5

African American English

LISA GREEN

Editors' introduction

This chapter explores the nature of African American English, the single-most studied American English variety over the past three decades, and one that has also been at the center of public controversies involving education. Lisa Green begins by commenting on the profusion of labels this variety has attracted over the years, including "Negro Dialect," "Black Communications," and "African American Language" in addition to the "African American English" designation (AAE) she favors. While these terms vary to some extent according to changing social climates and ideologies, the point she emphasizes is that AAE is a linguistic system, with well-defined rules.

After a brief overview of alternative views about the origins of AAE (including the Substratist, Creolist, Anglicist, Founder principle, and Settler principle views), the chapter focuses on its present-day characteristics. While its vocabulary does include current slang (e.g., *off the chain* 'good, exciting, outstanding'), familiar mainly to preadolescents and young adults, it also includes general vocabulary known by AAE speakers of all age groups (e.g., *saditty* 'conceited, uppity'), and verbal markers like invariant *be* for a habitual or recurrent activity. Using a single complex sentence, *Didn't nobody ask me do I be late for class* ('Nobody asked me if I am usually late for class'), the chapter illustrates characteristic AAE syntactic features like negative inversion, multiple negation, and the formation of embedded yes/no questions.

Under "Sound patterns," this chapter discusses the restrictions on the occurrences of consonant clusters like *-ld* and *-st* (as in *wild west*) and the alternative realizations of English "th" as /t/, /d/, /f/, or /v/ in AAE. In each case, the processes are not haphazard but systematic and rule-governed. The author also refers to the rhythmic intonation that many believe is a key element in "sounding black," a potential source as well of negative "linguistic profiling." The chapter closes with a discussion of the representations of AAE in film, with examples and descriptions of some of its key grammatical features, like remote past BIN (*Dey BIN practicing for one hour*) and existential *it's* (*It's a fly messing with me*). You can learn more about these topics in chapters 15, 16, 21, and 23.

African American English, the linguistic variety spoken by many African Americans in the USA, is a system with specific rules for combining sounds to form words and words to form phrases and sentences. Although words in this linguistic system are identical in spelling to words in other varieties of English, some of them may have different meanings.

Among the many labels used to refer to this variety over the past forty years are "Negro dialect," "American Negro speech," "Black communications," "Black dialect," "Black street speech," "Black English," "Black Vernacular English," "African American language," "African American English," and "African American Vernacular English." One observation about these labels is that they coincide with the social climate, so the periods during which *Negro*, *Black*, or *African American* appeared in the label coincide with the periods during which the speakers were referred to as "Negro," "Black," or "African American." A second observation is that the names sometimes indicate something about the features used to characterize the variety, as with "Black communications" referring to communication patterns and features in the speech of black people. Along these same lines, "Black street speech" was first used by John Baugh as a label for "the nonstandard dialect that thrives within the black street culture," a variety "constantly fluctuating, as new terminology flows in and out of colloquial vogue" (Baugh 1983: 5–6). It is important to note that "street speech" was used to capture the speech of some groups of African Americans who participated in the street culture in urban areas, not necessarily the speech of those engaged in rackets and other types of illegal activities. (See chapter 21 of this volume.)

A number of terms in the list are compounds in which the first elements are adjectives referring to the speakers (e.g., Black, African American) and the second are nouns referring to the language – English – from which the general vocabulary of the variety is taken. These terms indicate that the characterizing features of the variety are uniquely related to the history, culture, and experiences of Blacks although the variety shares many features with mainstream and other varieties of English. Also, while some researchers have chosen to use "African American English," others agree on "African American Vernacular English." "Vernacular" is often used to underscore the point that what is being referred to is a spoken language with socially stigmatized linguistic patterns. As is clear from characterizations such as "African American language" and "Black communications," "English" is not always used in the label. Another case in point is "Ebonics," which is not on the list because that term was created to refer specifically to the language of people of African descent that had its roots in West African languages, and not as a reference to any dialect of English (Williams 1975: vi; see also chapter 16 of this volume). During the highly publicized Oakland, California school board case in 1996–97, Ebonics was used synonymously with the labels on the list. The general public and the media have latched onto the term, not always using it in accordance with its intended original meaning. It is clear that today the term "Ebonics" has been extended and is used interchangeably with the labels given at the beginning of this paragraph.

