

Language in Society

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American English

Dialects and Variation

Second Edition

*Walt Wolfram
and
Natalie Schilling-Estes*

2006

[first ed. 1998]

 **Blackwell
Publishing**

and ancestral language tradition, (3) history and function, and (4) Indian English in the classroom. It is the most comprehensive overview of Native American English varieties currently available.

Santa Ana, Otto (1993) Chicano English and the Chicano language setting. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 15: 1–35. This article presents an overview of some of the traits of Chicano English as well as the social settings contextualizing this variety.

Schneider, Edgar W., Bernd Kortmann, Kate Burridge, Rajend Mesthrie, and Clive Upton (eds.) (2004), *A Handbook of Varieties of English*, vol. 1: *Phonology*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter; and Kortmann, Bernd, Edgar W. Schneider, Kate Burridge, Rajend Mesthrie, and Clive Upton (eds.) (2004), *A Handbook of Varieties of English*, vol. 2: *Morphology and Syntax*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

(The collections of essays in the companion volumes above contain the most comprehensive descriptions of social and ethnic varieties described in this chapter and the next, including Chicano English, Cajun English, African American English, and other social and ethnic dialects.)

Wolfram, Walt, Clare Dannenberg, Stanley Knick, and Linda Oxendine (2002) *Fine in the World: Lumbee Language in Time and Place*. Raleigh: North Carolina State Humanities Extension/Publications. This book on Lumbee language for general audiences describes the development and current status of the unique English variety spoken by the largest Native American group east of the Mississippi River. It is an extraordinary story of linguistic adaptation and cultural resolve.

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African American English

AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH (AAE), or more popularly EBONICS, is the paradigm case of ethnicity-based language diversity. It is also the best known and most subject to controversy of any American English dialect. Even its name has become a contentious issue. Among the labels attached to this variety over the past four decades have been Negro Dialect, Non-standard Negro English, Black English, Vernacular Black English, Afro-American English, Ebonics, African American (Vernacular) English, and African American Language. Though it is now popularly referred to as Ebonics, most linguists prefer not to use this label. The term “Ebonics” tends to evoke strong emotional reactions and has unfortunately given license to racist parodies of various types in recent years, so most linguists prefer to use more neutral references like African American English, African American Vernacular English, or African American Language.

The study of AAE dwarfs the study of other social and regional varieties, with more than five times as many publications devoted to it than to any other American English dialect in the past several decades (Schneider 1996). Furthermore, AAE has drawn widespread media attention and public discussion on a number of occasions in the relatively brief history of social dialectology. In the late 1960s, the deficit-difference language controversy discussed in chapter 1 received extensive public discussion, while in the late 1970s a court case over the role of dialect in reading in Ann Arbor, Michigan, received national attention. In the 1990s, the so-called Oakland Ebonics controversy erupted when the Oakland Unified School District Board of Education passed a resolution affirming the legitimacy of AAE as a language system. This situation even resulted in a United States Senate subcommittee hearing on the status of Ebonics in American education. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, several high-profile court cases have featured “linguistic profiling,” that is, discrimination based on ethnic voice identification. Speakers identified over the telephone as African American were told that advertised apartment vacancies were filled when they

inquired about their availability, whereas their White-sounding counterparts were invited to view the vacant apartments. Such public discussions and disagreements certainly testify to the persistent sociopolitical and educational controversy associated with this variety.

Though linguists naturally affirm the fundamental linguistic integrity of AAE, it is essential to understand how the social valuation of language diversity mirrors the racial inequalities that have characterized American society since the involuntary transportation of Africans to the American continent. Attitudes toward AAE are symbolic of the evaluation of behavior perceived to be associated with African Americans. As Sally Johnson (2001: 599) notes, "It is not language *per se*, but its power to function as a 'proxy' for wider social issues which fans the flames of public disputes over language." AAE continues to be controversial because race and ethnicity in American society remain highly contentious and politically sensitive. No language variety in American society has ever been surrounded by more heated debate, and the controversy does not appear to be subsiding.

In discussing AAE, it is still necessary to start with a disclaimer about language and race. There is no foundation for maintaining that there is a physiological or genetic basis for the kinds of language differences shown by some Americans of African descent. Dialectologists point to cases in which African Americans raised in European American communities talk no differently than their European American peers; conversely, European Americans who learn their language from, and interact primarily with, AAE speakers will adopt AAE features. Yet myths about the physical basis of AAE persist, so that there is a continuing need to confront and debunk claims about language and race. In our ensuing discussion, it should be fully understood that labels such as African American English and European American English refer to socially constructed, ethnolinguistic entities rather than genetically determined language varieties.

There are several major issues related to AAE: (1) the relation of vernacular varieties of AAE to comparable European American vernacular varieties; (2) the origin and early development of AAE; and (3) the nature of language change currently taking place in AAE, including its development into a widely recognized symbol of cultural identity. To a greater or lesser extent, these are the same issues that apply to any sociolinguistic discussion of ethnolinguistic variation, but there are unique controversies associated with AAE because of its particular history and the social roles assigned to African Americans in American society. There are also definitional issues surrounding AAE. For example, are all people of African descent in the US considered to be speakers of AAE, or only those whose native language variety is a vernacular version of AAE that is considered to be different from standard English? Conversely, can people of other ethnicities be considered to be speakers of AAE if they regularly use many or all of the core features of this

variety and are more closely integrated into African American culture than European American or other cultures? Such definitional issues defy easy resolution and involve sociocultural and political considerations every bit as much – indeed, more so – than linguistic ones. We will not discuss them in great detail in this chapter but will instead use the working definition of AAE initially set forth in chapter 1: the language variety spoken by many people of African descent in the US and associated with African American ethnic identity and cultural heritage.

7.1 The Status of European American and African American Vernaculars

In its simplest form, the question of Black-White speech relations can be reduced to a question of whether vernacular African American and European American varieties share the same set of linguistic structures. Are there unique features that distinguish vernacular varieties of AAE from comparable European American vernacular varieties in the same regional setting, and if so, what are they?

