

Jillian Best  
Bryn Mawr College

What Had Happened:  
The Story of AAVE's Rocky Relationship with American Society

**Abstract**

This paper investigates the social perceptions of AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH (AAVE) while seeking to demonstrate that MONODIALECTAL speakers of AAVE are greatly disadvantaged, yet fluent BIDIALECTAL speakers of both AAVE and STANDARD AMERICAN ENGLISH (SAE) are more advantaged than monodialectal speakers of SAE. This conclusion can be drawn from the examination of several related topics. There are many factors, such as socioeconomic class, age, and gender that influence who speaks AAVE and when. It has been argued that AAVE is simply ungrammatical SAE. In examining these issues, this paper also explains the history and purports to predict the future of AAVE by viewing court cases, policies and studies dealing with the use of this dialect in schools. There exists a population of children who require a more specialized ESL-style of teaching to learn SAE. These children are typically assumed to be unintelligent and their needs are not met. Upon entering adulthood, speakers of AAVE who are unaware of or unprepared for society's opinion of their dialect have difficulty finding upper and mid-level jobs. The final section of this paper will attempt to explain why bidialectal speakers of AAVE and SAE choose to continue using AAVE. It has been proven that one dialect is more beneficial than the other, so why maintain the minority dialect? To uncover the answer, it is important to understand how and when bidialectal speakers change their dialect and if there are any advantages in doing so. If AAVE is such a deeply stigmatized dialect, it is crucial to explore why a bidialectal speaker might choose to continue speaking AAVE.

**Review of Literature**

In this section, I will review four of the books that I found to be most useful throughout my work. Each of these sources offered in-depth information about AAVE, while presenting various perspectives. The authors of these four books greatly influenced my views and their statistics, as well as opinions, can be found throughout the text.

**Beyond Ebonics: Linguistic pride and racial prejudice. (Baugh 2000)**

The subtitle of Baugh's book exactly explains its focus. He opens the discussion by stating that "many who criticized Ebonics did not do so merely because they objected

to the term; they scoffed at Ebonics as an attempt to legitimize “bad English: in the name of politically correct linguistic enlightenment” (2).

The rest of the book goes on to describe in detail why the real problem behind the controversy of Ebonics was based on racial prejudice. Baugh presents a history of Ebonics and compares it with other English dialects. He also focuses on policy and legislation by discussing the Oakland, California court case and legal implications of the action taken.

The author uses cartoons from 1997 to prove the immediate prejudiced response to Ebonics. The numerous negative depictions of Ebonics show that the opinion was common and widely accepted. He uses that information to suggest a way to avoid the racial stereotypes when discussing Ebonics.

The author is not shy about presenting his opinions in this book. It makes the information slightly less pertinent to the situation of advantage of bidialectal speakers or why AAVE lives strong. This information does, however, offer great amounts of insight on the social perceptions of AAVE and native speakers of AAVE. The entire book is based on the fact that Ebonics, although it is not stated to be synonymous with AAVE, faces strong disapproval because of racial prejudice. Therefore, the perceptions of AAVE are most likely not entirely friendly on all fronts.

### **Language, Discourse, and Power in African American Culture. (Morgan 2002)**

In this book the author speaks primarily to sociolinguistic issues. Morgan focuses strongly on the questions of “why” and “who” in relation to AAVE (known as AAE in this book). Most of Morgan’s data is presented in transcriptions of conversations and

example sentences. She begins the book with a page of notes on the transcriptions to allow any reader to follow the intricacies of the speech.

There is a brief introduction that explains why the author has written on the subject, and Chapter One offers a bit of history, but overall, the lack of introduction of AAVE and its features shows that the author presupposes that the reader is already knowledgeable.

The second chapter, titled “Forms of Speech,” does not, as it may seem, give information regarding what rules occur in AAVE. Instead, it is a look at how speakers of AAVE respond verbally in various situations. The section is complete with examples of “comebacks” and “disses.”

Morgan does offer a definition of AAVE and uses conversation transcriptions to present some of the features in Chapter Three. Mainly, the author focuses on social situations. Morgan describes the differences between code switching and style shifting and how they are influenced by identity.

Chapter Four describes aspects of the dialect particular to women, while the fifth chapter investigates the language of the urban youth.

Chapter Six revolves around pedagogy and the educational system as the author uses what she has previously discussed to suggest a great need for reform in school systems.

This book, although it does not address bidialectal speakers, speaks extensively of the importance of AAVE. By focusing the discussion on the culture surrounding the dialect, Morgan shows that there is more involved than simply a way of talking. AAVE is a way of living. This author’s views can provide answers to the question of whether

AAVE should be discouraged and why people would struggle to maintain a dialect which has proven to be disadvantageous.

**African American Vernacular English.** (Rickford 1999)

The author divided the book into three main parts. Each part handles a different aspect of African American Vernacular English. Part One is a theoretical analysis of the dialect. Part Two describes its evolution and the third part applies the theory to the educational world.

Chapter One introduces AAVE with a definition and a detailed list, complete with examples, of the main features. It also explains that the features are not found in all forms of AAVE for all speakers. The author carefully describes that rules cannot be applied across the board for speakers of AAVE. He explains that variation exists and is correlated with gender, class, age, and region.

The rest of the chapters of the first part describe in great detail the various features of AAVE. Rickford presents the findings of several studies conducted by himself and by other linguists. He uses charts and graphs to enhance the understanding of the usage of each feature.

The second part is composed of chapters dealing with creoles and other ethnic vernaculars. Chapter Seven even delves into the unspoken communicative differences between the races. It describes the use of “cut-eye” and “suck-teeth” as silent ways of expressing disapproval.

Part Three focuses on pedagogy. Rickford explains attitudes towards speakers of AAVE in schools in the thirteenth chapter. Chapter Fifteen describes the term and label “Ebonics.” Finally in Chapter Sixteen, the author attempts to converge his findings to develop a method of “Using the Vernacular to Teach the Standard” (329).

Rickford’s book is essentially a compilation of essays he had previously written or published, yet it speaks directly to the important issues surrounding AAVE. This book is useful to linguists, but is also an accessible resource for people who are unfamiliar with the subject.

The information provided in this book offers a practical starting point to answering the question of advantage and disadvantage of bidialectal speakers of AAVE and SAE. The thorough, yet concise format of Rickford’s book presents the most pertinent information without offering heavy amounts of opinion or bias.

**Talkin That Talk:** Language, culture, and education in African America. (Smitherman 2000)

Smitherman’s book includes information about several subtopics of AAVE. The book is separated into six parts, each analyzing a different realm of the dialect.

Part One is an introduction of the dialect, identified here as Ebonics and Black English. Smitherman explains the history and evolution of the dialect in Chapter Two and who speaks the dialect in the third chapter. She even touches on discrimination and political theory.

Part Two uses the political theory to discuss the education of speakers of AAVE, particularly African Americans.

Part Three describes the culture that is such a tremendous part of AAVE. The author uses various real-life situations in which the Black English dialect is used. These chapters are not only anecdotal, but also necessary to paint an accurate portrait of the rich dialect. Chapter Eleven is about the oral tradition; Chapter Twelve introduces the world of insults; Chapter Thirteen relates the proverb tradition and its importance to Black culture; Chapter Fourteen goes to church to explain the verbal tradition; and Chapter Fifteen looks at hip hop as the newest form of all of these traditions, which are vital to the culture of the Black English dialect.

In Part Four Smitherman gets serious and focuses again on the politics and the power struggle of speaking a non-standard dialect. She faces the topic of English-Only and questions the democracy of the United States of America.

Part Five is a compilation of journal articles that pertain to the subject and Part Six explains the present and the future of the topic of AAVE in relation to students and their rights.