In this chapter and elsewhere in this book, African American English refers to a linguistic system of communication governed by well defined rules and used by some African Americans (though not all) across different geographical regions of the USA and across a full range of age groups. While AAE shares many features with mainstream varieties and other varieties of English, it also differs from them

in systematic ways. Because languages and dialects alike are rule governed and because there are differing views about the relationships between dialects and languages, this chapter does not take up the question whether AAE should be regarded as a language or as a dialect of English. Still, it is useful to note two other sociolinguistic situations in which the question has arisen. Consider that Mandarin and Cantonese share a common writing system and are considered to be dialects of Chinese despite the fact that they are not mutually intelligible. Monolingual speakers of Cantonese cannot understand spoken Mandarin, and monolingual speakers of Mandarin cannot understand Cantonese. By contrast, Serbo-Croat has separated into three *languages* (not dialects) called Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian. Addressing the question as to whether AAE is a dialect or a language would require analysis of definitions of language and dialect and of complex social situations that lie beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to say that, like all languages and like all dialects, AAE is a systematic means of communication (see chapter 16 of this volume.)

Views of the origins of AAE

A frequently asked question among professional linguists and others concerns the origins of AAE. How did it begin, and what are its historical relations? To answer such questions, historians of AAE must consult various kinds of information sources. They must compare data from other varieties of English (early American English, for example, and varieties in the African diaspora) and Caribbean creoles. A narrow definition of creole is a language that develops from a pidgin, and a pidgin is a simplified means of communication among speakers who do not share a common language. Unlike pidgins, creoles have native speakers and, as a consequence, a more extensive vocabulary and grammar than a pidgin (see chapter 7 of this volume). As a further means of determining characteristics of early AAE, linguistic historians analyze language data from the recorded speech of ex-slaves and investigate the sociohistorical conditions of slave life on plantations in the South to draw conclusions about factors and linguistic situations that may have affected the development of language among the slaves. Researchers do not always agree on the extent of the contribution to AAE made by African languages, creoles, and English, nor even on the structure of earlier varieties of AAE, and several hypotheses have been suggested about the origin of AAE:

- **Substratist view**: AAE is structurally similar to West African languages brought by slaves to the colonies, and it is only superficially similar to English. These West African languages are referred to as substrate languages because of the subordinate social status of their speakers with respect to social status of English speakers.
- **Creolist view**: AAE is related to and shares features with creoles such as Jamaican Creole and Gullah (spoken on coastal Carolinas and in Georgia). AAE may have started off as a creole given that slaves from

Africa and the West Indies brought creoles with them to the colonies (see chapter 8 of this volume).

- **Anglicist or dialectologist view**: AAE developed from an English base, which accounts for the characteristic patterns it shares with English varieties. AAE is thus more closely related to English than to creoles or West African languages.
- **Founder principle view**: The language of the founders of colonial America impacted the language of Africans who came to America and their offspring. These Africans and their descendants had the goal of adapting to the norms of the colonies.
- **Settler principle view**: AAE was created by African slaves but did not begin as a creole. Instead it developed from contact between Europeans and Africans in the seventeenth century.

As more documents such as ex-slave narratives and other texts are analyzed, the origin of AAE continues to be addressed.

The system of African American English

Whatever the earlier history of AAE, speakers today adhere to specific rules for putting sounds together to form words and for combining those words and phrases into sentences.

Words and phrases

In the minds of some Americans, the mention of AAE or of any other label listed above conjures up notions of bad grammar or slang. Slang of course makes up a part of AAE, as it makes up part of other varieties, but it is only a small part of the vocabulary of AAE. As is true of other varieties, AAE slang is limited largely to pre-adolescents and younger adults, for whom it serves particular social functions (see chapter 20 of this volume). Besides thousands and thousands of words that are shared with mainstream and other varieties of English, AAE contains unique vocabulary of its own. The mental dictionary of AAE speakers includes the information needed to use words and expressions grammatically: their pronunciation, part of speech, possible positions in a sentence, and meaning. The vocabulary of AAE can be viewed in three parts: words and phrases used by speakers in a range of age groups that cross generational boundaries; special verbal markers; and slang.

In the thumbnail sketch below, only incidental comments are given about the pronunciation of vocabulary items. Information about where in a sentence a word or phrase may occur is not given although a word's part of speech is noted.

General words and phrases

- *ashy* Adjective. Dry appearance of the skin. *That lotion is good for ashy skin.*

- *call _self* Verb. An observation that a person is not meeting perceived standards. *He call hisself cooking.*
- *get over* Verb. Take advantage of, succeed by using wit but little effort. *The students tried to get over on the teacher.*
- *saditty* Adjective. Conceited, uppity. *Having confidence is one thing, but she is downright saditty.*
- *mannish* Adjective. (1) Said of boys who are behaving inappropriately for their ages. (2) Mature. (1) *Those three boys try to hang with those older guys; they are so mannish.* (2) *Look at the way that little two year old holds his pencil and thinks about what to draw. He's just mannish.*
- *womanish* Adjective. (1) Said of girls who are behaving inappropriately for their ages. (2) Mature. (1) *She stays out much later than a twelve-year-old should. That's just womanish.* (2) *Your little niece is so womanish. Yesterday, I watched her while she entertained all the guests at her tea party.*

