AFRICAN–AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH: LINGUISTIC STRUCTURE, HISTORY, AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

There have been numerous debates about African–American Vernacular English (AAVE), the most widely studied American English variety primarily spoken by African–Americans. This paper explores the nature of AAVE, trying to reveal it as a distinct linguistic variety and identity marker, highlighting its sociolinguistic implications and its relation to Standard English (SE). AAVE's origins are revealed in the study through the dialectologist hypothesis, which traces its features to non–standard British dialects, and the Creole hypothesis, which links it to Creole languages formed during the transatlantic slave trade. Its lexical impact on Standard American English (SAE) is evident through the widespread adoption of AAVE–originated vocabulary in mainstream discourse facilitated by pop culture and digital media. The research analyses the existing literature, comparing AAVE with SAE in terms of phonology and syntax, drawing from the scholarly works of Rickford, Green, and Morgan. The findings of the study indicate that AAVE's linguistics features, including copula deletion, negative concord, aspectual markers, and subject–auxiliary inversion, illustrate its complexity and rule–governed nature.

Furthermore, the study addresses the social implications of AAVE in the framework of public performance by middle–class African–Americans, as well as the widespread linguistic discrimination Africans face together with the educational challenges they encounter. Public performances of political leaders such as Barack Obama, Martin Luther King, and well–known talk show host Oprah Winfrey have been analyzed, emphasizing their sociolinguistic code–switching ability where speakers adjust their pronunciation and shift between different linguistic styles and dialects based on audience and context. Research outcomes prove that AAVE has deep historical and cultural roots; thus, it needs proper recognition and

valuation for linguistic equity. The findings underscore the necessity of integrating the contrastive analysis teaching method to bridge the linguistic gap between AAVE and SAE. This will promote linguistic justice and inclusivity, particularly in educational frameworks, where code–switching and contrastive approaches can enhance literacy and academic performance.

Keywords: AAVE, SE, creole, dialect, linguistic structure, aspectual markers, lexical contribution, middle–class African–Americans, identity marker, public speech, code–switching.

ԱՖՐՈԱՄԵՐԻԿՅԱՆ ԺՈՂՈՎՐԴԱԿԱՆ ԱՆԳԼԵՐԵՆ. ԼԵԶՎԱԲԱՆԱԿԱՆ ԿԱՌՈՒՑՎԱԾՔԸ, ՊԱՏՄՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ ԵՎ ՍՈՑԻԱԼԱԿԱՆ ԴՐՍԵՎՈՐՈՒՄՆԵՐԸ

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Համառոտագիր

Աֆրոամերիկյան ժողովրդական անգլերենը (այսուհետ` ԱԱԺԱ)` ամերիկյան անգլերենի ամենաշատ ուսումնասիրված տարատեսակը, որը հիմնականում օգտագործում են աֆրոամերիկացիները, դարձել է բազմաթիվ քննարկումների առարկա: Հոդվածում ուսումնասիրվում է ԱԱԺԱ –ի բնույթը` բացահայտելով այն որպես առանձին լեզվական տիպ և ինքնության ցուցիչ, ընդգծելով դրա սոցիալ–լեզվաբանական նշանակությունը և կապը ստանդարտ անգլերենի հետ: Ուսումնասիրության շրջանակներում ԱԱԺԱ-ի ծագումը դիտարկվում է երկու վարկածների միջոցով` բարբառագիտական, որը կապում է դրա առանձնահատկությունները ոչ ստանդարտ բրիտանական բարբառների հետ, և կրեոլյան, որը կապում է դրա ծագումը կրեոլյան լեզուների հետ, որոնք ձևավորվել են տրանսատլանտյան ստրկավաճառության շրջանում: ԱԱԺԱ-ի բառապաշարային ազդեցությունը ստանդարտ ամերիկյան անգլերենի վրա դրսևորվում է հիմնական խոսույթում ԱԱԺԱ–