Smitherman's book is primarily anecdotal. It is a useful resource to recognize the strong cultural context of AAVE. It shows that the culture is what makes AAVE important to the African American community. Because the author is a bidialectal speaker of AAVE and SAE, although the book is not explicitly focused on the experience of a bidialectal speaker, it shows the opinions of one.

### *“Is that like Ebonics?”*

AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH (AAVE) is a dialect of STANDARD AMERICAN ENGLISH (SAE) primarily spoken by African Americans. According to the American Heritage Dictionary, a dialect is “a regional variety of a language distinguished by pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary, esp. a variety of speech differing from the standard literacy language or speech pattern of the culture in which it exists” (1985:391). A vernacular is described as the colloquial language of a people. Therefore, AAVE is a dialect because it is a variation of SAE, but more specifically, it is a vernacular because it is particular to African Americans, a racial community of speakers of SAE.

AAVE, like any dialect or language is identified by a list of features which describe its grammar, phonology, syntax and semantics. There are 18 documented phonological features and 6 major grammatical features that vary from the standard form of English (Rickford 1999).

Like many other dialects, though, this vernacular “does not consist simply of stringing together features... [it has] distinctive AAVE words, prosodies, rhetorical/expressive styles to inform persuade, attract, praise, celebrate, chastise, entertain, educate, get over, set apart, mark identity, reflect, refute, brag” (Rickford 1999: 12). In short, the African American vernacular is more than just a list of technical variations from the standard language. It is a dialect rich with cultural meaning and history.

To a person who has very little knowledge of American history or culture, AAVE would not seem like an exceptional dialectal phenomenon. This outsider would not understand why such a great issue has arisen around the presence of this particular dialect

and not many others. America does have other dialects and non-standard forms of English. There are other languages spoken. Native Hawaiians and Alaskans and other surviving Native Americans use languages that are an older part of this land's history than English. The United States has a huge multilingual history because of the flow of immigration from all parts of Europe and Asia and South America. Why then is AAVE, a mutually intelligible, although non-standard, form of English, treated so differently? The answer is simple: the history.

There are two major American problems that led to the genesis of AAVE. First, African Americans are in this country in such large numbers because of, and only because of, slavery. African people were brought en masse to America to serve as slave labor. Had this never occurred, there would most likely be no more African descendants in America than Polish or Russian, or any other ethnic, descendants. If the immigration of Africans to America had been as voluntary as the immigration of other nationalities, the linguistic assimilation would have been equivalent (Baugh 2000). For the most part, the language (accent and form) of other immigrant descendants is indistinguishable from that of the descendants of Puritans and Pilgrims and other son/daughter of the American Revolution types. Because the slaves were arriving in such huge numbers and with many different native languages, their English development was stunted. They spoke only with each other and received very little cohesive English input. Through the process of creolization, AAVE began to take root.

The second, and possibly most influential, reason behind the creation and perpetuation of AAVE is that even after slavery was abolished, laws were set in place to segregate the races. Former slaves and their descendants were racially isolated for



another hundred years. The non-standard form(s) of English had already been established and was(were?) the native language of most of these people (Baugh 2000). In the extraordinarily unlikely and fantastically idealistic hypothetical situation that, upon the abolition of slavery, the former slaves had been immediately accepted into white, SAE speaking society, the dialect would have eventually (probably within one generation) dissolved and given way to a multiracially-accessible standard English. But that did not happen. Isolated segregation, followed by unwilling integration bred a mutual racial distrust between black and white Americans. This hostile environment, which still exists today in less overt and intense forms, created a resistance to assimilation. The African American population developed pride in their culture, heritage, and history and to openly accept “white culture” (including “white language”) was, and often still is, viewed as being ashamed of that identity.

And so, the existence of AAVE, in the past and as it is today, is a direct result of the African American chapter of American history. That is why the situation differs from the completely natural evolution of a dialect or language based primarily on region.

Because of its close relationship with culture, AAVE varies amongst its speakers. In 1969, Walt Wolfram conducted a study in Detroit to determine the extent of class stratification within the population of speakers of AAVE. Thirty-six years later it is still considered the most comprehensive source of information about the differences that exist in the vernacular (Rickford 1999). Wolfram noticed that there were differences between the frequency of usage of certain features between working and middle class speakers.

For example, consonant cluster simplification (not in the past tense)<sup>1</sup> occurred 84% of the time in the lower working class, 79% in the upper working class, 66% in the lower middle class, and only 51% of the time in the upper middle class. This trend existed for many other features, such as multiple negation<sup>2</sup>, absence of the copula<sup>3</sup>, absence of third person present<sup>4</sup>, absence of possessive /s/<sup>5</sup> and absence of plural /s/<sup>6</sup> (Rickford 1999).

Based on Wolfram's early study, it makes sense that variation of features occurs based on many different characteristics of speakers of AAVE. It has been estimated that about 80% of African Americans speak AAVE and no one uses all of the features 100% of the time (Rickford 1999:9). The greatest number of documented features are used by working class urban youth.

Copula deletion occurred 68% of the time in 14-17 year olds, while occurring only 38% of the time in adults (Rickford 1999). The third person present /s/ deletion was more common in males than females. However, the difference here was only 5% and some of the variability may have been influenced by the fact that most of the interviewers in Wolfram's studies were male. As Rickford describes, "That variability in turn can be adjusted in one direction or another to mark the kinds of social and stylistic distinctions...and the dynamic, shifting relationships among the interlocutors" (Rickford 1999:12).

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<sup>1</sup> "Reduction of word-final consonant clusters (i.e., sequences of two or more consonants), especially those ending in *t* or *d*, as in *han'* for SE 'hand,' *des'* for SE "desk," *pos'* for SE "post," and *pass'* for SE "passed" (the *-ed* suffix in "passed" is pronounced as [t])." (Rickford 1999:4)

<sup>2</sup> "Multiple negation or negative concord (that is, negating the auxiliary verb and all indefinite pronouns in the sentence), as in 'He *don'* do *nothin'*' for SE 'He doesn't do anything.'" (Rickford 1999:8)

<sup>3</sup> "Absence of copula/auxiliary *is* and *are* for present tense states and actions, as in 'He tall' for SE 'He's tall' or 'They running' for SE 'They are running.'" (Rickford 1999:6)

<sup>4</sup> "Absence of third person singular present tense *-s*, as in 'He walk' for SE 'He walks.' The use of *don't* instead of 'doesn't' as in 'He *don't* sing' or *have* instead of 'has,' as in 'She *have* it' is related since 'doesn't' and 'hasn't' include 3<sup>rd</sup> singular *-s*.'" (Rickford 1999:7)

<sup>5</sup> "Absence of possessive *-s*, as in 'John house' for SE 'John's house.'" (Rickford 1999:7)

<sup>6</sup> "Absence of plural *-s* (much less frequent than [absence of third person singular present tense *-s* or absence of possessive *-s*]), as in 'two boy' for SE 'two boys.'" (Rickford 1999:7)

Linguistic environment plays a large role in the variability of AAVE. One teenager deleted *is* and *are* 70% of the time in an interview with an African American interviewer with whom she was familiar, but only 40% of the time when the interviewer was unfamiliar and white (Rickford 1999). This data strongly suggests that AAVE is spoken as an in-group dialect. The features occur more often when the interlocutors are both a part of the in-group, in this case, are African Americans or speakers of AAVE.

Even the development of AAVE is strongly related to its associated culture. “The genesis of the vernacular lies in the distinctive cultural background and relative isolation of African Americans, which originated in the slaveholding South” (Rickford 1999:324). The exact history of AAVE is unknown, but there are three different theories. One is the Eurocentric View, which is preferred by dialectologists. This theory presumes that the dialect was constructed by African slaves and their descendants by borrowing features used by other colonial English dialects. For example, Irish and Scotch-Irish dialects of the time, like AAVE of today, omitted the final consonants and used a habitual *be*<sup>7</sup>. Other supporters of the Eurocentric View think that the vernacular developed post-slavery, while African Americans were isolated in urban ghettos. Those who are against the Eurocentric View argue that “crucial features aren’t present in early settler dialects” and suggest that this model offers a “rosier view of [slaves and European settlers] relationship” (Rickford 1999:325).