Verbal markers

- *be* Indicates a recurring activity or state. *Sometimes they be sitting in the conference room in the library.*
- *BIN* (pronounced with stress) Situates an activity or state in the remote past. *They BIN sitting in the conference room; they didn't just get there.*
- *dən* (pronounced without stress) Indicates a completed activity whose resultant state holds now. *He dən read all the* Little Bill *books.*

Current slang

- *already* (with stress on first syllable) Adverb. Expresses agreement.
   A: We should'a told the truth, not lied.
   B: AL-ready.
- *get my praise on* Verb. To praise or worship. *I'm going to early morning service where I can get my praise on.*
- *off the chain* Adjective. Good, exciting, outstanding. *That party was off the chain.*
- *whoadie* Noun. Comrade (New Orleans, Louisiana, usage). *What's up, whoadie?*

The first group of lexical items is included under "General words and phrases" because speakers of all age groups in different geographical areas use them. One of the items is *call _self*, in which pronouns such as *my*, *her*, *his* and *they* are attached to *_self*, depending on the subject. As in the example above, the subject is *he*, so the pronoun *his-* (an AAE variant of *him-* in *himself*) must be used with *_self*. Besides occurring before an *–ing* verb, *call _self* can occur before a noun or an adjective, as in *He call hisself a Louisiana chef and can't even make gumbo* and *She call herself friendly and won't even speak to people.* In the opinion of the observers, the persons do not meet the standards of a Louisiana chef or a friendly person.

The verbal markers *be* and *BIN* can precede verbs, adjectives, nouns, prepositions, and adverbs, but *dən* can precede only verbs. These verbal markers are similar in pronunciation to auxiliaries and verbs in other varieties of English, but they have meanings unique to AAE. Current slang is included in the final category. Note that information about the particular geographical area in which the lexical item is used is also given, as indicated in the entry for *whoadie*.

Sentence patterns

Many characteristic features of AAE are from that part of the linguistic system that puts words together to form sentences (technically called "syntax"). Speakers of AAE form sentences according to the rules of its syntax. The point can be illustrated with the negative sentence, *Didn't nobody ask me do I be late for class* ('Nobody asked me if I am usually late for class').

1.   Didn't nobody ask me [do I <u>be</u> late for class].

verbal marker *be*

negative inversion/multiple negation

embedded yes/no question

For explanatory purposes, this sentence can be analyzed as having three AAE features: inversion/multiple negation; embedded yes/no question; and habitual *be*. Speakers, of course, do not think in terms of features when they speak; they simply – and automatically – form sentences according to the rules of whatever variety they are speaking. Negative inversion/multiple negation involves a sentence that begins with more than one negative word – in this case, the auxiliary *didn't* and the indefinite pronoun *nobody*. This sentence type is labeled "negative inversion" because the two initial elements carry negative markers and occur in an inverted order – that is *didn't nobody ask* instead of *nobody didn't ask* (the auxiliary verb usually follows instead of precedes the subject). This is characteristic of AAE and of certain other varieties of English. In the sentence *They didn't leave*, the auxiliary *didn't* follows the subject *they*, but in sentence 1 the auxiliary and the subject appear in the reverse order – not *nobody didn't* but *didn't nobody*.

A second AAE feature of sentence 1 is the verbal marker *be*, which serves to give the part of the sentence enclosed in square brackets a habitual meaning, something like '*usually* late for class.' Habitual *be*, as it is called, always occurs in its bare form, never as *is*, *am*, or *are*. Habitual *be* is a major characteristic of AAE and helps distinguish it from other varieties of English. Sentences containing habitual *be* are often mistaken by speakers of other varieties of English as incorrect English; such speakers take habitual *be* as an incorrect form used instead of *is*, *am*, or *are*. Actually, however, the grammar of AAE does not permit habitual *be* in place of *is, am*, or *are* but allows speakers to use it only to indicate habitual meaning. To indicate present time, speakers of AAE must use a form of *is* or *are* (*She is running*) or no auxiliary verb at all (*She running*). With first-person

singular subjects, AAE grammar requires *am* (*I am running*), and **I running* would be ungrammatical. (The asterisk * indicates that the construction violates the rules of the variety in question.) It is interesting to note that hip hop artists use this habitual *be* in their lyrics. For example, it occurs in Black Star's "Thieves in the Night":

> A lot of cats who buy records are straight broke
> But my language universal they be reciting my quotes.

Also, as Alim explains in chapter 21, another *be* (he calls it *be₃*), which is used differently than habitual *be*, occurs in hip hop nation language contexts. The extent to which this other *be* is used in regular conversation in AAE, that is, in contexts other than hip hop nation language, is not clear.