իզ փոխառված մի շարք բառերի լայն տարածմամբ, ինչին նպաստում են փոփ մշակույթը և թվային լրատվամիջոցները: Հոդվածում վերլուծվում է առկա գիտական գրականությունը՝ ԱԱԺԱ-ն համեմատվում է ստանդարտ ամերիկյան անգլերենի հետ ինչյունաբանության և շարահյուսության տեսանկյուններից՝ հիմք ընդունելով Ռիքֆորդի, Գրինի և Մերգանի գիտական աշխատությունները: Ուսումնասիրության արդյունքները ցույց են տալիս, որ ԱԱԺԱ-ի լեզվական առանձնահատկությունները, այդ թվում՝ օժանդակ բայի բացակայությունը, կրկնակի ժխտումը, կերպիմաստային ցուցիչները և ենթակայի ու օժանդակ բայի շրջադասությունը, վկայում են դրա բարդության և կանոնակարգված բնույթի մասին:

Այնուհետև հոդվածում դիտարկվում են ԱԱԺԱ-ի սոցիալական դրսևորումները միջին խավի աֆրոամերիկացիների հրապարակային խոսքում, ինչպես նաև լայնորեն տարածված լեզվական խտրականության և կրթական դժվարությունների խնդիրները, որոնց բախվում են աֆրոամերիկացիները: Վերլուծվում են քաղաքական առաջնորդների, ինչպիսիք են Բարաք Օբաման և Մարտին Լյութեր Քինգը, ինչպես նաև հայտնի թոք-շոուի հաղորդավար Օփրա Ուինֆրիի, հրապարակային ելույթները՝ ընդգծելով նրանց սոցիալ-լեզվաբանական կոդափոխման ունակությունը, երբ խոսողը հարմարեցնում է իր արտասանությունը և անցում կատարում տարբեր լեզվական ոճերի ու բարբառների՝ կախված լսարանից և համատեքստից: Ուսումնասիրության արդյունքները ապացուցում են, որ ԱԱԺԱ-ն ունի խորը պատմական և մշակութային արմատներ, ուստի՝ այն պետք է արժանանա պատշաճ ճանաչման և գնահատման՝ լեզվական իրավահավասարության ապահովման նպատակով: Արդյունքներն ընդգծում են կրթական գործընթացում ԱԱԺԱ-ի և ստանդարտ ամերիկյան անգլերենի միջև լեզվական բացը լրացնելու համար հակադրողական վերլուծության ուսուցման մեթոդի ներմուծման անհրաժեշտությունը: Դա կնպաստի լեզվական արդարությանը և ներառականությանը, հատկապես կրթական միջավայրում, որտեղ կոդափոխումը և հակադրողական մոտեցումները կարող են բարձրացնել գրագիտության մակարդակը և ակադեմիական առաջադիմությունը:

Բանալի բառեր՝ աֆրոամերիկյան ժողովրդական անգլերեն (ԱԱԺԱ), ստանդարտ անգլերեն, կրեոլ, բարբառ, լեզվբանական կառուցվածք, բառապաշարային հարստացում, միջին խավի աֆրոամերիկացիներ, ինքնության ցուցիչ, հրապարակային խոսք, կոդափոխում:

Introduction to the Theoretical Frameworks and Historical Background of AAVE

AAVE is a unique and original language that has gained significant scholarly and popular interest due to its distinctiveness and ubiquity in African–American literature, music, life, and culture. AAVE has been referred to as a linguistic variety of English spoken by African–Americans. Definitions and terminology used to describe AAVE have varied for around fifty years. "Negro dialect, Nonstandard English, Black English, Vernacular English..." and still other identifiers have been used to define the variety of English spoken by African–Americans. In the early

1970s the term "Vernacular" became more popular as a less negative way to indicate that not every variety of English spoken by African–Americans is included in it. Linguistic scholar and activist Geneva Smitherman (1977) defined AAVE as "an Africanized form of English reflecting Black America's linguistic–cultural African heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression, and life in America" (p. 2). Alternative terms like "Ebonics" and "African–American Language" are also associated with AAVE. Studies (Rickford, 1999; Green, 2002) indicate that Ebonics was developed as a primary means of communication between Black slaves and their white masters. Black individuals were sent to America from different countries and subjected to enslavement, however they were unfamiliar with the language of their masters and the native inhabitants of America. They began to blend their dialects with the existing dialects in the region. Both the terms "Ebonics" and "African–American Language" emphasize African ancestral roots and oppose classifying AAVE as a "dialect" of English (Rickford, 2003, pp. 41–42).