The Afrocentric View explains AAVE as an amalgam of English and many African languages. However, this view claims “that most distinctive features of Ebonics represents imports from Africa” (Rickford 1999:325). African slaves were from various

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<sup>7</sup> “Use of invariant *be* ...for habitual aspect, as in ‘He be walkin’ (usually, regularly, versus ‘He walkin’ right now) for SE ‘He is usually walking/usually walks.’ Used with auxiliary *do* in questions, negatives, and tag questions, as in ‘Do he be walking every day?’ or ‘She don’t be sick, do she?’” (Rickford 1999:6)

countries and regions of Africa and were brought to America with many different languages. In order to communicate with each other, they adopted a pidginized form of English and extended it with features from their own languages. The fact that some Niger-Congo languages have a simplification of consonant clusters and a lack of linking verbs is used as proof of the Afrocentric View. Those against this theory state that the Niger-Congo languages vary enormously and the similarities between any one of them and AAVE can not be proven to be more than mere coincidence (Rickford 1999).

The third theory is the Creolist View. This idea purports that AAVE is actually a creole that developed from pidgins used by Africans and African descendants. The features of AAVE, in this theory, developed in the way that creoles typically develop, as opposed to being remnants of African languages. This view is supported by evidence that compares aspects of AAVE with other creoles used by African descendants, such as Caribbean creoles and Gullah. Jamaican Creole English developed as a result of a majority population of African descendants on the island of Jamaica living as slaves to English speaking plantation owners. The Gullah dialect is spoken on the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina. These American islands, like the Caribbean islands, are populated primarily by African descendants. These two independently developed creoles share many features with each other and, more importantly for this case, with AAVE. These features include a lack of suffixes to mark past tense, a lack of plural /s/ and possessive /s/ (Rickford 1999:326).

Rickford explores three theories of AAVE's creole birth. One idea involves the movement of slaves from Jamaica and Barbados (with pre-existing creoles) into the American colonies. Another suggests that the creole was formed by Africans centered

around the West African trading forts. The other hypothesis is that, like Gullah, it developed entirely on American soil. No matter which of these cases is true, the Creolist View still assumes that AAVE is the product of mixing English with African languages. It differs from the Afrocentric View in assuming that the features of AAVE were derived from Niger-Congo language features, instead of being a creolized amalgam of African languages and English. The Creolist View is most accepted because of the strength of support based on comparison to other creoles and because there is not much, if any, strong evidence against it.

In the discussion of African American Vernacular English it is important to address the issue of nomenclature. Politicians and linguists, the people with the most influence over the situations dealing with the dialect, use several different terms to describe what may or may not be the same linguistic phenomenon. Such terms include Black English, Black Language, Black Vernacular English, African American English and Ebonics. In my experience as an undergraduate student studying in a relatively small field, I've come across a lot of other students completely ignorant of most things linguistic. Essentially, nobody, black or otherwise, had ever heard the term "African American Vernacular English." Upon further explanation they were all able to come to the conclusion that they did know what I was talking about and enthusiastically exclaim, "Oh! Ebonics!" This, however, is only partially correct. The definition of the word Ebonics varies from situation to situation and one person's idea of Ebonics might not match another's.

Robert Williams was the man who created the word "Ebonics" in 1973 at a conference he hosted in St. Louis called "Cognitive and Language Development of the

Black Child.” He made the word by combining “ebony,” meaning black, and “phonics,” meaning sound. William’s definition of Ebonics, published in Ebonics: The True Language of Black Folks in 1975 read:

Ebonics has two major dimensions as a language:

1. A lexicon or the vocabulary of the language,
2. Morphology of the study of the structure and form of the language that include its grammatical rules. Ebonics may be defined as the linguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represent the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and United States slave descendent of African origin. It includes the grammar, various idioms, patois, argots, ideolects, and social dialects of Black people. (Baugh 2000:15)

This general description of Ebonics does not apply solely to our North American situation. Williams’ Ebonics is any form of language spoken by African/slave descendants, of which AAVE is only an example.

Some linguists and politicians use Ebonics to be synonymous with AAVE. Others use it to describe a language that is not at all English. With so many opposing uses of the term Ebonics, I will not be using it to convey AAVE in the course of this paper, unless it is a direct quote, in which case, based on context, it will be safe to assume that it is being considered a synonym for AAVE.

***“It just sounds cooler.”***

The statement above was the argument offered by a college student in support of the preservation and use of AAVE. It is true that the vernacular is a treasured part of the African American culture, but, as they say, one man’s treasure...

Although AAVE is a linguistically recognized dialect, it is far from being universally acknowledged as legitimate. It has been neglected as “lazy English,”

“bastardized English,” “poor grammar,” and “fractured slang” for as long as it has existed (Rickford 1999). Research conducted by sociolinguists has done little to sway the general public in favor of its validity. Speakers of AAVE are viewed negatively and are discriminated against in schools, in the workplace, and in many other parts of society.

There is not much action taken against this type of discrimination because linguistic prejudice, in general, is not against the law. It is an accepted form of discrimination. Studies by Matsuda and Lippi-Green in the 1990s discovered that “...accent and dialect discrimination in hiring and firing have been tolerated by US Courts” (Rickford 1999:302). In 1997, Lippi-Green even explained that “Disney animated cartoons teach children how to discriminate against non-standard dialects” (Rickford 1999:302). For example, in Peter Pan (1953) the tribe of Indians spoke very broken and ungrammatical English and were viewed and treated as “bad guys” and inferiors. This type of discrimination could be excused by the fact that the movie was made during a time that it was more acceptable to create stereotypical images. However, the more recent film Aladdin, from 1992, also uses accents to portray differences in social status. The “good guys” (Aladdin, Jasmine, the Genie, and the Sultan) all speak with standard American accents. The “bad guys” (the prison guards, the thieves, and Jafar) have accents that can, based on the geographic and racial ambiguity of the movie, only be described as “Arabian.” Even the parrot, Iago, who is in the movie for comic relief, has not only a notoriously annoying voice (provided by Gilbert Gottfried), but a heavy Brooklyn accent. There was controversy surrounding Aladdin’s portrayal of Arabs, but the topic was given little publicity and Disney did not attempt to avoid being racially incorrect. Their later films, Pocahontas (1995) and Mulan (1998), also created a

stir because of historical and cultural inaccuracies. These seemingly innocent examples show that America is relatively accepting, and in the case of Disney, even encouraging of linguistic prejudice.

Many of the problems that occur with AAVE are related to schools and literacy rates. Students who speak AAVE are disadvantaged in the classroom. Although AAVE and SAE are basically mutually intelligible, the native AAVE speaker cannot accurately produce the standard in oral or written form. There are situations in which their work would be graded as incorrect because of incorrect form even though the meaning might be correct. The writing sample of a student who is transcribing their oral non-standard dialect is less impressive than a sample written in SAE, although the content may be equally meaningful. Because the work of native AAVE speaking students appears wrong, the teachers are likely to assume the child is unintelligent, incapable of learning, or has a learning disability. Without intent, the teachers are discriminating against these children. If passed off as incapable, these students are never expected to excel and are no longer encouraged as students who are able to show more promise. Rickford (1999:283) describes how

“teachers often have unjustifiably negative attitudes towards students who speak AAVE, and such negative attitudes may lead them to have low expectations of such students, to assign them inappropriately to learning disabled or special education classes, and to otherwise stunt their academic performance”.