The third feature, embedded inversion, occurs in the part of the sentence set off by square brackets. *Do I be late for class* looks like a question because the auxiliary *do* precedes the subject *I*, as it would in yes–no questions (*Do I tell lies?*). In AAE, this question can be set ("embedded" is the technical term) within a larger declarative sentence. By contrast, in mainstream and other varieties of English, speakers use *if* or *whether* when embedding such a sentence within a larger one and do not invert the auxiliary and subject: *Nobody asked me **if I am usually late for class***. The information that a speaker must know in order to form a sentence like example 1 can be summarized as follows:

- An inverted negated auxiliary and negated subject can introduce a negative declarative sentence.
- The verbal marker *be* indicates habitual meaning.
- A yes–no question set within a larger declarative sentence is not a request for a yes–no response and not a direct quote.

In AAE, *BIN* indicates that some activity or state started or happened in the remote past. Depending on context, remote past may mean fifteen years ago or a mere fifteen minutes ago.

2.	a.	Bruce BIN running.	'Bruce has been running for a long time'
	b.	Bruce BIN a teacher.	'Bruce has been a teacher for a long time'
	c.	Bruce BIN quiet.	'Bruce has been quiet for a long time'
	d.	Bruce BIN in the house.	'Bruce has been in the house for a long time'
	e.	Bruce BIN there.	'Bruce has been there for a long time'
	f.	Bruce BIN ran.	'Bruce ran a long time ago'

In 2a–2e, Bruce has been involved in an activity (running), or been a professional (a teacher), or had some attribute (quiet), or been in a place (the house, there) for a long time. In 2f, he is in the state of having run. Although the time period (how long the activity has been in progress or been completed) is not explicitly stated, listeners have an idea about the length of time the speaker has in mind. Perhaps Bruce has been a teacher for fifteen years, but perhaps he's been quiet for only fifteen minutes, which would be a long time for a good talkative teacher like Bruce. It is ungrammatical in AAE to use time phrases (e.g., *two hours ago*)

with *BIN* to indicate how long an activity has been completed, so speakers cannot say **Bruce BIN ran two hours ago* to mean 'Bruce ran two hours ago'; instead, speakers would have to say *Bruce ran two hours ago*.

In AAE, *dən* indicates that an event is completed or finished and in its resultant state.

3.   Bruce dən ran.   'Bruce has already run'

Dən is similar to the *done* in Southern varieties of English, but these forms differ in a number of ways. For instance, *dən* precedes only verbs (and *already*, as in *He dən already left*), but in at least one Southern White variety (that of Anniston, Alabama; see Feagin 1979: 132), 'done' precedes the adjective *dead*.

The verbal markers *be*, *BIN*, and *dən* pattern similarly in several ways. As an example, they share the characteristic of not allowing the contracted *not* (*n't*) to attach to them, as shown by the ungrammatical examples: **ben't*, **BIN't*, **dən't*. As a result, there must be another way of negating sentences with these markers, such as *They be putting too much gumbo in that pot*. The corresponding negative construction cannot be **They ben't putting too much gumbo in that pot* because *n't* cannot attach to *be*. The grammatical negative sentence is *They don't be putting too much gumbo in that pot*, in which *don't* is the negated form. Likewise the corresponding negative sentences for *Bruce BIN eating too much gumbo* and *Bruce dən ate that gumbo* must be *Bruce ain't BIN eating too much gumbo* and *Bruce ain't dən ate that gumbo*. Because these markers cannot be negated by attaching *n't* to them, elements such as *don't* and *ain't* must be used in the corresponding negative constructions. Speakers use these markers correctly in positive and negative sentences, evidence that they understand the rules for using them. For example, speakers know that if they use *be*, *BIN*, and *dən* in negative contexts, they cannot simply add *n't* to them. They follow the rule that says it is necessary to negate them by using separate auxiliaries *don't* and *ain't*.

Many of these distinctive features are presented in table 5-1.

Table 5-1 *Examples of AAE linguistic patterns*

AAE sentence	General description	Mainstream English gloss
I never be looking for that.	grammatical verbal marker *be* construction	'I usually never look for that'
*I be never looking for that.	ungrammatical because verbal marker *be* precedes the adverb *never*	
When I change the oil, I like to see how much it be dən burned.	verbal marker consisting of habitual *be* and resultant state *dən* (habitual resultant state)	Literally: 'When I change the oil, I like to see how much oil the truck has burned'
They'a be dən got older.	verbal marker consisting of *be* and *dən* (future resultant state)	'They will have gotten older'

(*cont.*)