The origins of AAVE have been widely debated among linguists due to comparative data from English adaptation in the Diaspora, Caribbean Creoles, and other varieties of English. Due to limited information, various theories regarding the origins and development of the dialect are considered. There are two predominant theories – the Dialectologist Hypothesis, which suggests that AAVE developed from non–standard British dialects, and the Creole Hypothesis, which posits that AAVE evolved from a Creole language formed by African slaves who blended English vocabulary with African grammatical structures (McWhorter, 1998). These theoretical frameworks provide the foundation for understanding the historical development of AAVE and its socio–cultural significance.

The Dialectologist Hypothesis, prevalent in linguistic research in the 1940s, argues that AAVE is a descendant of non–standard British and Irish dialects spoken by early English settlers in North America (Bailey & Maynor, 1985). Proponents of this theory assert that many features of AAVE, such as consonant cluster reduction and grammatical structures, can be traced to regional English varieties spoken in England, Scotland, and Ireland during the colonial period. For example, linguistic similarities between AAVE and particular British dialects include the omission of the third–person singular present tense marker (–s) (e.g., He walk instead of He walks.), multiple negation (e.g., I don't know nothing instead of I don't know anything.) and copula deletion (e.g., He Ø happy instead of He is happy.). While this hypothesis explains some features of AAVE, it does not account for the significant grammatical structures unique to AAVE, such as aspectual markers (e.g., be, BIN).

The Creole Hypothesis posits that AAVE originated as a Creole language during the transatlantic slave trade, when African slaves, who spoke different native languages, developed a pidgin to communicate with each other and their English–speaking enslavers (Rickford, 1999). Over time, this pidgin became a stable creole. As African–Americans became more integrated into American society, the Creole underwent a process of decreolisation, gradually assimilating to English while retaining distinct syntactic and phonological features. Key evidence supporting the

Creole Hypothesis includes the aspectual markers (e.g. *He been sick.* meaning *He has been sick.* in SE; *He finna go.* meaning *He is about to go.* in SE) specific to AAVE that differentiate habitual, completed, and ongoing actions, which resemble features found in West African languages (Morgan, 2002, pp. 10–14). The Creole Hypothesis provides a compelling argument for the African linguistic influence on AAVE and its role in shaping African–American identity and culture. Green (2002) discusses the "substratist hypothesis" which goes in line with the Creole hypothesis suggesting that AAVE has limited features that are similar to general English and that it is directly related to West African languages with its distinct sentence and sound structure.

Linguistic Structure of AAVE

AAVE has been a subject of significant interest for linguists due to its distinctiveness, popularity in African–American literature, music, life, and culture, its connection with African–American students' educational crises, and the descriptive challenges and historical puzzles it poses for sociolinguists and variationists. AAVE exhibits systematic and rule–governed linguistic features across phonology, morphology, syntax, and pragmatics, distinguishing it from SAE and other English varieties. AAVE's phonological and grammatical features are often shared with other metropolitan English dialects but are more frequently used in AAVE than in other American dialects. It exhibits distinct phonological features such as several systematic sound patterns that impact consonant clusters, vowel pronunciation, and prosody, as well as unique morphological patterns, particularly in verb inflexion, pluralisation, possessive constructions, and pronoun usage (Green, 2002; Rickford, 1999). The phonological and morphological patterns of AAVE demonstrate the expressive power of AAVE, its structural complexity, indicating its consistency as a distinct linguistic variety rather than a deviation from SAE. AAVE is a prime example of the orderly heterogeneity that is fundamental to sociolinguistics, with studies showing that many of its features are sharply stratified among African–American working–class and underclass speakers.