If this statement is true, it seems that, with 80% of African Americans speaking AAVE, there are a lot of African American students being stifled in their academic achievement without the world even realizing that it is happening (Rickford 1999).



Based on studies done by Taylor and Williams in the 1970s, this statement does seem to be valid.

Taylor, in 1973, conducted a survey of 422 teachers of various races and 40% of them had negative opinions about the structure and usefulness of AAVE. Forty percent also had positive opinions. The attitudes varied based on which aspects of dialect were used and the teacher's length of teaching experience (Rickford 1999). In 1976, Williams followed up with an experiment. The subjects were teachers who watched videotapes of students of various races speaking. The accompanying soundtrack was the same for every subject, but the video was changed, presenting students of different races to different subjects. The teachers were then asked to rate to what extent the speech of the student was standard. It was reported that the speech of the African American and Mexican American children in the videos were rated as less standard than the white child. There were also "regular correlations between teachers' assessment of the relative 'standardness' and 'ethnicity' of students' speech and their ratings of children's states and confidence and eagerness" (Rickford 1999:335). Therefore, students who were perceived as "non-standard," in other words, the African American and Mexican American students, were rated as less promising or effective in the classroom.

Two major, although local, court cases brought this issue to national attention. In 1977, working-class mothers of African American children attending Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School in a middle-class school district in Ann Arbor, Michigan sued the school board to demand that their children be educated in the same manner as other students. They were successful and the ruling of Judge Charles W. Joiner "mandated the Ann Arbor School District to take 'appropriate action' to teach the *King* school children

‘to read in the standard English of the school, the commercial world, the arts, science and professions’ (Joiner 1979)” (Smitherman 2004:186). The other case received much more national attention. It occurred nearly twenty years after the Ann Arbor case, suggesting that although Ann Arbor was a success for that school district, its effect was not widespread. In 1996, the Oakland School District proposed a resolution in which it declared that African American students spoke a different language than other students and should be taught in a manner similar to that of ESL students. After a few revisions, the resolution was passed. However, the Oakland case succeeded only in introducing the term “Ebonics” to the public. There was widespread disapproval and animosity-filled backlash. To further understand the issue at hand, the matter was brought to a congressional hearing. Linguists and educators were present to testify on behalf of and against the resolution. The hearing did nothing to increase awareness or assistance to schools that had similar problems with linguistic differences among their students

The Oakland school district, at the time that they were contesting to have Ebonics recognized in the schools in 1996, was 53% African American. That population accounted for 80% of suspended students and had the lowest GPA (C-). Back in 1973, Piestrup conducted a study on 200 first graders in predominantly African American classrooms in Oakland, California. It was found that the less vernacular a student used, the higher he or she would score on standardized reading tests (Rickford 1999). There is a negative correlation between educational success and frequency of AAVE features used. This relationship suggests that the disparity directly stems from the difference in language use and the teachers’ attitudes and response to language use.

There are two schools in California that are in close proximity, but vary greatly in effectiveness. Palo Alto, a predominantly white school located in Silicon Valley, consistently has standardized testing scores in the ninety-ninth percentile. East Palo Alto, which has a population of mostly African American and Latino students, tests vastly lower. A group of third grade students tested in the sixteenth percentile one year. The same group of students was tested in the sixth grade and their scores were actually lowered to the third percentile (Rickford 1999). The fact that the sixth grade score is lower than the already low third grade score suggests that the students were still reading on a reading level at or below the third grade standard. This period between third and sixth grade is the time when children generally shift from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” Without ever reaching the “reading to learn” stage, these students technically are not literate. Palo Alto and East Palo Alto are in the same school district, and yet one school, where presumably the students all speak SAE, consistently rates the highest in the state, while the other does not succeed in even making the students literate.

It is, consequently, logical to assume that, aside from overt prejudices, there exists a disparity in the way teachers view students of color, even without a linguistic difference. Add AAVE into the situation and the teachers become even more discriminatory. This is not to say that teachers are doing a bad job or are trying to harm students, but the lack of knowledge and pre-disposition to judge do act negatively against the African American students. Rickford offers a semi-solution in explaining that “teachers trying to decide whether and how to take AAVE into account in their classroom pedagogy might benefit from understanding what the attitudes of students, parents, employees, and other teachers are towards this group” (Rickford 1999:283). However,

attitudes on the subject of AAVE vary greatly, even within the African American community.

“Youth of all races and ages...often echo the negative attitudes of their parents, teachers, and the media toward AAVE, and their positive attitude toward SAE” (Rickford 1999:283). It has already been established that teachers have a negative attitude towards AAVE, but it is also worth investigating the causes of the negative views held by parents and the media, who, arguably, hold even more influence over children than teachers. Parents are concerned with the discrimination they know to affect the speakers of AAVE. They want their children fluent in SAE for job interviews, reading and writing, schools and other formal contexts, but they also believe that the vernacular is acceptable for listening and speaking, or being at home and in other informal settings. Parents “endorsed it positively for solidarity maintenance and cultural preservation” (Rickford 1999:284).

The media, however, has been very effective in creating anti-AAVE sentiments. The coverage of the Oakland Ebonics case fermented animosity towards the dialect and its proponents. The Oakland goal always was to use the vernacular to teach the standard (Oakland School Board Resolution 1996). The media was able to convert the meaning of the outcome into what appeared to be the destruction of English. Newspapers and magazines were covered in criticism against the court’s decision and against the use of Ebonics all over the country. AAVE became a joke. It was viewed as the language of the educationally and economically inferior. By accepting its use in schools, the courts had allowed that inferior population to take over the rest of the nation. Without any

understanding of the situation, the media was able to create panic and disgust within citizens of all races and economic classes in America (Baugh 2000).

The most detrimental mistake made by the Oakland School Board in writing the resolution was the absence of a linguistic advisor. The pandemonium was created by confusion and misunderstanding of the implication of recognizing Ebonics was a language. Had the resolution been more effective in explaining AAVE instead of the more general term “Ebonics,” it would not have been nearly as controversial. People were frightened by the claim that African Americans were speaking another language. The ambiguous use of the word “genetically” also added to the stress. The meaning of “genetically,” I assume, is linguistic in nature and referring to the relationship between Ebonics and English. It was, however, not taken as such. Upon reading “genetically” people may have imagined that the Oakland School Board was attempting to create a eugenics-type model in which African Americans were biologically slated to speak Ebonics. However, had the school board chosen to describe the language of the African Americans as a dialect of English, which I believe and evidence shows it is, that required extra attention to standardize, there would have been much less room for justified uproar. There still would have been a small amount of scandal based on the racial implications, but, overall, had the resolution been clearer there would have been much less drama.

Even some educational psychologists view the use of AAVE by young children as detrimental to cognitive capabilities (Rickford 1999). Typically, however, linguists disagree. William Labov and John Baugh were two of the first sociolinguists to delve deeply into the AAVE phenomenon and pick apart its construction, history and purpose. Linguists approved of the Oakland decisions for three main reasons. For the most part,

linguistics is descriptive, rather than prescriptive. It is the study of how people talk and not how people should talk. Linguists also recognize that all languages have dialects and so the existence of AAVE is not a singular event that occurred because of something American society is doing wrong. They also know that all languages and dialects are systematic and rule-governed, and therefore should not be viewed as illegitimate. “The manner in which Ebonics differs from Standard English is highly ordered; it is no more lazy English than Italian is lazy Latin” (Rickford 1999:323).

Linguists also seek to prove that Ebonics is not slang. “Slang refers just to a small set of new and usually short-lived words in the vocabulary of a dialect or language (Rickford 1999:321). The goal behind recognizing Ebonics or AAVE in schools is not to teach the students slang, but rather to help their chances of understanding and correctly producing SAE.