The matter of the linguistic distinctiveness of speakers of AAE is both simple and complex. Given a randomly selected set of audio recordings whose content contains no culturally identifying material, listeners can accurately identify African American speakers approximately 80 percent of the time. Determining the basis of this identification, however, is not nearly as straightforward as making the categorizations. Linguistically, different levels of language organization may be involved, ranging from minute segmental and suprasegmental phonetic details to generalized discourse strategies and conversational routines. Socially, factors such as listeners' social status, region, and level of education affect their perceptions of ethnic identity, as do interactional factors such as speakers' co-conversationalists and the speech setting. All of these factors enter into ethnic identification based on language, and manipulating the array of linguistic, social, and personal variables in identification experiments greatly affects the likelihood of accurate ethnic identification. Thus, the ethnicity of some African American speakers in certain contexts may be identified correctly less than 5 percent of the time while other speakers are correctly identified more than 95 percent of the time (Thomas and Reaser 2004).

Region and status, along with various other sociocultural attributes, are also important factors in considering structural similarities and differences in African American and European American vernacular varieties. Because AAE is historically rooted in a Southern-based, rural working-class variety, researchers often seek to answer questions of dialectal uniqueness by

comparing vernacular AAE with rural Southern European American vernacular varieties. At the same time, the development of AAE into a recognized sociocultural variety in the twentieth century became strongly associated with its use in urban areas in the North.

All dialectologists agree that some features of vernacular AAE are distinct from surrounding European American varieties in Northern urban contexts, but the ethnic uniqueness of vernacular AAE in Southern contexts is more debatable. Though the issue of African American and European American speech relations is still not totally resolved after several decades of heated debate, some agreement is emerging. The following is a partial list of the phonological and grammatical features that are most likely to differentiate vernacular varieties of AAE from comparable European American vernacular varieties. More extensive lists of the dialect traits of AAE (Rickford 1999: 3–14; Green 2002) may include dozens of phonological and grammatical structures, though many of them are shared to some extent with non-African American vernacular varieties. In addition, most likely there are important features on other linguistic levels, including prosodic and pragmatic features, but these have not yet been studied to nearly the same extent as phonological and morphosyntactic ones.

Some distinguishing features of vernacular African American English

habitual *be* for habitual or intermittent activity

- e.g. *Sometimes my ears be itching.*
She don't usually be there.

absence of copula for contracted forms of *is* and *are*

- e.g. *She nice.*
They acting all strange.

present tense, third-person *-s* absence

- e.g. *she walk* for *she walks*
she raise for *she raises*

possessive *-s* absence

- e.g. *man_ hat* for *man's hat*
Jack_ car for *Jack's car*

general plural *-s* absence

- e.g. *a lot of time* for *a lot of times*
some dog for *some dogs*

remote time stressed *béen* to mark a state or action that began a long time ago and is still relevant

- e.g. *You béen paid your dues a long time ago.*
I béen known him a long time.

simple past tense *had* + verb

- e.g. *They had went outside and then they had messed up the yard.*
Yesterday, she had fixed the bike and had rode it to school.

ain't for *didn't*

- e.g. *He ain't go there yesterday.*
He ain't do it.

reduction of final consonant clusters when followed by a word beginning with a vowel

- e.g. *lif' up* for *lift up*
bus' up for *bust up*

skr for *str* initial clusters

- e.g. *skreet* for *street*
skraight for *straight*

Use of [f] and [v] for final *th*

- e.g. *toof* for *tooth*
smoov for *smooth*

Even with this restricted list, there are important qualifications. In some cases, it is a particular aspect of the phonological or grammatical pattern rather than the general rule that is unique to AAE. For example, consonant cluster reduction is widespread in English, but in most varieties it applies mostly when the cluster is followed by a consonant (e.g. *bes' kind*) rather than when followed by a vowel. Similarly, we also find plural *-s* absence in some Southern European American varieties, but only on nouns indicating weights and measures (e.g. *four mile, five pound*). In other cases, the difference between the patterning of a feature in vernacular AAE and in a comparable European American vernacular variety involves a significant quantitative difference rather than a qualitative one. For example, the absence of the verb *be* for contracted forms of *are* (e.g. *you ugly* for *you're ugly*) is found among Southern European American vernacular speakers, but it is not nearly as frequent as it is in vernacular AAE.

Exercise 1

In the study of the absence of *be* verb forms (so-called COPULA DELETION) among speakers of vernacular varieties of European American and African American English in the South, the following conclusions were reached:

- Neither European American nor African American speakers delete the copula when the form is *am* (e.g. neither group of speakers uses forms like *I nice*).
- Both African Americans and European Americans delete the copula frequently when the form corresponds to *are* (e.g. *You ugly*), but African Americans have a higher frequency for *are* absence.

- Both European Americans and African Americans delete the copula form *is* when it is followed by the item *gonna* (e.g. *She gonna do it*).
- European Americans show almost no (less than 5 percent) absence of the copula form *is* with forms other than *gonna*, and African Americans show significant frequency levels of *is* absence (for example, 50 percent).

How do these kinds of results show the complexity of the descriptive detail necessary for the resolution of the question of the relationship between African American English and European American language varieties? How would you respond to a person who observed that "copula absence can't be unique to AAE because I hear European American speakers who say things like *They gonna do it right now?*"

Debate over the group-exclusiveness of some AAE structures has continued, and, in some cases, has re-emerged, despite careful study of the present status of AAE in relation to other varieties. For example, research by Guy Bailey and Marvin Bassett (1986) and Michael Montgomery and Margaret Mishoe (1999) shows that the use of uninflected or finite *be* to indicate HABITUAL or intermittent activity (so-called habitual *be*), as for example in constructions like *I be there every day* or *They usually be acting silly*, is found in both European American and African American varieties. At the same time, other investigators have suggested that there are additional forms that may qualify as unique. For example, William Labov (1998) suggests that among the constructions overlooked in earlier descriptions of AAE is a sequence of *be* and *done* together in sentences such as *If you love your enemy, they be done eat you alive in this society*. This construction is often called resultative *be done* in linguistic descriptions of AAE since it indicates that a potential action or condition will lead to some inevitable result. The conditional-resultative meaning, which is often associated with threats or warnings, may be a newer semantic-aspectual development in AAE.

