plenum Trade.
- 36 Perry, T. and Delpit, L.D. (eds.) (1998) *The Real Ebonics Debate: Power, Language, and the  
37 Education of African American Children*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- 38 Rickford, J.R. (2010) Geographical Diversity, Residential Segregation, and the Vitality of  
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