Speakers of AAVE who are unable to use SAE are greatly disadvantaged even after their school years have ended. Terrell and Terrell conducted an experiment in 1983 in order to determine to what extent discrimination occurred in hiring practices. Six African Americans applied for secretarial positions at 100 different sites (Rickford 1999). Three of them spoke AAVE and the other three spoke SAE. The applicants who spoke fluent SAE were given longer interviews, offered more jobs, and were offered higher pay than those who spoke AAVE. In 1982, Akinnaso and Ajitotutu found that “where several candidates have equivalent qualifications...candidates who can linguistically match a standard variety and interact within the discourse conventions of the standard language are normally at an advantage” (Rickford 1999:304).

Even while accepting AAVE as a legitimate linguistic occurrence, there are still stereotypes involved with its use. The fact, as previously discussed, is that AAVE is used most often by African American working class urban youth. That is not to say, however, that it is not used fluently by many other people. It seems to be less acceptable when the speaker of AAVE is not a part of the majority of speakers, that is to say, not an African American inner-city male. For example, Marcyliena Morgan describes how “some linguists have considered the phenomenon of educated African Americans using [AAVE] subversive to the extent that they have argued that these varieties were fabrications and never existed at all... Others suspected that educated African Americans who criticized linguists promoting [AAVE] suffered from self-hate” (Morgan 2002:18). The so-called “educated African Americans” are then in a position to be attacked no matter what side they stand on. They cannot use the vernacular without reducing the validity of its existence. They cannot be against the vernacular without reducing the validity of their opinion.

The truth of the matter is that there are a great number of African Americans who are just as against the use of AAVE in schools as are other American citizens. I do not believe that it is the case to say that the people who support the use of AAVE as a bridge are the people who speak AAVE or are a part of the African American community. In my experience, I have observed the greatest amount of support for the idea among linguists or people who have studied or have knowledge of linguistics. Most African Americans with whom I have discussed the topic for this paper do not agree that AAVE is a useful tool for learning SAE. The general opinion seems to be that students would be adversely affected by this type of education. They would have less exposure to the standard and

would be singled out in classrooms as different or atypical. While these things may be true, I do not feel that they are more detrimental than the outcome of the education would be beneficial. One of the major problems with gaining support in this situation is the fact that the vast majority of the population are unfamiliar with the study and practice of linguistics, and so are unfamiliar with AAVE as a linguistic situation. They view it only as a cultural difference.

In one classroom setting, students were asked to self-identify as using AAVE. All of the students, except one, raised their hands. It is reported that, "the camera shows them turning, in amusement, to look at the student who had not [raised his hand], and right before he asks, 'Why you lookin' at me like that, man?'"(Pandey 2000:96). While insisting that he did not use AAVE, this student used AAVE. I have witnessed similar behavior among Bryn Mawr students. I have had conversations and discussions about my thesis topic with women who use AAVE on a daily basis but do not agree that it should be considered legitimate enough to have a place in the education system.

I have determined that the refusal to accept AAVE as a valid linguistic event (specifically by African Americans) is not only based on a lack of familiarity with linguistics, but is based on fear. They are afraid to be viewed by the majority, SAE speaking population as wrong or unintelligent or uneducated. Admitting to the use of the vernacular is like admitting to being different or inferior. However, if there was more awareness of AAVE and its implications and the ramifications of its use, there would eventually be a greater acceptance and understanding of its existence. If African Americans are ignoring the situation, how can the rest of the population ever be expected to see it.



### ***Why You Talkin White?***

Because of the obvious disparity in many facets of daily life based on linguistic differences, it seems as though everyone would be better off speaking the same standardized English. This idea, however, excludes the relationship between AAVE and the African American culture. Language is the most basic form of expression and is, therefore, closely linked with identity. Group identity also relies on a group language. Dialects exist in part because groups have in-group languages. For a community to deny their language, in order to achieve other goals, is to deny a part of their identity.

It remains a mystery to people who have not studied and do not understand AAVE that an educated person can and will use the vernacular simply because it is so closely linked with the African American culture. To deny your language is to deny your culture and to deny your culture is to deny your people. If a person grew up speaking AAVE in their homes and in their neighborhoods, no amount of education is going to cause them to forget where they came from. Although African Americans are always physically linked to being African American, based on skin color or other salient features, that does not mean that they are considered or consider themselves a part of the African American community. It is not uncommon for any person to grow up and be ashamed of their childhood and their personal history. However, if an African American appears to be ashamed of being a part of the African American community or black culture, their physical features no longer link them to other members of the community. They may choose to abandon that side of their personal history, but it will be at the cost of their

position in the community. For the most part, people who choose to become bidialectal, as opposed to completely adopting SAE and abandoning AAVE, move fluidly between two communities. They have access to the privileges associated with the language of prestige, in this case SAE, but they also are accepted in their home community.

Whereas AAVE cannot be eradicated, the most logical solution is to ensure that speakers of AAVE become fluent and literate in SAE, without destroying their pride in their native vernacular. Many sociolinguists have designed pedagogical strategies to achieve this goal. John Rickford declared “there is experimental evidence...that mastering the standard language might be easier if the differences in the student vernacular and Standard English were made explicit rather than entirely ignored” (1999:3277).

His assertion was tested in Chicago. African American students were taught contrasted features of SAE and AAVE “through explicit instruction and drills” for eleven weeks. At the conclusion of the experiment, there was a 59% reduction in the use of AAVE features in SAE writing. The control group, which was taught by conventional methods, realized an 8.5% increase in AAVE features in SAE writing (Rickford 1999).

Anita Pandey published a paper in 2000 attempting to liken monodialectal AAVE speakers to ESL students. In order to demonstrate this point she used the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) as a way to measure how fluent African American students were in SAE. The subjects were divided into four groups. Two were control groups that consisted of first and second year college students at the University of Memphis taking a course on African American literature. The group was racially mixed and represented various ages and regions. There were also two focus groups. Focus

group A consisted of eleven 18-19 year old inner-city African American students enrolled in a summer Bridge Transition program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Focus group B was made up of twelve students, between the ages of 18 and 39, enrolled in a remedial English course at the University of Memphis. Nine people in this group were African American and three were Caucasian. Focus group A was learning SAE through a curriculum that incorporated AAVE, while Focus group B did not use AAVE in the classroom.

The control groups took the TOEFL tests two times throughout the experiment, while the test was administered to the focus groups three times to observe their development. The results of the tests were compared within each group. First of all, results of the first test showed that most of the students of both focus groups were below the level of SAE fluency that is required of foreign students to attend U.S. and Canadian schools. (Most schools require a score of 550 and some even expect a 600.) The only exceptions to this result were the three Caucasian students. None of the African Americans in the focus group were, by TOEFL standards, considered to be fluent in SAE. This finding is a good argument for the suggestion that monodialectal speakers of AAVE should be taught SAE as if they were ESL students. Pandey states, "What is most striking is that the students in both groups obtained scores similar to low-level ESL/EFL students the first and second times they took the TOEFL" (2000:100).

By the end of the study, all members of focus group A showed a steady increase in their SAE abilities. On average the group score rose between 13 and 40 points on the second test and 13-30 points on the third test. "The students' scores on the SAE test went

up when SAE was taught through the contrastive approach and not otherwise” (Pandey 2000:99).

Should this type of pedagogical plan be incorporated in American schools, there would be an entire population of bidialectal people who reap the benefits of the prestige language without being forced to deal with the disadvantages of the vernacular.