Table 5-1 *(cont.)*

AAE sentence	General description	Mainstream English gloss
They BIN practicing for one hour.	Remote past *BIN* can occur with a time phrase if the phrase (e.g., *one hour*) indicates how long the practices usually last. This sentence cannot mean that they started practicing one hour ago. *BIN* refers to a long time, NOT to one hour, the length of time the practices usually last.	'They have been practicing for one hour stretches for a long time'
Dey got a fly messing with me.	*Dey got* can introduce a sentence meaning something exists.	'There is a fly bothering me/A fly is bothering me'
It's a fly messing with me.	*It's* can introduce a sentence saying something exists.	'There is a fly bothering me/A fly is bothering me'
I had got strep throat on the last day of school.	*Had* in some contexts (often when relaying an account of an event) can indicate past tense.	'I got strep throat on the last day of school'
I can show you some of the stuff we tesses them on.	*Tes* (vs. 'test') occurs in AAE due to the restrictions on final *st*. Once *tes* is produced, when *s* is added to it, it behaves like the plural *mess*. The form *s* (or *es*, depending on how the word ends) can indicate a habitual meaning, as in 'usually test them on.' In mainstream English, this would be similar to saying, *He tests them on reading comprehension*. In AAE, the *s* form is not used only with singular subjects (as *we* in the example is plural).	'I can show you some of the stuff we usually test them on'
She steady talking.	The form of *is* does not have to occur after the subject *she*. But if speakers stress the sentence as in *She IS steady talking*, *is* would probably be pronounced. This *is* differs from verbal marker *be*, as in *She be steady talking*, which must be present to indicate the habitual meaning associated with it. *Steady* means doing something nonstop or consistently.	'She is talking nonstop'
She come telling me it was hot.	*Come*, a marker that precedes verbs ending in *–ing*, is used to indicate speaker indignation.	'She had the nerve/audacity to tell me it was hot'

Sound patterns

One well-known characteristic of the AAE pronunciation system is the restriction on the occurrence of certain combinations of consonant sounds, especially at the ends of words. The restriction is placed on the following:

pt (as in *kept*)   st (as in *best*)   ld (as in *cold*)
ct (as in *act*)   ft (as in *left*)   nd (as in *spend*)

As a result, words that in other varieties of English end in *st* or *nd*, for example, may be produced in AAE as though they ended in *s* or *n*, respectively. In AAE, *spend* would be pronounced *spen*, *left* as *lef*, and *mask* as *mass*. The restriction AAE places on consonant combinations such as *nd*, *ft*, and *sk* is not placed on *nt* or *nk*. That means that a word like *mint*, which ends in *nt* is not pronounced as *min*, nor is *think*, which ends in *nk* (but sounds more like *ngk*), pronounced as *thin* or *thing*. They are pronounced as *mint* and *think*, respectively, with final consonant clusters. Auxiliaries like *can't*, *won't*, and *ain't* that end in *n't* behave slightly differently than main verbs and nouns that end in *nt* (e.g., *went* and *mint*). They are often pronounced without the full *n't*, and the vowels in the words are nasalized. This means that instead of producing the final *n't*, speakers end the words by beginning to produce the nasal sound *n*. This results in the production of a nasalized vowel as opposed to the full final *n't*, for example [dõ] for *don't*.

AAE also imposes restrictions on some consonant combinations in the middle of words. The combination *nd* occurs at the end of *spend* but in the middle of *spending* and *kindness*. When the combination occurs in the middle of the word and precedes a suffix that begins with a consonant (as with *-ness* in *kindness*), only the first consonant of the *nd* combination is usually pronounced. *Kindness* is more likely to be pronounced *kiness* (without the *d*), a pronunciation also used in some speech situations and environments by speakers of other varieties of English, including mainstream English. When the consonant combination is in the middle of the word and precedes a suffix that begins with a vowel (as with *-able* in *acceptable*), both consonants are usually pronounced. When the consonant combination precedes other suffixes that begin with a vowel, however, it may not be pronounced, as with the verbs *spening* ('spending') and *builing* ('building'). Although the *nd* and *ld* combinations precede the *–ing* suffix, which begins with a vowel, only the first consonant (*n* or *l*) in the combination may be pronounced. The vowel-initial suffix *–ing* is a special case because the clusters preceding it may be pronounced (as in *spending*), or only the first consonant in the cluster may be pronounced (as in *spening*). This does not seem to be the case with the vowel-initial suffix *–able*, in that the clusters preceding it are generally always pronounced (*acceptable*, not **accepable*). Speakers of AAE follow regular established patterns in producing and combining sounds; the grammar of AAE – like the grammar of every other language variety – does not permit sounds to be left off words haphazardly.

In general, when speakers produce and hear speech sounds, they do not think of the processes used to make them or the descriptive properties of the sounds.