There are also structures in AAE that appear on the surface to be very much like those in other dialects of English but turn out, upon closer inspection, to have uses or meanings that are unique. These types of structures are called CAMOUFLAGED FORMS because they bear surface resemblance to constructions found in other varieties of English even though they are used differently. One of these camouflaged constructions is the form *come* in a construction with an *-ing* verb, as in *She come acting like she was real mad*. This structure looks like the common English use of the motion verb *come* in structures like *She came running*, but research indicates that it actually

has a special use as a kind of auxiliary verb indicating annoyance or indignation on the part of the speaker (Spears 1982). The specialized meaning of indignation is apparently unique to AAE.

Another case of camouflaging is found in sentences such as *They call themselves painting the room* or *Walt call(s) himself dancing*. The meaning of this form is quite similar to the standard English meaning of *call oneself* constructions with noun phrases or adjectives such as *He calls himself a cook* or *She calls herself nice* to indicate that someone is attributing qualities or skills to themselves which they do not really possess. Thus, a person who calls him/herself dancing is actually doing a very poor imitation of dancing. The shared counterfactual meaning of the standard English and the AAE constructions obscures the fact that the *call oneself* construction does not typically occur with verb + *-ing* in most dialects of English. European American speakers will, for example, use a sentence like *She calls herself a painter* but not typically *She calls herself painting*, whereas African American speakers are more likely to use both kinds of sentences.

Exercise 2

Studies of vernacular dialects of English have documented the use of *ain't* in a broad range of dialects. Typically, *ain't* is used for *have/hasn't* as in *She ain't been there for a while* and forms of *isn't* and *aren't*, as in *She ain't home now*. AAE uses *ain't* for *didn't* as well, as in *She ain't do it yet*. The use of *ain't* for *didn't* is rarely included in discussions of the unique features of vernacular AAE. How does this usage compare with other kinds of differences cited above, such as the use of inflectional suffixes or habitual *be*? Would you consider it a "camouflaged form"?

Although the debate over particular structures in considering relations between African American and European American language varieties will no doubt continue, it is fair to conclude that there is a restricted subset of items that is unique to vernacular AAE. The inventory of dialect differences is, however, probably much more limited than originally set forth by some social dialectologists who studied AAE in Northern urban areas a few decades ago. But if significant quantitative differences are admitted to our list of qualitative differences, there may be considerable distinction between comparable European American and African American vernaculars, even in regions within the presumed birthplace of AAE in the rural South. In addition, as mentioned above, there are likely to be important differences on other levels of language organization, including prosodic and pragmatic

differences, though these are still under-studied compared to the phonological and grammatical features of AAE.

While it is possible to compare structures used by European American and African American speakers on an item-by-item basis, the picture that emerges from this approach does not fully represent the true relationship between varieties. The uniqueness of AAE lies more in the particular combination of structures that makes up the dialect than it does in a restricted set of potentially unique structures. It is the co-occurrence of grammatical structures such as the absence of various suffixes (possessive, third-person singular, plural -s), absence of copula *be*, use of habitual *be*, and so forth, along with a set of phonological characteristics such as consonant cluster reduction, final [f] for *th* (e.g. *baf* for *bath*), postvocalic *r*-lessness, and so forth that best defines the variety rather than the subset of proposed unique features. To find that a structure previously thought to be unique to vernacular AAE is shared by a European American vernacular variety does not necessarily challenge the notion of the uniqueness of AAE as a dialect. Studies of listener perceptions of ethnic identity certainly support the contention that AAE is distinct from comparable European American vernaculars, but researchers are still investigating how to sort out the precise points of this differentiation. Recent experimental investigation by Erik Thomas and Jeffrey Reaser (2004) suggests that phonological rather than grammatical differences, including differences in vowel pronunciation and voice quality, may have as much to do with the perceptual determination of ethnicity as differences in grammatical structures.

Up to this point, we have discussed AAE as if it were a unitary variety in different regions of the United States. We must, however, admit regional variation in AAE, just as we have to admit regional variation within vernacular European American varieties. Certainly, some of the Northern metropolitan versions of AAE are distinguishable from some of the Southern rural versions, and South Atlantic coastal varieties are different from those found in the Gulf region. While admitting these regional variations, it is necessary at the same time to point out that one of the most noteworthy aspects of AAE is the common set of features shared across different regions. Features such as habitual *be*, copula absence, inflectional -s absence, among a number of other grammatical and phonological structures, are found in locations as distant as Los Angeles, California, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, New Haven, Connecticut, Austin, Texas, and Meadville, Mississippi, cutting across both urban and rural settings. The foundation of a core set of AAE features, regardless of where it has been studied in the United States, attests to the strong ethnic association and supraregional dimension of this language variety. There is also a wide range of social class and stylistic variation in AAE; however, variation in this variety by social class has received little systematic study and awaits more detailed investigation.

7.2 The Origin and Early Development of AAE

Although the historical development of AAE has often been linked with the question of its present-day relationship to European American vernaculars, these two issues are not necessarily related. It is, for example, possible to maintain that earlier AAE developed from a radically different language variety but that linguistic accommodation to European American varieties or mixing among varieties has been so complete as to eliminate many of the differences that existed at a prior point in time. Sociolinguistic contact between Whites and Blacks over the generations may have resulted in speakers of both ethnicities picking up features from one another so that the two dialects became very similar. On the other hand, it is possible to maintain that earlier African American and European American varieties in the South were once identical, but that independent dialect innovation, patterns of segregation, and cultural factors related to ethnic identity led to significant dialect divergence. However, whether AAE and European American varieties had quite different histories or developed along very similar lines, it is possible that later developments may have led to the establishment of two similar or quite different varieties. Hence, the question of the historical origins of AAE is not intrinsically tied to a particular position on its current relationship to European American varieties.