As previously emphasized, there is a strong relationship between language and cultural identity. This link is not always obvious. It is all too easy to take for granted that you are able to completely and accurately express yourself whenever you feel the need. It is not until your abilities are taken away that you realize how much you rely on your language. Sometimes the situation is as simple as a hoarse throat. Imagine how worked up some people get about not being able to speak for a day or two. They’ve lost their sole means of communication and must resort to awkward charades or writing notes. Even being in another country causes people to panic. They can’t speak with the waiter, they can’t speak with the cab driver, they can’t speak with the hotel concierge. This is a source of great stress for most world travelers. Those are the occasions that cause you to realize and appreciate how important your ability to effectively communicate really is. Consider, though, that you are unable to speak in the manner to which you are accustomed. How would you get along if your vocabulary and access to syntactic nuances were cut by half? Could you express everything you wanted to express in the way you wanted to express it? Or would it be slightly off, slightly unclear? That would be terribly frustrating. You couldn’t show exactly how you were feeling, exactly what you wanted, exactly who you are. You’ve just lost a part of your identity. Of course, you still know who you are. You still know what you want and what you feel, but nobody

else does. Nobody knows the real you because you can't express it. That is how language is linked to identity. Without language, without a way to express it, your identity disappears.

To push the point even farther, that link between language and identity can be stretched into a tripartite in which culture becomes key. The addition of culture is where the lines become blurred. It is simpler to demonstrate that language and identity are linked than it is to suggest the same thing about language and culture. Because people take advantage of their use of language, they aren't likely to consider it an important part of their culture. Part of the problem is because culture is such an abstract concept, especially in America. As a country filled with many cultures, many of them several generations removed from their origins, it is nearly impossible to pinpoint a common culture. Outsiders have a view of American culture that Americans, for the most part, do not appreciate. Because of the racial make-up (and breakdown) of our country, it becomes messy to include all citizens under this blanket "American culture." It is a common complaint (that I hear often) among white American college students that there is no "white culture." There is, however, a "black culture." I would argue that what is considered as the black culture is no longer a racial construction, but has morphed into something that could more accurately be described as an urban or hip-hop culture. This culture includes a certain style of dress, a particular taste in music, a walk, and a talk. This is not black culture. It is merely a sub-section of black culture.

As previously discussed in relation to the degree of AAVE used, there is as much diversity within the black community as there is in any other racial community. To think that black culture is equivalent to hip-hop music and a certain style of dress is to ignore a

great deal of the African American population. The true black culture is rich with variety. It can't even be described in terms of what people do or do not do. Black culture is based on a history filled with strife and hardship. Those memories, whether experienced first-hand or handed down from generation to generation, are what create the division between the black American culture and the rest of American culture. Within the African American community, the acceptance of "white culture" equals the denial of "black culture." This translates into shame. To turn your back on your black culture means that you are ashamed of your history. And the first way to accept white culture/deny black culture is to start "talking white." Morgan describes "...[c]hoosing dialects or being aware of dialect choice is more difficult than, yet, as significant as, recognizing discourse styles. In spite of the complexity inherent in both situations, the African American community treats those who opt for one system and the comforts of linguistic respectability as an anathema" (2002:68).

The "talking white" phenomenon is not necessarily as intense as it seems. By claiming that African Americans look down on each other for using Standard English, it seems that I am saying that African Americans do not believe in educational success. This is, of course, not the case. "Talking white" is a complicated thing to explain<sup>8</sup>. There are many variables, such as who is speaking, to whom are they speaking, in front of whom are they speaking and about what are they speaking. For example, a person of any race whose native dialect is not AAVE should not speak AAVE to a person whose native dialect is AAVE (or at all, to be honest). It would not sound natural and would be condescending. A person who speaks AAVE and SAE should not speak SAE with

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<sup>8</sup> Although Rickford describes "talking white" by citing John Ogbu, the following examples and explanation are based solely on my personal observation as a member of the African American community and bidialectal speaker of AAVE and SAE.

someone or in front of someone who does not speak SAE. In the case of a conversation between two bidialectal speakers, the use of either dialect would be completely acceptable, unless they were in the presence of people who do not speak SAE. Interestingly, though, when two bidialectal speakers converse, their dialects tend to change depending on the topic. They codeswitch with each other. Speaking about business or work or school or something of the more formal nature, they are more likely to use their common SAE. If the topic turns to family or friends or anything more casual, or anything causing strong emotions, they will probably be speaking in AAVE. Both of those speakers know, however, that if someone enters the dynamic who only speaks AAVE, to halt the use of their SAE. The change is not necessarily voluntary. One does not have to make a decision of how to speak in order to speak in that manner. It is something that happens very naturally. The bidialectal speakers don't want the monodialectal speaker to feel left out or as if they are inferior. If a speaker of only SAE joins the conversation instead of a speaker of AAVE, the language will not necessarily be much different than it was without the SAE speaker involved. That is to say, speakers of SAE are not typically offended by the presence of AAVE in a casual situation. However, the bidialectal speakers must be cautious and aware of whom the monodialectal SAE speaker is. Linguistic prejudice could take hold of the SAE speaker and they could very well assume that these bidialectal speakers are uneducated or unintelligent. In the unfortunately very common case that the monodialectal SAE speaker attempts to use AAVE the situation could take one of two turns. The bidialectal speakers could write off the faux pas as innocent or they could take great offense and feel as if they (and their culture) are being mocked.

Basically, “talking white” refers to the native speakers of AAVE (whether or not they are also native speakers of SAE) using SAE in front of native speakers of AAVE (even if they have developed SAE non-natively). Sometimes the action is called out. It is often mentioned and people are ridiculed for “talking white.” Other times, the criticism is not made out loud, but the monodialectal speaker of AAVE could assume that the person “talking white” is a snob or believes him/herself to be superior.

As stated before, this phenomenon has no relation to belief in education. It is perfectly acceptable and even encouraged to use your best Standard English in the classroom. Parents want their children to have a good education. What they don’t want is for the child to begin to believe that the non-standard dialect and the non-standard culture are wrong.

This worry exists for good reason. Even nomenclature in this situation must be handled delicately. It isn’t correct to describe any aspect of AAVE as “incorrect,” “bad,” or “wrong.” They are simply different. The terms standard and non-standard are used to avoid the idea that one dialect is better than the other, but even those words cause AAVE to be stigmatized. Why is SAE standard? Is it just because the majority of the population speaks it? An important thing to notice in SAE is the A. American. Our standard dialect is the non-standard form of British English. But there are more people in America speaking SAE than there are in England speaking standard British English, so it can’t be just about numbers. It is all about prestige.

Of the forms of English, British English is the prestige language, meaning that it is the one that is considered most “correct,” most desirable, and most influential. British English also has dialects, the prestige being Received Standard Southern British English.



This dialect, in America would be regarded with great favor. Yet, even one of the lower class dialects would carry more prestige in America than would an American accent. There is just something about a British accent that Americans love and respect. American dialects, however, do not receive the same kind of appreciation from American listeners. The prestige dialect is SAE. It is the language of business and education. It is the language used by the President (on most occasions), by the news anchors and radio DJs, by the teachers, and by talking cats on kitty litter commercials. It is the dialect that receives attention and respect. One must consider, then, that those who do not speak SAE are not included in any of those aspects of daily life. They are not taken seriously and their opinions are not heard. How are the monodialectal speakers of AAVE to change their position in society if they can't get a little recognition? The responsibility rests upon the shoulders of speakers of SAE to learn to listen and the speakers of AAVE to speak up.

The first challenge is to teach people (both speakers of SAE and AAVE) to believe that AAVE is a legitimate dialect and not just incorrect SAE. This would help alleviate the prejudice that has built up around the vernacular over the past several years. Of course, the racial prejudice has existed for several hundred years, but linguistic prejudice is the way that people excuse discrimination. This linguistic discrimination has increased in the years since the Oakland case exposed people to the term "Ebonics." Therefore, the education of the masses regarding the linguistic validity of AAVE would be beneficial to the decrement of prejudice.