Some of AAVE's characteristic phonology, such as the monophthongisation of [ai] (*[ra:d]* 'ride') or the neutralisation of [ɪ] and [ɛ] before nasals (*[pin]* 'pin' or 'pen'), are shared by Southern white dialects, too, reflecting the fact that 90% of the African–American population was concentrated in the South until 1900. However, AAVE does have more distinctive phonological features, such as the rule of deleting initial voiced stops in several tense–aspect auxiliaries (e.g., the unique use of *ain't* for 'didn't', or the realisation of *I don't know* as [a ð no] and I'm going to do it as [ã mə du ɪt]) (Rickford, 2003, p.42).

Grammatically, the most distinctive features of AAVE are in the verb phrase. They include the absence of present tense forms of the copula, the use of a wide range of preverbal tense–aspectual markers, multiple negation, the inversion of negative auxiliaries with indefinite pronoun subjects in declarative sentences, the use of *say* in serial verb–like constructions to introduce the complement of verbs like *tell*, existential *it* and *dey got*, and the absence of possessive *–s* (Mary boychild)

and of third person singular present tense –*s* (he walk a lot). These features are also found in other English varieties, especially in the USA South (Rickford, 2003, pp. 41–42). Key syntactic features in AAVE verb phrases include *copula deletion, subject–auxiliary inversion, existential constructions, negative concord,* and *aspectual markers.*

Copula/auxiliary absence: auxiliaries are often left out in statements and questions, as in 'They Ø walking too fast' for SE 'They are walking too fast', or 'Ø Bob left?' for SE 'Has Bob left?' (Russell, 2018, p.65). This pattern is systematic and follows specific grammatical rules. Rickford (1999, p.6) states that copula absence is for present states and actions. Research has shown that this phenomenon is consistent with copula variation in other Creole languages and English–based pidgins, suggesting historical connections between AAVE and West African linguistic influences (Rickford, 1999; Green, 2002).

Negative concord (Double Negation): AAVE features negative concord, commonly referred to as "double negation," where multiple negative elements in a sentence reinforce negation rather than cancelling each other out, as in SAE. This structure is also found in many Roman languages, such as French and Spanish, indicating that negative concord is a natural linguistic phenomenon rather than an error (Labov, 1972; Green, 2002).

E.g.: *She don't know nothing. (SAE: She doesn't know anything.)*
I ain't never been there before. (SAE: I have never been there before.)

Negative concord in AAVE is highly systematic: all indefinite pronouns (*nothing, nobody, nowhere*) must agree in negation with the auxiliary verb (*don't, ain't*) (Green, 2002).

Invariant "Be" and Aspect Marking: AAVE has a sophisticated aspect system that includes invariant be, which marks recurring actions rather than simple present tense. Unlike SAE, where *be* is typically a linking verb or part of a future construction (e.g., *I will be there*), in AAVE, *be* is an aspectual marker that expresses habituality (Rickford, 1999).

E.g.: *She be working late. (*SAE*: She usually works late.)*
They be hanging out at the park. (SAE: They habitually hang out at the park.)

E.g.: *She be working late. (*SAE*: She usually works late.)*
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The habitual *be* is distinct from unstressed *been*, which marks past events, and from the present progressive, which lacks *be*. The omission of *be* in other contexts (e.g., *She working late*) indicates a present progressive meaning rather than habituality (e.g., *She working late* means she is doing so right now, not habitually) (Green, 2004, p.80).

Unstressed "been": The unstressed form of *been* functions similarly to the present perfect in SAE but without the auxiliary verb *have*. This form indicates that something happened in the past, but unlike stressed *BIN*, it can co–occur with time adverbials.

E.g.**:** *I been seen that movie.* (I have already seen that movie.)

This form is particularly useful in AAVE for marking events as past without additional words like *already* (Rickford, 1999, p.6).

Subject–Auxiliary Inversion in Embedded Questions: Unlike SAE, AAVE often allows subject–auxiliary inversion in embedded (indirect) questions. This feature is common in Creole languages and suggests structural differences between AAVE and SAE (Labov, 1972; Rickford, 1999).