There are several major hypotheses about the origin and early development of AAE: the ANGLICIST HYPOTHESIS, the CREOLIST HYPOTHESIS, and the NEO-ANGLICIST HYPOTHESIS. In this section, we review these hypotheses and offer yet another alternative that we will refer to as the SUBSTRATE HYPOTHESIS. The Anglicist hypothesis maintains that the roots of AAE can be traced to the same sources as earlier European American dialects, the dialects of English spoken in the British Isles. Briefly put, this position maintains that the language contact situation of African descendants in the United States was roughly comparable to that of other groups of immigrants. Under this historical scenario, slaves brought a number of different African languages with them when they were transported, but over the course of a couple of generations only a few minor traces of these ancestral languages remained. In effect, Africans simply learned the regional and social varieties of surrounding White speakers as they acquired English. Hans Kurath, a pioneer in American dialectology, noted:

By and large the Southern Negro speaks the language of the white man of his locality or area and of his education. . . . As far as the speech of uneducated Negroes is concerned, it differs little from that of the illiterate white: that is, it exhibits the same regional and local variations as that of the simple white folk. (Kurath 1949: 6)

From this perspective, differences between AAE and European American varieties that could not be explained on the basis of regional and social factors resulted from the preservation in AAE of British dialect features lost from other varieties of American English. Some of the features mentioned previously, such as habitual *be* and third-person *-s* absence, have been explained on this basis. The pursuit of historical evidence from this perspective involves the scrutiny of earlier British English varieties for features similar to those found in AAE, along with a search for sociohistorical facts that might place the speakers of the potential donor dialects in a position to make their linguistic contributions to people of African descent in North America.

The Anglicist hypothesis, first set forth by prominent American dialectologists such as Hans Kurath (1949) and Raven McDavid (McDavid and McDavid 1951) in the mid-twentieth century, was the prevailing position on the origin of AAE until the mid-1960s and 1970s, when the creolist hypothesis emerged. According to this hypothesis, AAE developed from a CREOLE LANGUAGE developed during the early contact between Africans and Europeans. Those who support the creolist hypothesis maintain that the creole that gave rise to AAE was fairly widespread in the antebellum (pre-Civil War) South (Stewart 1967, 1968; Dillard 1972). They further observe that this creole was not unique to the mainland South but rather shows a number of similarities to well-known English-based creoles in the AFRICAN DIASPORA, or the dispersal of people from Sub-Saharan Africa to other parts of Africa, the Caribbean and North America. These creoles include Krio, spoken today in Sierra Leone and elsewhere on the west coast of Africa, as well as English-based creoles of the Caribbean such as the creoles of Barbados and Jamaica. Creolists further maintain that the vestiges of the creole that gave rise to AAE can still be found in Gullah, more popularly called "Geechee," the creole still spoken by some African Americans in the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. It is maintained that this creole was fairly widespread among people of African descent on Southern plantations but was not spoken to any extent by Whites. William Stewart (1968: 3) notes:

Of the Negro slaves who constituted the field labor force on North American plantations up to the mid-nineteenth century, even many who were born in the New World spoke a variety of English which was in fact a true creole language – differing markedly in grammatical structure from those English dialects which were brought directly from Great Britain, as well as from New World modifications of these in the mouths of descendants of the original white colonists.

Although not all researchers on AAE accepted such a strong interpretation of the creolist hypothesis, many accepted some version of it during the 1970s and 1980s.

Contact with surrounding dialects eventually led this creole language to be modified so that it became more like other varieties of English in a process referred to as DECREOLIZATION. In this process, creole structures are lost or replaced by non-creole features. Decreolization, however, was gradual and not necessarily complete, so that the vestiges of its creole predecessor may still be present in modern AAE. For example, copula absence (e.g. *You ugly*) is a well-known trait of creole languages, so one might maintain that the present-day existence of copula absence in AAE is a vestige of its creole origin. Similar arguments have been made for various types of inflectional *-s* absence (e.g. *Mary go_*; *Mary_ hat*), as well as phonological characteristics such as consonant cluster reduction. However, we are not aware of any serious researchers on AAE who maintain that present-day AAE still qualifies as a genuine creole language.

Both linguistic structures and the social history of Blacks in the antebellum South have been cited in support for the creole origin of AAE. J. L. Dillard's book *Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States* (1972) was quite influential in promoting the creolist hypothesis, although creolists have now engaged in much more detailed and quantitative analysis in support of this hypothesis (Rickford 1999).

Although the creolist hypothesis was clearly the favored position among sociolinguists during the 1970s and 1980s, several new types of data emerged in the 1980s that called this position into question. One important type of data that came to light was a set of written records of ex-slaves. These include an extensive set of ex-slave narratives collected under the Works Project Administration (WPA) in the 1930s (Schneider 1989; Bailey, Maynor, and Cukor-Avila 1991); letters written by semi-literate ex-slaves in the mid-nineteenth century (Montgomery, Fuller, and DeMarse 1993; Montgomery and Fuller 1996); and other specialized collections, such as the Hyatt texts – an extensive set of interviews conducted with Black practitioners of voodoo in the 1930s (Hyatt 1970–8; Ewers 1996). All of these records seem to point toward the conclusion that earlier AAE was not nearly as distinct from postcolonial European American English varieties as would have been predicted under the creolist hypothesis. A limited set of audio recordings of ex-slaves conducted as a part of the WPA in the 1930s (Bailey, Maynor, and Cukor-Avila 1991) also seemed to support this contention.

A different type of data offered in opposition to the creolist hypothesis comes from the examination of Black expatriate varieties of English. For example, in the 1820s, a group of Blacks migrated from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to the peninsula of Samaná in the Dominican Republic, where their descendants continue to live in relative isolation and to maintain a relic variety of English (Poplack and Sankoff 1987; Poplack and Tagliamonte 1989). A significant population of African Americans also migrated from the United States to Canada in the early nineteenth century, and some of their

descendants have preserved to this day a life of relative isolation in Nova Scotia. The examination of the English varieties spoken by Blacks in these areas by Shana Poplack and Sali Tagliamonte (Poplack 2000; Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001) indicates that these insular varieties were quite similar to earlier European American varieties rather than to a presumed creole predecessor, thus casting doubt on the creole hypothesis.