Then, it is necessary to train teachers to be sensitive and aware of the dialectal differences of their students. One of the most important differences between AAVE and

other American dialects, such as the Appalachian dialect, is that AAVE is not regionally based. There is not a city, nor a state where AAVE is spoken. It is spread, in large and small pockets, all throughout the United States. It is a logical conclusion that there could be students speaking AAVE in nearly every American school. And so, it is absolutely essential that teachers, no matter where they are located, have access to resources regarding AAVE and its intricacies. With a greater understanding of the dialect they will be more equipped to teach the standard. Baugh explains,

“Some students will pursue professions that are more or less demanding from a linguistic point of view, and educators who can illustrate the potential benefits of gaining communicative competence in Workplace English are far more likely to motivate students to learn Academic English, Standard English, or Workplace English as a secondary dialect than are those who reinforce and perpetuate the undemocratic impression that speakers of nonstandard dialects are less capable than their [native SAE speaking] counterparts” (2004:205-6).

Geneva Smitherman, in her 2000 publication Talkin that Talk, offers a five tiered pedagogical plan for teaching SAE. These steps are labeled “Examination of alternative lifestyles,” “Emphasis on reading,” “Emphasis on work,” “Intensive study of language and culture and both social and regional dialects,” and “Emphasis on content and message, logical development, use of supporting details and examples, analysis and arrangement, style, specificity, variation of word choice, sentence structure, originality, etc.” As the titles suggest, the goal is to build upon each step by adding more awareness of cultural difference and writing style. In the beginning, she proposes that it is necessary to accept, or at least understand, the variations of each culture. The next idea is to actually teach the standard. Smitherman offers bridge readers as a possible tool. The following focus is on oral work. She states that the oral tradition is a major part of African American culture and should be emphasized for the sake of the student.

Smitherman suggests that this can be done through debates, speeches, and discussions. The plan becomes more evolved with the fourth step. Smitherman proposes that the students learn about the dialects. Educating students on why and how they have a different native dialect than the majority population is a helpful step toward their motivation to learn. John Rickford describes a similar idea. He makes a list of possible videos to show to students to illustrate the use of vernaculars. He mentions My Fair Lady, a PBS special about English history, and a particular episode of Oprah from 1987 that focuses on Black English (Rickford 1999). The final action aims toward style. It is in this portion of education, after the technical issues have been assessed and handled, that the students learn how to use what they've gained in order to be more eloquent and expressive.

The next step is to teach SAE to the native speakers of AAVE. As previously stated, SAE is the prestige language and entering the higher education/business world without it is like going into battle without any sort of weapon. Access to the prestige language is necessary for success. Many linguists have devised plans for teaching SAE by incorporating AAVE as a bridge. In fact, in 1977 Simpkins, Holt and Simpkins created *Bridge* readers. They were printed in AAVE, a transitional variety, and Standard English. A trial use of the readers was carried out in Iowa with 540 middle school and high school students. The results were positive, but the *Bridge* readers did not become popular (Rickford 1999). Based on one passage from the readers, it seems to me that the problem was in the language used to express the standard dialect.

AAVE: He couldn't find no dictionary, so he split on down to the library...He ask the lady there 'bout books to help him learn some big words like redundancy.

Transition: He didn't have a dictionary so he went down to the public library...He asked (the librarian) for a book to help him.  
Standard English: He explained to the librarian that he wanted to increase his vocabulary.

The transition language is SAE. The Standard English is extremely formal. Most people do not talk that way in typical conversation. In addition to the problems with the SAE forms, the Bridge readers would not be of practical use to all speakers of AAVE. Considering that there are such high levels of variability amongst speakers, there is no uniform way to express AAVE in writing. The passage is likely to confuse students who do not use the aspects featured. The Bridge readers would only be able to be used with students who spoke the exact brand of AAVE that it uses, and that would be impossible to attempt.

In his book "Out of the Mouths of Slaves," John Baugh describes a game he devised to increase motivation to learn and practice SAE. The game is called Lyric Shuffle and, as the name suggests, involves music. Because children love popular music, they are highly motivated to participate. The students are presented with lyrics to a song. The first step is to create a corpus of words used in the lyrics. They then create new sentences, poems, or stories using the words that came from the song. Work can be done in groups or individually. By participating in this exercise, students are practicing both reading and writing. They are also being creative and using art (the music) in academic contexts.

These types of explicit instruction are helpful to young students to whom the difference between the dialects is not clear. Susan Geiger conducted a study to determine the age at which children using AAVE are able to discriminate between the standard and non-standard dialect (1976). The subjects were all African American children who were

tested in advance to assure that they were native monodialectal speakers of AAVE. They ranged in age from six to ten years. The experimenter read various sentence pairs to the children, who were instructed to point to a picture of who was most likely to utter the phrase. They were offered two choices of speakers. One picture was of a popular local TV news anchorman. The other was a photograph of children playing in school playground. All people in the photos were African American to avoid racial implications which would skew the results. It was hypothesized that the subjects would associate the SAE sentences with the anchorman and the AAVE sentences with the children in an informal setting. The results showed a trend indicating that younger subjects had more difficulty correctly matching the sentences with the appropriate speakers. The ten year olds were better able to discriminate between SAE and AAVE. There were variations in success based on the aspect of AAVE that was manipulated. For example, there was a greater rate of recognition of copula variation than there was of possessive variation. The children in this study had no previous bidialectal education. Geiger suggests, because the six to eight year olds were unable to adequately understand the differences, that “if language programs are begun before the late elementary school years, the paralinguistic and lexical features of social dialects should be introduced first” (1976:31).

Another way to assist the use of SAE in schools by African American students is peer tutoring. A study by Beverly Flanigan in 1991 determined that peer tutoring was successful for second language learners in elementary schools. In most cases that Flanigan examined the student tutors were also ESL students who happened to be more advanced or older than the children being tutored. Flanigan claims that the use of “teacher talk,” rather than “foreigner talk,” is helpful to the tutored students.

Flanigan's paper did not specifically mention speakers of non-standard English dialects, however, I believe that the findings are relevant. An article by Norma Spencer and Shirla McClain, which does focus on pedagogy tailored for speakers of non-standard English, suggests that "a key factor for NSE [Non-Standard English] speakers to acquire SE at the junior and senior high-school levels is peer approval" (1990:37). The use of peer tutoring ensures that everyone in the classroom is aware and accepting of the dialectal differences, which offer the NSE speakers a greater level of comfort while learning. However, while I do believe peer tutoring is a great idea, I do not believe that it is always the best idea. For example, a peer tutor would be relatively inappropriate in a classroom in which only one or two students spoke AAVE. The students would be singled-out as different. It seems to me that peer tutoring is best suited for classrooms in which all or most of the students are native AAVE speakers. The students who have more access to or ability with SAE could tutor students who have very little knowledge of the standard. In this situation, the student tutors understand how and why their peers need assistance and are better equipped to help without belittling.

The goal of these programs is to create bidialectal speakers of AAVE and SAE. The most important issue involved is to maintain the vernacular. Bidialectalism does not discourage the use of AAVE. Marcyliena Morgan describes "those who choose to accommodate the demands of non-African American society and use [SAE] exclusively risk losing community membership and...earning a pariah status that can lead to abuse" (2002:67-8). Morgan also explains the importance of using both varieties of English. "Though exclusive use of [SAE] is disparaged, it is considered odd if one cannot speak

it...Yet it is also odd if one cannot speak [AAVE] to some extent and without error too” (2002:68).

In 1983 at the NCTE Convention in Minneapolis Minnesota, James Sledd, from the English department at the University of Texas at Austin, presented a paper entitled, “After Bidialectalism, What?” Sledd offered a different definition of bidialectalism,

“Bidialectalism is the attempt to require black children in the schools to learn middle-class white English for use on all occasions which the middle-class white world considers worth its while to regulate, so that by mollifying their white masters young blacks may achieve the upward mobility in the mainstream culture which otherwise the whites will permanently deny them” (1983: 770).