E.g.: *I asked him did he go to the store. (*SAE*: I asked him if he went to the store.)*

*I wonder can she do it. (*SAE*: I wonder if she can do it.)*

This construction, which is also found in some Southern English dialects, reinforces the syntactic independence of embedded clauses in AAVE (Green, 2002).

Existential "It" and "They": AAVE frequently uses existential *it* or *they* instead of *there is* or *there are* to indicate the existence of something. This construction is found in various creoles and non–standard English dialects (Rickford, 1999; Green, 2002).

E.g.: *It's a lot of people here today.* (SAE: *There are a lot of people here today.*)

They some good musicians. (SAE: *They are good musicians.*)

This variation in existential constructions suggests different syntactic strategies for indicating presence or existence in AAVE.

Preterite "Had" in Past Narratives: AAVE frequently employs preterite *had* in narratives where SAE would use the simple past tense. This structure emphasises or marks past events sequences in storytelling (Labov, 1972; Rickford, 1999).

E.g.: *She had went to the store and bought some milk.* (SAE: *She went to the store and bought some milk.*)

We had saw him last week. (SAE: *We saw him last week.*)

Unlike the past perfect in SAE (*had gone*), AAVE's preterite *had* does not necessarily require two past actions. Instead, it often appears in single–event past constructions as a stylistic or narrative device (Green, 2002).

Aspectual and Verbal Markers

Aspectual markers in AAVE are crucial for expressing nuanced distinctions in tense, aspect, and habituality. Unlike SAE, AAVE has a rich aspectual system with preverbal markers indicating ongoing, completed, or habitual actions. AAVE speakers use aspectual markers to convey precise temporal and habitual distinctions, a grammatical system often overlooked as "incorrect" English, reflecting a structured and systematic approach to expressing aspect.

Stressed "BIN" (Remote Past or Perfective Aspect): The use of stressed *BIN* in AAVE marks an action that has been true for a long time and remains relevant. This is different from unstressed *been* in SAE, which simply indicates past action. The key difference in AAVE is the stress on *BIN*, which conveys that something happened a long time ago and is still the case.

E.g.: *She BIN married.* (She has been married for a long time.) (Rickford,

1999, p.6).

"Done"/"Dən" (Perfective or Completive Aspect): The preverbal marker *done* in AAVE signifies that an action is fully completed. This usage is similar to the present perfect in SAE (*has already*), but it does not require an auxiliary verb. Instead, *done* itself functions as a perfective aspect marker to indicate that an event has been concluded (Labov, 1972).

E.g.: *He done ate all the food.* (He has completely finished eating all the food.)

She done lost her keys. (She has already lost her keys.).

"Finna" (Imminent Future): *Finna* is used to mark the immediate future. It functions similarly to *about to* in SAE but is more commonly used in informal speech.

E.g.: *I'm finna leave.* (I'm about to leave.)

"Steady" (Intensive Continuative Aspect): The aspectual marker *steady* conveys the idea that an action is persistent, intense, and unchanging over time. This is used after invariant habitual *be*, but before a progressive verb (Rickford, 1999, p. 6).

E.g.: *She steady talking on the phone.* (She keeps talking on the phone persistently.)

"Come" (Indignant or Unexpected Action): The use of *come* as an aspectual marker expresses indignation, criticism, or an unexpected or unwelcome action. This is unique to AAVE and has no direct equivalent in SAE.

E.g.: *She come walking in here like she own the place.* (She walked in unexpectedly and arrogantly.) This construction adds an emotional or attitudinal layer to the statement, indicating that the speaker disapproves of the action (Green, 2002, p.73).

The above–mentioned examples illustrate that AAVE's syntactic structure is not simply a deviation from SAE but rather a complex and rule–governed system with internal consistency. The patterns of *copula absence, negative concord, invariant be, subject–auxiliary inversion, existential constructions,* and *preterite had* illustrate how AAVE systematically marks tense, aspect, and negation in ways that are distinct from SAE. Far from being "incorrect" or "broken" English, AAVE follows predictable grammatical patterns that align with linguistic features found in creoles, African languages, and other non–standard English dialects (Labov, 1972; Rickford, 1999; Green, 2002). These syntactic features reinforce the legitimacy of AAVE as a fully developed linguistic variety with historical, cultural, and social significance. Future research should explore the influence of AAVE on other English varieties and its role in language variation and change.