Finally, closer scrutiny of the sociohistorical situation and demographics of the antebellum South (Mufwene 1996, 2001) has indicated that the distribution of slaves in the Southeastern plantation region of the US was not particularly advantageous to the perpetuation of a widespread plantation creole, as had been postulated by earlier creolists. In fact, the vast majority of slaves lived on smaller farms with just a few slaves per household rather than in the large, sprawling plantations with large numbers of slaves that are sometimes pictured in popular portrayals of the antebellum South. Whereas expansive plantations with large numbers of slaves might be conducive to the development and spread of a plantation-based creole, over 80 percent of all slaves were associated with families that had less than four slaves per household.

The emergence of data from these newly uncovered situations seemed to indicate that earlier African American speech was much more similar to surrounding European American varieties than was assumed under the creolist hypothesis. This conclusion led to the development of the NEO-ANGLICIST HYPOTHESIS (Montgomery et al. 1993; Montgomery and Fuller 1996; Mufwene 1996; Poplack 2000; Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001). This position, like the Anglicist hypothesis of the mid-twentieth century, maintains that earlier postcolonial African American speech was directly linked to the early British dialects brought to North America. However, the neo-Anglicist position acknowledges that AAE has since diverged so that it is now quite distinct from contemporary European American vernacular speech. Poplack asserts that "AAVE [African American Vernacular English] originated as English, but as the African American community solidified, it innovated specific features" so that "contemporary AAVE is the result of evolution, by its own unique, internal logic." Labov (1998: 119) observes: "The general conclusion that is emerging from studies of the history of AAVE is that many important features of the modern dialect are creations of the twentieth century and not an inheritance of the nineteenth."

Despite growing support for the neo-Anglicist hypothesis, it has hardly become a consensus position. Disputes remain over the validity of the data and their interpretation, the exact nature of the language contact situation between Africans and Europeans in the colonies and the early US, and other, more general sociohistorical circumstances that framed the speech of earlier African Americans (Rickford 1997b, 1999; Winford 1997, 1998; Singler 1998a, 1998b). Research on long-term, historically isolated enclave

communities of African Americans in such areas as coastal North Carolina (Wolfram and Thomas 2002) and Appalachia (Mallinson and Wolfram 2002; Childs and Mallinson 2004) suggests that earlier African American speech, at least in some regions, converged to a large extent with neighboring European American English varieties. In this respect, the data appear to support the traditional Anglicist and neo-Anglicist hypotheses. But there is also evidence for a durable ethnolinguistic divide that is not generally acknowledged under the Anglicist or neo-Anglicist positions, since some enduring differences between AAE and European American varieties have also been found in these enclave communities. Some of these persistent differences may be attributed to enduring influence from the early contact between African Americans and European Americans. For example, such features as inflectional *-s* absence (e.g. *She go*), copula absence (e.g. *He ugly*), and word-final consonant cluster reduction (e.g. *lif' up* for *lift up*) are common in language contact situations. These features distinguished earlier African American speech from that of its regional European American counterparts and persist to this day in vernacular AAE, despite similarities with respect to other dialect features. Though earlier African American speech may have incorporated local European American dialect features, there thus seems to have been lasting language influence from the earlier language contact situation between Europeans and Africans. Influence from another language or a language contact situation that endures beyond the original contact circumstance is sometimes referred to as a SUBSTRATE EFFECT. The persistence of consonant cluster reduction, inflectional *-s* absence, and copula absence centuries after the original contact situation between Africans and English speakers is probably best considered a substrate effect in AAE.

The SUBSTRATE HYPOTHESIS maintains that even though earlier AAE may have incorporated many features from regional varieties of English in America, its durable substrate effects have always distinguished it from other varieties of American English (Wolfram and Thomas 2002; Wolfram 2003). In this respect, the position differs from the neo-Anglicist position, which argues that earlier AAE was identical to earlier European American English. The substrate effect could have come from the original contact between speakers of African languages and English, whether or not this contact ever resulted in the development of a full-fledged creole language. While the sociohistorical evidence does not support the existence of a widespread plantation creole in the American South, this does not mean that contact with creole speakers during the passage of slaves from Africa to North America could not have influenced the development of earlier AAE. Indeed, extended periods of internment of African slaves along the coast of West Africa and in Caribbean islands such as Barbados before transfer to North America may have resulted in linguistic influence from creole languages – even though a creole most

likely was never used extensively among African Americans in the American South. Creole varieties still flourish widely today throughout the Caribbean Islands and in countries such as Sierra Leone and Liberia on the west coast of Africa, and earlier versions of these creole varieties may well have extended some influence over the development of early African American speech in the American South.

Though recent research evidence suggests more regional influence from English speakers than assumed under the creolist hypothesis, and more durable effects from early language contact situations than assumed under the Anglicist positions, we must be careful about assuming that we have the final answer. Given the limitations of data, the different local circumstances under which African Americans lived, and the historical time-depth involved, there will probably always be speculation about the origin and earlier development of AAE. If nothing else, the significant shifts in positions over the past half-century caution against arriving at premature and unilateral conclusions about its origin and early evolution.

7.3 The Contemporary Development of AAE

In many respects, the contemporary development of AAE is as intriguing as its earlier development. Furthermore, questions about its present trajectory of change have now become as controversial as its earlier history. Though the roots of present-day AAE were no doubt established in the rural South, its development into an ethnically distinct variety is strongly associated with its use in Northern urban areas. In fact, descriptive studies of AAE in the 1960s, which helped launch the modern era of social dialectology, concentrated on metropolitan areas such as New York City, Detroit, Los Angeles, Washington, DC, and Philadelphia rather than the rural South where the seeds of this variety were sown.