When they produce the sounds represented as *t*, *d*, *f*, and *v*, they do not realize the similarities to the sounds represented by *th*. In some instances, speakers of AAE produce a *t*, *d*, *f*, or *v* sound in words in which the *th* sound occurs in mainstream varieties of English. For instance, the pronunciations ***d***ese, wi***t***/wi***f***, bir***f***day, ba***f***, and smoo***v*** occur often in AAE, while ***th***ese, wi***th***, bir***th***day, ba***th***, and smoo***th*** occur in mainstream varieties. As with the sound patterns in all language varieties, the patterns in AAE are completely systematic. The *d* sound occurs at the beginning of a word (as in *dese* 'these') and the *t* sound at the end (as in *wit* 'with'). The *f* sound occurs in the middle (as in *birfday* 'birthday') and at the end (as in *baf* 'bath'), and the *v* sound occurs at the end (as in *smoov* 'smooth'). The *v* sound can also be pronounced in the middle of words in environments in which *th* occurs between vowels, as in *muver* 'mother' and *bruver* 'brother.' The grammar of AAE does not permit haphazard substitution of the sounds *t*, *d*, *f*, or *v* for the *th* sound. Whether speakers of AAE pronounce *t*, *d*, *f*, or v depends on the special properties of the corresponding *th* sound and its position in the word.

In mainstream varieties of English and in AAE, the *th* spelling represents two different pronunciations – the one in *thigh* and *bath* and the one in *thy* and *bathe*. Both *th* sounds are produced with the tongue between the teeth, but to produce the one in *these* and *bathe* the vocal cords vibrate and cause what is technically called "voicing." By contrast, to produce the *th* sound of *bath* or *birthday* the vocal cords do not vibrate – the sound is not voiced. The *th* sound in *these* and *smooth* is said to be voiced. The *th* sound in *bath* and *birthday* is said to be voiceless.

The *t* and *f* sounds are similar to the voiceless *th* sound (*with*, *birthday*) in that they too are made without vibration of the vocal cords – *t* and *f* are not voiced sounds. On the other hand, the *d* and *v* sounds are similar to the voiced *th* sound (*these*, *bathe*) in that they are made with vibration of the vocal cords – *d* and *v* are voiced sounds. The generalization is this: AAE speakers produce *t* and *f* (voiceless sounds) in environments where voiceless *th* occurs in other varieties of English but produce *d* and *v* (voiced sounds) in environments where voiced *th* occurs in other varieties of English. Also, AAE speakers often produce the *d* sound at the beginning of a word where voiced *th* occurs in other varieties of English (cf. *dese* and *these*), but they usually produce voiceless *th* sounds at the beginning of all words in which it occurs in other varieties of English. That is, along with speakers of most other varieties of English, AAE speakers produce the *th* sound in words like *thistle*, *think*, and *thirty*. Unlike speakers of varieties of Irish English and some speakers of New York City English, AAE speakers generally do not say *tistle*, *tink*, and *tirty*.

The preceding examples illustrate some of the sound patterns of AAE that affect individual consonants, but some patterns also affect syllables, words, phrases, and sentences. When listeners observe that African Americans have a rhythmic way of speaking, they may be commenting indirectly about sounds and rhythms affecting syllables, words, phrases, and sentences. A phrase commonly used to

characterize the speech of some African Americans is "sounding Black." It is not quite clear which features lead listeners to conclude that a speaker "sounds black," but some listeners feel that they can make this determination. This is not a new issue. In 1972 in a paper entitled "'Sounding' Black or 'Sounding' White," Rickford raised the question of what specific features were used to identify black and white speech and found the more varied intonation of black speech most significant. More recently, the issue of identifying a person's race on the basis of voice quality or speech patterns has been addressed in the media. In 1995, during a widely publicized court case, one of the attorneys was accused of suggesting that race could be determined by one's voice. The following excerpt (Margolick 1995) is from *The New York Times* article reporting the relevant portion of the trial:

> But on cross examination, Christopher A. Darden, a prosecutor, contended that in statements to friends, Mr. Heidstra had identified the two people as a young white man and an older black one, and even identified Mr. Simpson as one of the speakers. "I know it was O.J. It had to be him," Mr. Darden said Mr. Heidstra told a friend.
>
> Mr. Heidstra dismissed the suggestion that he had identified the speakers by their age or race as "absurd," insisting he could not have told whether they were "white or brown or yellow." When Mr. Darden pushed him, Mr. Cochran rose angrily to object . . .
>
> Simply by suggesting that someone's race can be gleaned from the sound and timbre of his voice, Mr. Darden opened up once more the volcanic issue of race . . .

John Baugh is conducting research on linguistic profiling and has found that listeners respond unfavorably to him when he uses his "black voice" (see Baugh 1999). In a National Public Radio (NPR) interview (Smith 2001), Baugh explained that he had conducted a series of experiments that involved making telephone calls to inquire about the availability of apartments. As he produced the following introductory statement, he modified the sound of his voice and manner of speaking: "Hello, I'm calling about the apartment you have advertised in the paper." Tovia Smith, the NPR reporter, expanded on Baugh's comments about his experiment:

> After more than a hundred calls, Baugh found that his black voice got less than half as many calls back as his white voice. His more recent study suggests that more than 80 percent of people correctly infer a person's race just from hearing them count to 20. In real conversation, it's even easier to tell. Shawna Smith, of the National Fair Housing Alliance, says she sees linguistic profiling all the time in housing, insurance, mortgages and employment.