Linguistic impact of AAVE on SE

AAVE has had a lasting influence on SE, challenging rigid distinctions between "vernacular" and "standard" language. It has been a source of phonology, grammar, vocabulary, discourse styles, and performative language practice, which have gradually been adopted into mainstream English, especially in informal and

media–driven contexts. Instead of viewing AAVE as a separate or "non–standard" variety, Weldon highlights how it has contributed to linguistic innovation and enriched American English as a whole. Studies (Nguyen, 2006 & Grieser, 2014) indicate that AAVE is a linguistic innovator, introducing features that are later adopted into mainstream English. Some AAVE phonological features are integrated into more standard varieties of English, often through middle–class speakers who balance between vernacular and mainstream norms. Phonological contributions include changes in pronunciation and speech patterns, such as final consonant cluster reduction, monophthongisation of /ay/, glide reduction, and fronting of /ʊ/. These features have been widely adopted in SE, particularly in casual or colloquial varieties. Specific grammatical structures that originated in AAVE have influenced SE, particularly in informal speech and creative expression. Grammatical contributions include the use of invariant *be*, negative concord (double negatives), preterite *had* for past tense, and copula absence. While SE does not fully accept these features, similar structures appear in storytelling and casual speech.

In the present era cultural borrowing is a common practice in the United States, and it provides ample opportunities for mainstream speakers to borrow black verbal expressions. AAVE has significantly enriched the lexicon of SE, with many words and expressions originating in Black communities becoming widely accepted in mainstream discourse. Lexical contributions include new words and phrases that have been adopted into SE through pop culture, hip–hop, social media and digital communication. Popular daytime talk shows such as Ricki Lake and Jenny Jones, African–American music videos and commentary aired on MTV and BET, and young–oriented African–American films have become major components of American popular and youth culture over the past several years (Lee, 1999, p. 371). Slang words, idiomatic expressions, and culturally significant phrases like "**cool**" (excellent), "**bad**" (good), "**chill**" (relax), "**crib**" (home), "**funky**" (stylish)", **bling**" (jewellery), "**dope**" (great), "**lit**" (exciting), "**woke**" (socially aware), "**finna**" (about to), "**lit**" (exciting or enjoyable) and "**salty**" (bitter) have crossed into mainstream English, particularly through music, television, and social media (ICLS, 2024). Similarly, expressions such as "**I feel you**" (I understand you), "**Stay woke**" (Stay aware, don't be fooled), "**Throwing shade**" (subtly criticise) and "It's **all good**" (No problem, no worries) have transitioned from AAVE as niche linguistic elements to SE and are widely recognised and utilised by everyone. Linguist Lee (1999) closely examined borrowings from black English that have gained general usage providing a list of 69 words and expressions found in mainstream journals (mainly from the *Daily Press*). These expressions derive from the African–American four significant historical and cultural periods: Slavery through the 1920s (1600s–1920s), Jazz (1930s–40s), Civil Rights (1950s–60s), and Rap (hip–hop) (1980s–90s) (Lee, 1999, p. 373). Below are some of the most frequently used words and expressions with their meanings in SE (found in the Daily Press) that Lee observed in her study (Lee, 1991 pp. 381–386):

Cool (meaning *relaxed, okay, excellent, great*) e.g., *This makes me wonder: if old things are cool, could I become cool again?*

Hip (meaning *knowledgeable, aware, sophisticated*) e.g., *ABC changes image with smart, hip, star–studded ads*

Gig (meaning *Jazzman's job; any job*) e.g., *And what does he think of his new gig?*

Boogie (meaning *dance, celebrate*) e.g., *No way they can hide Newt [Gingrich], who was born to boogie.*

Hot (meaning *Exciting*) e.g., *No doubt you've read about the Hot New trend among "with it" 20–something people ...*