Sledd, therefore, proposes that African Americans should not learn to use SAE, academically or otherwise, because it would be buying into the idea that it is white people, using SAE, that are controlling this country and will be controlling this country regardless of whatever efforts African Americans put into furthering their opportunities. On one hand, I agree with Sledd. My emotional, racially-conscious side tells me that this country will always be by and for “the white man” and to suggest that African American children accept “the white man’s” idea of what is right and correct is to admit inferiority. During the course of writing this paper, I’ve often considered the question of why SAE is the standard. And why should its use be required for economic success? There is no answer. I don’t know why. That is not what I’m trying to prove. I’m trying to solve a problem, not understand why there is a problem. And the only way to solve the problem is to take action. Sledd’s theory is inactive, and bordering on passive aggressive. The idea of refusing to learn and use the standard dialect because it would mean accepting some sort of defeat is petulant. It is much more powerful and productive to play “the white man’s” game and beat “him” at it. Sledd goes on to say “that although the

student's society equips him with one dialect, it demands that he should use another" (1983:772). By providing African American children with SAE (the dialect that is demanded) they are given the opportunity to be just as successful as the white children with whom they go to school. Regardless of other factors that may deter or hinder their success, linguistically they are prepared. What makes them even more potent, under the plan I suggest, these African Americans will grow up with pride in themselves and in their cultural heritage.

In addition to "talking white" there is also a stigmatized model of "acting white." Unfortunately, "acting white" partially means being successful in the realm of the majority. One will "act white" if they mingle and make friends with white people at their job. They are, in the eyes of some more critical members of the African American community, ignoring their culture and adopting that of the oppressor. Yet, that assumption is born from the idea that one would be ashamed of their black culture. Under this bidialectal plan, students are gaining the ability to manipulate their dialect to fit into the majority population, but without developing shame in their native dialect or culture. If the students are not told that they are wrong for speaking with a non-standard dialect, they are less likely to think that they are wrong. Presented with a dialectal dichotomy and the knowledge that one is used for academics and business and the other is used for informal situations, children will not assume that one is "better" than the other. Think of any other social linguistic dichotomy, for example, the simple difference between formal and informal speech (in SAE). You would not speak with your professor or boss the same way that you would speak with your best friend. And yet, no one thinks that the way they speak to their best friend is incorrect. It is just different.



Although I am a proponent for the preservation of AAVE and its associated culture, I would like to emphasize that there is a certain time and place where it should be used. Sledd's absolute lack of acceptance of SAE concerns me, in that he seems to suggest that SAE should only be used by those who know it natively. My interpretation of this is, because he states that college students should not be forced to use SAE, that colleges and universities accept the use of non-standard dialects. I believe very deeply in the importance and the power of maintaining the value of the vernacular, but I completely disagree with the suggestion that it has a place in academia. No other non-standard dialects are accepted. A paper written in Appalachian English would not receive a passing grade. A paper with considerable amounts of slang would also be questionable (depending on the department and the topic). It would be equally as inappropriate to expect a paper written in AAVE to receive equal consideration as a paper written in SAE.

If Sledd was correct in his proposal that SAE should not be used by African American students in universities, then it would be likely to assume that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) accept the vernacular from most of its students. While my knowledge of HBCUs is not extensive, I have the distinct impression that the integrity of education is no different than that of any other college or university. That is to say, African American students at those schools are using the same standard dialect as African American students, and students of all other races, at other American schools.

During the course of my research for this paper, I have read many articles and books by linguists on the topic of AAVE. Most of the authors are of African descent and claim to be native speakers of AAVE. Only one of these writers ever uses AAVE in the

content of the article as anything other than example. Geneva Smitherman often uses AAVE in her writings, which, for the most part, are composed in SAE. In her article "Language and African Americans," she uses two sentences in AAVE. While discussing the lack of support of single African American mothers in the *King* trial, Smitherman says, "These Sistas was shonuff underdogs, boldly and bravely taking on the whole Ann Arbor School District." One of the closing sentences of her papers reads, "Like, don't nobody in they right mind now argue that 'Black Dialect' is the 'last barrier to integration' (Green 1963), speech therapy for [AAVE] speakers no longer rules, the mainstream done crossed over to [AAVE] (to paraphrase Hip-Hop artist Jay-Z), and yes, *Oakland*, 1996, represents an advance over *King* 1979" (2004:195). She then moves fluidly back into SAE without so much as a footnote to explain the reason for her dialectal change. Although I do not wish to pass judgment on such an established linguist, her use of the vernacular surprised me and made me feel a little awkward. I am a native speaker of AAVE and understand its use and depth, and I still momentarily questioned her validity. Even though the inclusion of AAVE adds intrigue and creativity to her article, it seems to detract from the seriousness of her argument. I can only imagine the way it would be received by a reader in opposition of the use of AAVE at all. Aside from perceptions, the fact that she was the only writer to use AAVE in academic writings, and because it came as a shock to me, a reader who is very familiar with AAVE, implies that the vernacular really does not have much of a place in the academic world.

It is exactly because I do agree with Dr. Sledd's view of the bidialectal situation being forced upon minorities by the majority population that I think it is necessary to give in. His plan would only breed more animosity between the races and that would do

nothing to aid the advancement of African Americans in academics. By teaching students SAE while maintaining AAVE, an entire generation of bidialectal African Americans will exist. These people will have the advantage over all monodialectal speakers. The monodialectal speakers have access to only one community and whether it be the community of prestige or not, two is usually better than one, especially when one of the two is the community of prestige. According to Morgan “those who do not have a range of stylistic variation routinely experience linguistic insecurity because they cannot shift their variety according to the appropriate social context or topic” (2002:68). Linguistic insecurity is a term used by Labov and “is shown by the very wide range of stylistic variation used by lower-middle-class speakers; by their great fluctuation within a given stylistic context; by their conscious striving for correctness; and by their strong negative attitudes towards their native speech patterns” (Morgan 2002:68).

One might also then logically propose that it would be beneficial to teach AAVE to monodialectal speakers of SAE. They would then have the same advantages as the bidialectal speakers. However, this is impossible for two reasons. Teaching a child a non-standard dialect would be confusing. It is not the dialect they hear often, if ever, and it is not the dialect they are allowed to use in school or expected to use at home. Meanwhile, teaching an adult, who may have more use for access to the vernacular, is a moot point. Native status of fluency can never be achieved in a second language after the critical period for language learning is over. That critical period ends around the onset of puberty. Even if the learner becomes completely fluent in the second language, native speakers will always be able to tell that the learner is not native. This leads to the second reason teaching AAVE would not work. As previously stated, using AAVE when it is not

your native dialect can often be considered rude and condescending. It would therefore be pointless to teach it to an adult, because even if the adult had the best of intentions, those intentions would not be recognized by the native speakers with whom he tried to communicate.

Aside from the difficulties of teaching/learning AAVE, it isn't really necessary. Speakers of SAE don't require more advantages. They already have command of the prestige language. Bolstered with an acceptance and appreciation for the vernacular, native speakers of SAE will be sufficiently prepared for the linguistic demands of society. Provided that the bidialectal speakers are equally adept at using the standard as native SAE speakers, the possibility of ending linguistic prejudice as a mask for racial prejudice is very real. By using the "proper" language, minorities would be protected from would-be discriminators. Of course, prejudice would still exist, but the law forbids most other forms of discrimination. Bidialectal speakers would no longer be tagged as soon as they opened their mouths as being unintelligent or uneducated. They would be able to flow, with relative ease, between the two dialects depending on what the situation called for. "Those who have knowledge of both must not only consider two related and separate systems, but whether the use of one over the other signifies a negative value toward either" (Morgan 2002:68). The use of the two dialects is a careful, but seemingly natural, balance. This balance is crucial for the continued membership and acceptance of each community.

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