There are several major factors affecting the recent and continuing development of AAE, including patterns of population movement and matters pertaining to cultural identity. The emergence of urban AAE was in part a by-product of the Great Migration in which African Americans moved from the rural South to large metropolitan areas of the North in the early and mid-twentieth century. However, demographic movement *per se* is not a sufficient explanation for the cultural shift in which urban areas became the contemporary centers of AAE language and culture. In 1910, almost 90 percent of all African Americans in the US lived in the South, and 75 percent of that number lived in communities of less than 2,500. Starting with World War I and continuing through World War II and beyond, there was a dramatic relocation of African Americans as they left

the rural South for Northern cities. By 1970, some 47 percent of African Americans lived outside of the South, and 77 percent of those lived in urban areas. More than a third of all African Americans lived in just seven cities – New York, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Washington, DC, Los Angeles, and Baltimore (Bailey 2001: 66). Large numbers of these African Americans lived under conditions of racial separation, and this separation, coupled with racist ideologies and laws, led to the development of a social environment conducive to the maintenance of a distinct ethnolinguistic variety.

Population movement among African Americans has shifted somewhat in the last several decades, as the movement of Southern African Americans to Northern cities has slowed, and more African Americans move from the inner city to suburban areas, but this has not significantly affected inner-city segregation. The 2000 US Census indicates that approximately 60 percent of all African Americans now live in the non-South and that approximately six million African Americans live in the large metropolitan centers mentioned above. Some of these cities have become even more densely populated by African Americans than they were several decades ago. For example, the city of Detroit is now 83 percent African American (2000 US Census); in the mid-1960s, when the first author of this book conducted his research on the social stratification of AAE in Detroit (Wolfram 1969), it was only 37 percent African American. Furthermore, a half-century ago, the vast majority of middle-aged and elderly African Americans living in Northern urban areas were born in the South; today the majority of African Americans living in Northern cities were born there or in another metropolitan area. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the population demographics of non-Southern urban areas reveal the continued existence of well-established, highly concentrated urban African American populations.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, a couple of noteworthy sociolinguistic developments took place with respect to AAE. First, this variety took on an ethnic significance that transcends regional parameters. That is, there appears to be a SUPRA-REGIONAL NORM for AAE in that it shares a set of distinctive traits wherever it is spoken in the United States. Though AAE is still regionally situated to some extent, some prototypical dialect traits supersede many of the regional boundaries associated with European American dialects. There are several convergent factors that account for this uniformity. As noted previously, a set of common substrate structures from the earliest contact situations provided a linguistic foundation for the development of an enduring ethnolinguistic divide between AAE and local European American vernaculars. In addition, the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and segregation that most African Americans over the centuries have endured has served to preserve this unique linguistic heritage. At the same time, there is also evidence that speakers of AAE

innovated and intensified some dialect structures over the course of the twentieth century.

Patterns of mobility and inter-regional, intra-ethnic social relations helped support the supra-regional base of AAE in the twentieth century. African Americans in isolated rural regions of the South, for example, tend to have more extensive contact with African Americans in urban areas than they did a century ago. In addition, in these rural regions older and younger residents often have different patterns of inter-regional mobility. Elderly residents rarely left the region during the course of their lives, whereas younger residents today travel outside of their local areas on a regular basis and often include visits to larger, more urban areas in their travels. Furthermore, African Americans who move from the rural South often stay connected to their roots through various homecoming events and family reunions that bring together those who live within and outside of the community. Patterns of inter-regional continuity and increased mobility certainly help transmit models for a supra-regional norm.

At the same time, the persistent *de facto* segregation of American society fosters a social environment conducive to maintaining a distinct ethnic variety. As noted, many Northern urban areas are, in fact, more densely populated by African Americans today than they were several decades ago, and the familial and social networks of many urban African Americans include few, if any, European Americans. The lack of regular interaction between African Americans and European Americans in large urban areas provides an ideal context for the growth of ethnolinguistic distinctiveness.

Perhaps more important than population demographics in the development of AAE as a distinctive variety is the fact that African Americans have long had a strong, coherent sense of cultural identity and, in recent decades, have cultivated overt pride in their ethnic identity and rich cultural heritage. In addition, African American culture and language have long had an enormous impact on American popular culture, and on youth culture in general, whether in America or elsewhere in the world. The center of African American youth culture today is primarily urban, and many models for behavior, including language, seem to radiate outward from these urban cultural centers. As Marcyliena Morgan (2001: 205) puts it: "cultural symbols and sounds, especially linguistic symbols, which signify membership, role, and status . . . circulate as commodities."

The growing sense of African American identity and the spread of African American youth culture are bolstered through a variety of informal and formal social mechanisms that range from community-based social networks to media projections of African American speech (Lippi-Green 1997). In addition, part of what it means to speak African American English is the use of features associated with AAE; however, the avoidance of features associated with regional and standard "White speech" is also important. For

example, Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1986) note that the adoption of standard English is at the top of the inventory of prominent behaviors listed by African American high school students as "acting White." Hence, AAE identity not only concerns the relations, behaviors, practices, and attitudes of African Americans themselves but also so-called OPPOSITIONAL IDENTITY—in other words, how African Americans position themselves with respect to White society.

Studies of vernacular AAE in urban contexts in the last couple of decades seem to show that some structures are intensifying rather than receding and that new structures are developing. For example, the use of habitual *be* in sentences such as *Sometimes they be playing games* seems to be escalating, to the point of becoming a stereotype of AAE. While older speakers in rural areas rarely use this form, some younger speakers use it extensively, especially those in urban settings. Similarly, the narrative use of the auxiliary *had* with a past or perfect form of the verb to indicate a simple past tense action, as in *They had went outside and then they had messed up the yard*, seems to have arisen quite recently and to be on the increase as well. Earlier descriptions of AAE do not mention this feature at all, but more recent descriptions (Rickford and Th  berge-Rafal 1996; Cukor-Avila 2001) note that this construction may be quite frequent in the narratives of some pre-adolescents. The fact that this feature is so frequent among pre-adolescents raises the possibility that it may be AGE-GRADED, meaning that young speakers will use the feature less as they become adults; however, this remains to be seen. Furthermore, some of the camouflaged uses such as indignant *come* in *He came here talking trash* seem to be later developments more associated with urban speech.