Right on! (meaning *Cry of approval, affirmation*) e.g., *... freedom means having power... to control circumstances of one's own life. Right on, we say.*

High–five (meaning *Gesture of agreement or approval in which open palms are slapped together in the air*) e.g., *New Kent high school student Irby Lemons . . . gets a high–five from Jim Kelly after the two hooked up for a touchdown pass Thursday.*

AAVE's Social Stratification and Influence in Public Discourse

There have been numerous debates about the frequency of AAVE usage regarding class and race of African–Americans. It has been found that the dialect's features are more common among working–class than middle–class speakers and are more frequent among adolescents than middle–aged speakers (Lewis, 2008, p. 158). Labov's ethnographic and linguistic research in Harlem, New York, focused on how language varied based on social class, identity, and cultural groupings. He examined the speech of different groups of young African–Americans, particularly contrasting those in working–class communities dominated by vernacular cultural norms versus Middle–class speakers ("The Lames") who were socially isolated from street culture and became more influenced by mainstream English as they approached adulthood. This and other similar research indicate that AAVE is a marker of ethnic identity, and middle–class speakers try to adhere to the "rich verbal culture" of the vernacular in order to counterbalance the effects of mainstream assimilation (Labov, 1972). Research suggests that SE does not simply replace AAVE as speakers move up the socioeconomic ladder. Instead, middle–class speakers strategically incorporate AAVE into their speeches. Despite employing SE features, they maintain that the street culture (as defined by sociologists) is essential to the community and reject any attempt to categorise it as either representative or distinct (Morgan, 1994, p. 136).

Middle–class African–American English (AAE) has been examined from the perspective of public performance, emphasising the smooth style transition of notable African–American public leaders. Studies have shown that linguistic practices and ideologies exhibited by these individuals have shaped our understanding of what certain linguistic features mean and how social rules regulate their use in daily and public speech. For example, studies have found that African–American talk show host Oprah Winfrey uses higher rates of /ay/ monophthongisation in high–frequency lexical items when discussing African–American referees, especially in casual and emotional speech settings. Her speech patterns have been influenced by her upbringing in the Southern United States,

where this linguistic feature is prevalent. Monophthongisation occurs when a diphthong like /aɪ/ (as in my or time) is pronounced as a single vowel sound [a:], making 'my[aɪ] sound like mah [ma:] and time[taɪm] like tahm [ta:m] in motivational speeches or heartfelt moments. While in more formal situations, she uses the corresponding diphthongs [taɪm], [maɪ]). This type of variation aligns with sociolinguistic theories of code–shifting, where speakers adjust their pronunciation based on audience and context. As Gumperz (1982) defines "Conversational code switching can be defined as the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems" (p. 59). In her surprise appearance at the 2024 Democratic National Convention (DNC), Oprah delivered a powerful speech endorsing Kamala Harris (Watch: Oprah Winfrey's full speech at the 2024 DNC). The analysis of this speech reveals instances of monophthongisation:

"I am so honored..." → [a: æm] I am (min 0:35)
"...we are all in the same boat *now*." → [na:] now (min 1:54)
"... *I've* seen racism and sexism..." → [a:v] I've (min 3:24)

These examples illustrate how Oprah's Southern linguistic heritage influences her pronunciation, particularly in high–frequency words like *I* and *now*.