More and more research is being conducted on rhythmic and intonational patterns of AAE to determine the extent to which speakers use such patterns uniquely as well as the role they play in identifying a person's race.

Representations of AAE in film

While questions about the validity of AAE, that is, whether it follows set rules or exists at all, are addressed frequently in educational and linguistic research, there is no question that certain linguistic patterns are associated with the speech of African Americans. In this section, we consider the representation of language used by African American characters in film. (For discussion of the representation of African American language in fiction and other literary genres, see chapter 23 of this volume.)

One strategy filmmakers employ to represent blackness could be called "figurative blackface," which differs from literal blackface in minstrelsy. In minstrel shows, actors literally went through a process of making up their faces with black paint and their lips with red lipstick. They also used exaggerated language and body features such as bulging lips and eyes that matched the blackened faces to create grotesque characters.

Figurative blackface and minstrel devices are used in the 1998 film *Bulworth*, starring Warren Beatty and Halle Berry. The film is the story of Bulworth, a white senator, who is transformed into a politician concerned about the plight of people in inner cities. After being introduced to inner city life by a streetwise African American girl named Nina, Bulworth is taken in by the "culture." He enjoys the nightclub environment with Nina, dancing, smoking marijuana, eating barbecued ribs, and acting as a disc jockey. It appears that the denouement of the experience is his rhyming. In searching for Nina in the many rooms of the nightclub, he chants:

> What I really want to know is where did little Nina go
> I'm looking here, I'm looking there, but I can't find her anywhere
> Nina, Nina, has anybody seen her?

At the point when he sees her, he sings, "Nina, Nina, where you bina?" In this scene, Bulworth puts on figurative blackface as a means of simulating "black culture." The film appears to be a modern day minstrel show in which Bulworth uses minstrel devices such as cool talk, rhyming, body language, and types of clothing that are intended to mirror the image of black males in the inner city.

Figurative blackface is used in *Bulworth*, but figurative blackface and literal blacking up occur in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*, a 2000 film about racism in television. Throughout the film, the white senior vice president of the entertainment division of a television network puts on figurative blackface as he uses current slang and "keeps it real" in other ways. The literal blacking up occurs in *Mantan: the New Millennium Minstrel Show*, the minstrel television show within *Bamboozled*. The stars of *Mantan* are Mantan and his dumb-witted sidekick Sleep n Eat. (See Green 2002 for more discussion of blackface in *Bamboozled*.)

Sentence patterns can also be used as markers of black images in film. The verbal marker *be* that indicates habitual recurrences is used in the 1994 film *Fresh*, about the coming of age of a streetwise African American adolescent and

his struggles in the inner city. In addition to drugs and violence, language is used to create images of the urban ghetto. In the film, African American characters of all age groups use features associated with AAE. The verbal marker *be* seems to be strongly associated with the language of adolescent males, and it occurs often in the speech of African American and Latino characters (especially adolescent and teenage males), as in these examples:

4.   Why you come home so late? You know Aunt Frances **be** getting
           worried when you come home so late.
        All his phones **be** tapped, man.
        My grandma **be** cooking at home.
        But I know she still **be** going back there sometime for like her
           clothes and stuff she **be** keeping over there.

These *be* constructions communicate that an activity (getting worried, cooking at home, keeping stuff over there) happens from time to time or that something is in a certain state (phones are tapped) from time to time. They are used in line with the meaning and rules specified for the marker in AAE. Other uses of this *be* are ungrammatical, however, as with these examples from *Fresh*:

5. a.   **Michael**: I don't want nobody **be** touching this board.
         Michael's female cousin: You don't own this house. You ain't
         hardly ever be here, so you don't tell us what to do.
  b.   Nikki say James tired of he **be** so small time, wanna be moving
         bigger.

The line spoken by Michael in 5a would be a grammatical sentence of AAE if *to* were inserted before *be* (*I don't want nobody **to be** touching this board*), and 5b would be grammatical with *being* instead of *he be* (*James say he tired of **being** so small time*). Film viewers have an idea of the meaning intended by these lines, but the actual utterances are ungrammatical: they do not follow the syntactic rules of AAE. The recurrence of *be* in the film suggests how strongly the marker is associated with the inner city life and language the film depicts, although ungrammatical uses like those in (5) perhaps indicate that the screenwriter is not fully aware of AAE's regularities and restrictions.