The change in language observed in a historically isolated community of African American residents in coastal North Carolina illustrates the movement of AAE toward a more supra-regional norm (Wolfram and Thomas 2002). For almost three centuries, a couple of thousand European Americans and African Americans in Hyde County, on the eastern coast of North Carolina, on the Pamlico Sound, lived in this remote marshland community, with regular overland access into the county possible only since the middle of the twentieth century. Elderly African Americans, who traveled little outside of the region, grew up using many of the distinctive features of the regional dialect associated with European Americans while maintaining a core set of AAE features. Over time, however, there has been a reversal in the balance of core AAE features and local regional features in the speech of Hyde County African Americans. Older speakers show moderate levels of core AAE features and extensive use of local dialect features, while younger speakers show a progressive increase in AAE features and a loss of local dialect structures, referred to here as Pamlico Sound features. The trajectory of change with respect to the Pamlico Sound features and core AAE features

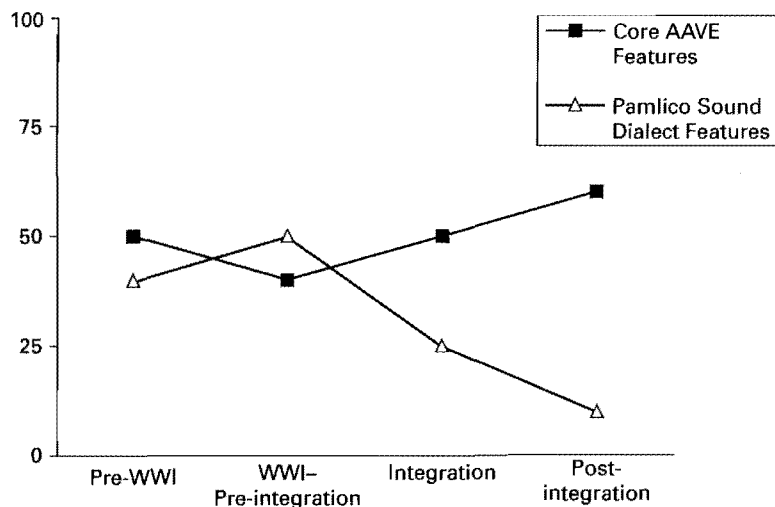


Figure 7.1 Trajectory of language change for African Americans in Hyde County (adapted from Wolfram and Thomas 2002: 200)

in the speech of African Americans of different generational groups in the area, based on our analysis of a number of representative features, is plotted in figure 7.1 (Wolfram and Thomas 2002: 200). Speakers are divided into generational groups based on four important sociohistorical periods: speakers who were born and raised in the early twentieth century up through World War I; speakers born and raised between World War I and school integration in the late 1960s; speakers who lived through the early period of school integration as adolescents; and speakers who were born and raised after legalized institutional integration.

On one level, the explanation of language change over time is based on the local social history of Hyde County, but on another level it appears to be indicative of a more general path of change for rural Southern African American English. The next-to-last group of speakers represents those born in the mid-1950s through the mid-1960s – the group most directly affected by the racial conflict brought about by court-ordered school integration in this county. As children and adolescents, they experienced the social upheaval of school integration first-hand. In this sociopolitical atmosphere, and in the integrated schools that followed, these African Americans actually increased the ethnolinguistic distinction between Whites and Blacks by reducing their alignment with the local dialect and intensifying language norms now associated with vernacular urban AAE. Through the reduction of local dialect

features and the intensification of core AAE features, African Americans during the integration and post-integration eras diverged from, rather than converged with, their European American counterparts.

From one perspective, this path of change reveals the limited linguistic effects of institutionally mandated integration. From a different vantage point, however, it indicates the growing consciousness of the role of language in maintaining ethnic identity, even in the face of sociopolitical pressure and legal mandates to integrate. Traditional rural dialects like those spoken on the coast of North Carolina now carry strong associations of White, rural speech. In fact, younger African Americans describe the speech of older Hyde County African Americans as “sounding country” and being “more White” than the speech of younger African Americans. Younger speakers who identify strongly with African American culture vs. “White culture” would therefore be inclined to change their speech toward the more generalized version of AAE – and away from the localized dialect norm. An essential ingredient of the contemporary supra-regional norm for AAE is thus the heightened symbolic role of language as an ethnic emblem of African American culture. This cultural identity would enhance the role of a widespread supra-regional AAE norm *vis-à-vis* regional dialect norms with strong connotations of White speech behavior.

Research evidence shows that the majority of African Americans do not participate in major dialect changes taking place among European American speakers in many areas of the United States. For example, African Americans in Philadelphia are not involved to a significant extent in the evolution of the unique vowel system described for the European American community in this city (Graff, Labov, and Harris 1986). There is also little evidence that the Northern Cities Vowel Shift discussed in chapter 5 is spreading to speakers of AAE in significant numbers in the metropolitan areas affected by this shift. Even in the South, characteristic Southern vowel traits, such as the fronting of back vowels like the [u] of *boot* towards the [i] of *beet*, tend to be primarily found among European Americans, not African Americans. And, while both African Americans and Southern European Americans tend to pronounce /ai/ as [a], as in *tahd* for *tide*, European Americans are much more likely to use the [a] pronunciation before voiceless consonants, as in *raht* for *right* or *laht* for *light*.

We might even cite the role of the media in supporting the development of a supra-regional norm for AAE. Though linguists usually claim that the media play relatively little role in the spread of particular dialect traits because of their impersonal and usually non-interactive nature, media representations may still project a model for African American speech. In TV and the movies, the vernacular speech norm for African Americans tends to be urban and generic rather than rural and local, thus projecting the image of a unified AAE that young African Americans throughout the

country can use in constructing their cultural identities as part of the larger community of African Americans.

Like any other variety, AAE is also changing. For example, more recent descriptions of finite *be* show that its meaning may be extending beyond the habitual reference we have noted previously. H. Samy Alim (2001), for example, notes that *be* is commonly used in hip-hop culture in sentences such as *I be the truth* or *Dr Dre be the name* in a way that seizes upon its iconic status as a marker of African American speech. Under earlier analyses, the use of finite *be* in sentences such as the above would have been considered ill-formed in AAE, since finite *be* has tended to be used in this variety to indicate habitual or recurrent activities rather than enduring states. However, such newer usages may signal a shift in the meaning of finite *be* such that it can now be used to indicate not only habituality but also very intense, even super-real, states. This most recent change appears to be taking place in more urban versions of AAE and spreading outward from that point. AAE is changing, as it acquires new forms, loses some older ones, and reconfigures still others.