There are other AAVE features frequently used by popular political figures. Former US president Barack Obama often shifts between linguistic styles or dialects depending on the social context. Although in formal situations he adheres to SA, in less formal situations he has been observed to use AAVE features. In 2012 before an exhibition game against Brazil, President Obama visited the Team USA men's basketball locker room (Behind the Scenes with President Obama & Team USA Basketball), where he greeted LeBron James with a hug, saying, *"What's up, champ?"* (min 0:16) using "champ" as an informal term of endearment and respect. Obama adapted his language to communicate with the players. He used informal language and cultural references familiar to the athletes, demonstrating his ease in shifting linguistic registers. He addressed the staff with *"y'all,"* a common Southern and AAVE expression used to address a group of people meaning "you–all". He constructed his sentence with copula/auxiliary absence, which is a typical AAVE syntactic feature, saying "*If you don't listen you going shave*" (min 0:28) leaving out the auxiliary *are*. Then he said "*I know you guys got to concentrate, we just want to come by say hello, say congratulations...*" (min 0:33). In the latter sentence he used popular AAVE word *"got to"* which indicates *"have to"*. In SE *"have got to"* is similarly used with the same meaning, however the omission of *"have"* is characteristic to AAVE speakers. Besides, in the same sentence Obama omitted the indefinite particle *"to"* when *saying "we just want to come by say hello"*, another AAVE common feature. Another instance of AAVE usage was observed during his "White House to Main Street" tour in Savannah Georgia in 2010 (Raw Footage: President Obama's Surprise Lunch Stop), when President Obama makes a surprise lunch stop at the famous Mrs. Wilkes' Boarding House restaurant. In his informal conversation he said *"...now we got to do some hard things"* (min. 1:44) meaning "...now we have to do some hard things". The phrase 'got to' is a common AAVE

expression that is commonly used in colloquial English. In AAVE, however, it is used with copula deletion (omitting forms of "to be").

Many AAVE feature usage instances were highlighted by Analysing Martin Luther King's 1968 speech of "I've Been to the Mountaintop" (I Have Been to the Mountaintop Full Speech). This speech exemplifies his masterful use of AAVE features, enhancing his connection with the audience and reinforcing his message. Below are some examples from the speech.

Consonant Cluster Reduction: This is the simplification of consonant clusters in words that contain two consonants. E.g.:

"You reveal that you are determined to go on anyhow." → (Pronounced as /dɪˈtɜːmɪn/ with a softer or omitted final consonant) (min 1:09)

"We got some difficult days ahead." → (Pronounced as /ˈdɪf.ɪ.kət/) (min 41:52)

"Let us move on in these powerful days." → (Pronounced as /ˈpaʊfəl/ pow'ful) (min 35:03)

Use of "Ain't" for Emphasis: Ain't is a classic AAVE grammatical feature used for emphasis. It replaces *aren't* or *isn't*.

E.g.: "*...I say we aren't going to let dogs or water hoses turn us around, we ain't going to let anything turn us around.*" (min 18:15).

Dropping the final "g": this is a phonological reduction when the final –ing is pronounced as [–in'].

E.g.: talkin', somethin', warnin', standin') (min 00:25 – 01:35)

Absence of third singular present tense –s:

E.g.: "it don't matter now." it really don't matter what happens now. (min 40:42)

Thus, the above–mentioned examples illustrate that AAVE has different manifestations in the public discourse. It is a critical social force affecting literature, music, media, communication, social perceptions, racial behaviour, and systemic structures such as education, employment, and legal frameworks. Critics are deeply concerned that the educational application of AAVE still increases segregation between linguistic groups and hinders prospects for advancement in society. Some argue that its presence in the classroom causes lower academic achievement among African–American students. In contrast, others advocate teaching SE by using their dialect as a foundation. AAVE speakers often face problems in professional fields as well as judicial environments because of language–prejudice–driven discrimination that affects both employment opportunities and fair treatment in legal systems. These issues continue to persist and need additional investigation in future academic research.

Conclusion

The historical, cultural, and social experiences of African–Americans are reflected in the complex and dynamic language of AAVE, which AAVE has developed through complex sociolinguistic processes, influencing and being influenced by the cultural expressions of its speakers. The misconceptions that Africans, speaking

many languages, had lost all traces of their linguistic background, heavily criticized and marginalized AAVE. However, linguistic analyses indicate that it should be considered an authentic language variety originating from African languages and English dialects. It is characterized by unique grammatical structures and phonological features, functioning as an organized linguistic system rather than a mere deviation from English. AAVE is a significant source of lexical innovations in SE due to its presence in hip-hop, literature, and social media. It is widely used in public speeches by famous African-Americans. Recognizing it as a genuine linguistic system is crucial for promoting inclusivity and linguistic equity in societal contexts.

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