    Habitual *be* and other AAE patterns are used by characters in *The Best Man*. The representation of AAE in this 1999 film is interesting, especially compared to the representation in *Fresh*, in which habitual *be* is closely connected to inner city life. In *The Best Man*, habitual *be* is not used by all the African American male young adult characters. Lance and Quentin, the more skilled language users, who also happen to be college educated, use the marker.

    Over the past forty years, research on AAE has been addressed from a number of angles, including historical origins, rules of use, expressive language use, and education. Researchers are continuing to study this linguistic variety by considering its representation in literature, film, and hip hop. One important point is that AAE is characterized by well-defined rules. (See Green 2002 for further

commentary on the rules of use of AAE.) The sentences and general descriptions in the table 5-1 are examples of the linguistic patterns that occur in AAE.

Acknowledgments

Suggestions for further reading and exploration

Wolfram and Thomas (2002) provide a general history of African American English. Rickford (1998), Rickford and Rickford (2000), and Edwards and Winford (1991) discuss the creolist view. Dunn (1976) and DeBose and Faraclas (1993) are good sources for the substratist view. For the Anglicist or dialectologist view, see Poplack (2000); for the founder principle view Mufwene (2000); for the settler principle view Winford (1997, 1998). Good sources of information about intonation in AAE are Foreman (1999), Green (2002), and Tarone (1973). Note also the representation of AAE in films such as *The Brothers*, *Do the Right Thing*, *Imitation of Life*, and *Set it Off*, some of which have explicit content.

References

Bamboozled. 2000. New Line Productions, Inc.

Baugh, John. 1983. *Black Street Speech: its History, Structure, and Survival*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Baugh, John. 1999. "Linguistic Perceptions in Black and White: Racial Identification Based on Speech." In Baugh's *Out of the Mouths of Slaves: African American Language and Educational Malpractice*. Austin: University of Texas Press. Pp. 135–47.

The Best Man. 1999. Universal Pictures.

Bulworth. 1998. Twentieth Century Fox.

DeBose, Charles and Nicholas Faraclas. 1993. "An Africanist Approach to the Linguistic Study of Black English: Getting to the Roots of the Tense–Aspect–Modality and Copula Systems in Afro-American." In *Africanisms in Afro-American Language Varieties*, ed. Salikoko S. Mufwene. Athens: University of Georgia Press. Pp. 364–87.

Dunn, Ernest F. 1976. "Black-Southern White Dialect Controversy." In *Black English: a Seminar*, eds. Deborah S. Harrison and Tom Trabasso. Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. Pp. 105–22.

Edwards, Walter and Donald Winford, eds. 1991. *Verb Phrase Patterns in Black English and Creole*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Feagin, Crawford. 1979. *Variation and Change in Alabama English: a Sociolinguistic Study of the White Community*. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press.

Foreman, Christina G. 1999. "Identification of African American English Dialect from Prosodic Cues." In *Salsa VII, Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Symposium about Language and Society*, eds. Nisha Merchant Goss, Amanda Doran, and Anastasia Coles. *Texas Linguistic Forum* 43: 57–66.

Fresh. 1994. Miramax Films.

Green, Lisa. 2002. *African American English: a Linguistic Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Margolick, David. 1995. "Simpson Witness Saw a White Car," *The New York Times*, July 13.

Mufwene, Salikoko S. 2000. "Some Sociohistorical Inferences about the Development of African American English." In Poplack, ed. Pp. 233–63.

Poplack, Shana, ed. 2000. *The English History of African American English*. New York: Blackwell.

Rickford, John R. 1972. "'Sounding' Black or 'Sounding' White: a Preliminary Acoustic Investigation of a Folk-Hypothesis," ms., University of Pennsylvania.

1998. "The Creole Origin of African American Vernacular English: Evidence from Copula Absence." In *African American English: Structure, History and Use*, eds. Salikoko S. Mufwene, John R. Rickford, Guy Bailey, and John Baugh. New York: Routledge. Pp. 154–200.

Rickford, John R. and Russell J. Rickford. 2000. *Spoken Soul: the Story of Black English*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Smith, Tovia. 2001. "Scientific Research that's Being Used to Support Claims of Linguistic Profiling." National Public Radio, Morning Edition. September 5, 2001.

Tarone, Elaine. 1973. "Aspects of Intonation in Black English," *American Speech* 48: 29–36.

Williams, Robert, ed. 1975. *Ebonics: the True Language of Black Folks*. St. Louis: Institute of Black Studies.

Winford, Donald. 1997. "On the Origins of African American English – a Creolist Perspective Part I: The Sociohistorical Background," *Diachronica* 14: 305–44.

1998. "On the Origins of African American English – a Creolist Perspective Part II: Linguistic Features," *Diachronica* 15: 99–154.

Wolfram, Walt and Erik Thomas. 2002. *The Development of African American English: Evidence from an Isolated Community*. Malden MA: Blackwell.

Discography

Black Star. 1997. "Thieves in the Night." Rawkus.