7.4 Conclusion

AAE is obviously a distinct, robust, and stable socioethnic dialect of English. We have seen that a growing sense of linguistic solidarity and identity among African Americans unifies AAE in different locales. Although it may seem contradictory for the speech of African Americans to be blatantly rejected by mainstream institutions such as schools and professional workplaces at the same time that it is supported and embraced by some groups within the community, it is important to remember that different levels of social valuation may exist concurrently for a language variety. As we noted in chapter 6, it is possible for a dialect to be overtly rejected by mainstream institutions while it is covertly valued by those who use it as symbolic of distinctive cultural identity.

At the same time, we have to recognize that not all local situations follow the path of change toward a supra-regional norm that we have outlined here. Comparisons of different local situations involving African Americans suggest considerable variation in patterns of change. In a comparison of four different small communities in locations ranging from the coast of North Carolina to the Appalachian Mountains, we found quite different paths of change. In addition to the pattern of divergence from the local European American dialect toward a supra-regional norm, we found some communities where African Americans and European Americans were converging in their speech. In one case involving a small community of African Americans

in Appalachia, researchers found a curvilinear pattern of alignment with the local regional dialect. Middle-aged speakers who had spent time in the city of Atlanta used more AAE features than regional Appalachian speech, while older and younger speakers were quite closely aligned with the local variety associated with European Americans (Childs and Mallinson 2004; Mallinson and Childs in press). Such studies show that we need to be cautious about making unilateral conclusions with respect to change in AAE. Furthermore, these different situations underscore the significance of the social dynamics and the geographical location of local communities in understanding the past and present development of AAE. Original settlement history, community size, local and extra-local social networks, and ideologies surrounding race and ethnicity in American society must all be considered in understanding the changes African American speech has gone through in the past and present.

Finally, we must note that AAE is more than a simple assemblage of linguistic structures of the type that we have described here. Linguists and dialectologists have sometimes focused on structural features of grammar and phonology to the exclusion of other traits that might distinguish groups of speakers from one another. AAE may also encompass culturally significant uses of voice quality and other prosodic features, as well as culturally distinctive pragmatic features such as particular types of conversational routines, including greetings and leave-takings; backchanneling; and narrative styles. Some researchers have maintained that the soul of AAE does not, in fact, reside in the structural features of the language variety but in how AAE is used – that is, in its functional traits. Though great advances have been made in describing the speech of African Americans, fundamental issues of definition still linger, both within and outside of the African American community.

Exercise 3

Linguists have tended to define AAE in terms of the kinds of structural linguistics features we have discussed here. In this connection, consider Salikoko Mufwene's (2001: 353) observation:

The distinguishing features associated with a referent do not necessarily justify the association nor the naming practice. . . . We should indeed ask ourselves whether we have been consistent practitioners when on the one hand, we argue in theory that it is up to native speakers to determine the affiliation of the language variety they speak and, on the other, we take it upon ourselves to determine who speaks English and who does not on criteria that are far from obvious.

- How do you think AAE should be defined? To what extent should the voice of the community be heard in its definition? How important is it to arrive at a consensus definition of this variety?

7.5 Further Reading

- Bailey, Guy, Natalie Maynor, and Patricia Cukor-Avila (eds.) (1991) *The Emergence of Black English: Text and Commentary*. Philadelphia/Amsterdam: John Benjamins. This collection of articles focuses on the analysis of the set of WPA recordings with ex-slaves made during the 1930s. The records are a unique and valuable collection, and each author comments on a different aspect of this rich data set. Transcripts of the recordings are also included.
- Green, Lisa J. (2002) *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Green offers a thorough overview of the grammar and phonology of AAE, as well as a discussion of the pragmatic and interactional features associated with AAE. Informative chapters on AAE in literary representation, AAE in the media, and the implications of AAE for education give this book broader appeal than most descriptions restricted to linguistic structures.
- Lanehart, Sonja L. (ed.) (2001) *Sociocultural and Historical Contexts of African American English*. Philadelphia/Amsterdam: John Benjamins. This work is a collection of articles by experts on various aspects of AAE, ranging from issues of definition and description, to the application of linguistic knowledge to education, to issues of speech and language development and reading. Most of the prominent researchers in the field are represented in this collection. Excellent overviews of the past and present features of AAE in relation to Southern European American English are presented in the articles by Guy Bailey and Patricia Cukor-Avila, while Salikoko Mufwene offers insightful reflections on defining AAE.
- Mufwene, Salikoko S., John R. Rickford, Guy Bailey, and John Baugh (eds.) (1998) *African American Vernacular English*. London: Routledge. This collection brings together a set of articles by leading researchers on the history and current state of AAE. The authors consider both historical and descriptive issues pertaining to AAE.
- Poplack, Shana, and Sali Tagliamonte (2001) *African American English in the Diaspora*. Oxford: Blackwell. This is the most detailed and careful argument for the neo-Anglicist hypothesis currently available, based on a highly technical, quantitative presentation of variation in the tense and aspect system of black speakers in Nova Scotia and Samaná.
- Rickford, John R. (1999) *African American Vernacular English: Features, Evolution, and Educational Implications*. Oxford: Blackwell. This book offers a comprehensive treatment of a wide range of AAE structural features, the historical development of AAE, and the implications of the study of AAE for education. The collection represents over two decades of informed research by one of the leading AAE

- researchers in the field. Rickford presents a modified creolist position on the origin and early development of AAE.
- Rickford, John R., and Russell John Rickford (2001) *Spoken Soul*. New York: John Wiley and Sons. This book is a highly engaging account of AAE for readers with no background in linguistics. The authors consider the history and current status of AAE, as well as its use in literature and the media.
- Wolfram, Walt, and Erik R. Thomas (2002) *The Development of African American English*. Oxford: Blackwell. This book provides a description of a unique, insular bi-racial community existing in coastal North Carolina for almost three centuries, with implications for the general development of earlier and contemporary AAE.