African American English: An Overview

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Abstract

This article presents a summary of African-American English (AAE) for the speech-language pathologist. An overview of research on AAE and of the specific linguistic characteristics of AAE is presented. Examples of lexical, phonological, grammatical, and prosodic features of AAE and their implications for assessment are discussed. Linguistic variation within AAE is also described. Educational issues surrounding AAE and teachers' attitudes concerning student use of AAE are considered. The challenges in assessment that AAE presents for the SLP are highlighted along with resources for further information regarding AAE.

According to a recent poll of the 72,840 speech-language pathologists (SLP) registered with American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), only 2.5-2.9% identified as African American (ASHA 2004; 2006). This number is notably less than the 13.4% of the general population that identifies itself as African American and less than the percentage of African Americans receiving treatment from SLPs (ASHA, 2001). Approximately 70% of SLPs feel only moderately qualified to provide services to multicultural populations (ASHA, 2007). This set of articles seeks to raise the percentage of SLPs who feel qualified to provide services to multicultural populations and provide additional information and support to those who are currently serving multicultural populations, specifically those serving African American children. Most African American children are assumed to use one or more linguistic features of African American English (AAE) in their speech. Even children who are not African American have also been shown to have characteristics of AAE in their speech, such that the total number of children who use features of AAE may be greater than those who are identified as African American.

A wide variety of terms have been used to describe English as spoken by African Americans in the United States, including Ebonics, Black English, and African American Vernacular English. African American English (AAE) is the more encompassing term used throughout this chapter to refer to all varieties of English used by speakers where African Americans live or historically have lived. The terms *School English, Mainstream,* or *Standard American English* (SAE) have been used across ethnic categorizations to refer to the English dialects that are typically used in commerce, government, and education.

AAE has often been used to refer to the linguistic features of the language of African Americans that are most unlike Standard American English (SAE). The term *Ebonics* was coined during a conversation between Robert Williams and Ernie Smith as a combination of "ebony" and "phonics" (Williams, 1975). Ebonics was widely adopted by educators and the general public following a movement in Oakland, California in 1996-1997 that was designed to help teachers use AAE as a way to help students acquire SAE, which is, arguably, the language of the school. The efforts were widely misunderstood in the media as an attempt to teach children to speak African American English in school, and thus the educators' efforts were thwarted (Perry & Delpit, 1997).

As the United States borders have opened to allow greater numbers of immigrants with Caribbean and African heritage, definitions of AAE have now been expanded to include English of speakers from other countries, as well as individuals who come into contact with African Americans and acquire some of their language patterns.

Overview of Research on African American English

Much of the earlier research on AAE has centered on the difference versus deficit debate (Seymour, Bland-Stewart, & Green, 1998). Scholars have operated on the premise that knowing more about the unique language patterns of students can help with the understanding of dialect versus difference in the acquisition of language and literacy as highlighted in Craig and Washington (2005). The U.S. Government funded seminal studies of AAE in the 1960s and 1970s in order to address the academic black-white achievement gap. AAE was examined in contrast to SAE. Large-scale examinations of speech communities in Detroit (Wolfram, 1969) and Harlem (Labov, 1972) provided crucial evidence for establishing AAE as a full linguistic system and not a result of language impoverishment or impairment (Wolfram, 1993, 2005).

Research on AAE in the 1980s and 1990s centered on expanding the communities in which AAE was studied and sampled, as well as understanding the social and cultural ramifications of AAE on its speakers (Smitherman, 1977; Stockman & Vaughn-Cooke, 1986). While much of the early work centered on the speech of boys, researchers added more information about the language of women and girls in the late 1980s and 1990s (Goodwin, 1990; Morgan, 1998). Current research on AAE continues to build on knowledge of specific social groups and African American communities, as well as the educational implications for AAE use on language and literacy skill acquisition (see Dr. Connor's and Dr. Terry's papers, which follow, for more information).

Lexical Variation

The AAE lexicon is perhaps the feature that is best known to the general American public. The lexicon used by many young African American males is emphasized and frequently represented in popular culture. There are also other often-unnoticed lexical items that may have an effect on a child's understanding and success in the classroom. Hart and Risley (1995) examined the speech of African American and White children of different socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds, and suggested that the speech of low SES African American children is more linguistically impoverished than is the speech of white and

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middle class children. Hart and Risley focused on inequalities in the vocabulary and syntactic complexity of speech samples of children speaking with their caregiver; they did not, however, include an assessment of the linguistic structure of AAE. Scarborough, Charity, and Griffin (2003) found that many relational terms describing space, time/order, quantity, and logic, which are used in the classroom and on aptitude tests, are actually acquired at school during the kindergarten and first grade years. These functional words include relational terms such as "beginning, middle, end" as well as "different, every, most of." Variation in the school lexicon can cause misunderstandings between students and teachers. For example, the more standard "turn on the lights" and "go to the front of the line" may be represented in AAE with the forms "cut on the lights" and "go to the head of the line." AAE-speaking students may be unsure about what the teacher means and thus compliance with his or her command may be delayed or not completed at all.

Phonological Variation

Many of the phonological features of AAE are shared by other dialects of American English, especially Southern American English. Some features that are common to AAE also appear as features in the speech of younger Southern American English speakers including the merger of the vowels /e/ and /i/ before nasals such that the words "pen" "pin" rhyme. SLPs who are aware of the differences in the appearance of these features in different groups are better able to provide valid and reliable assessment and intervention. Table 1 presents common consonantal variations found in AAE and gives examples of their use.

Table 1. Consonantal variation in AAE.

Consonant variation	
Name	**Examples**
ask/aks alternation	I aks him a question
ing/in alternation	He's runnin' fast
/r/ vocalization or deletion	occurs in words such as in *four, father, car*
/l/ vocalization or deletion	occurs in words such as *school, cool, people*
final consonant reduction in clusters	*find* as *fine; hand,* as *han*
single final consonant absence	*five* and *fine* s *fie*
final consonants can be devoiced	*bad* as *bat*
initial /th/ as [d];final /th/ as [d,t,s,z,f,v]	*they* as *day; with* as *whiff*, and *with* as *wit*
/s/ as [d] before /n/	*Isn't* as *idn't; wasn't* as *wadn't*
glide [j] as consonant	*computer* as *compooter*; *Houston* sas *Hooston*
/t/ as/k/ in a *str-* cluster	*stream* as *scream*
Syllable stress can shift from the second to the first syllable	*POlice, UMbrella*

A frequent concern when assessing young African American children is identifying where the phoneme occurs in the word position. For example, AAE speakers often produce /th/ as /d/ (e.g., "this" as "dis") at the beginning of words while, /th/ may be produced as /d/ or /f/ at the end of a word (ex:

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"with" as "wif" or "wit"). Similarly, clusters of two consonants at the end of words are often reduced to one consonant (ex: "first" as "firs"). Consonant cluster reduction is more prevalent overall at the end of the word than in beginning clusters.

Vowel Variation

African Americans, for the most part, do not participate in the local vowel changes that characterize the speech of white speakers outside of the South. For example, in the southern vowel shift, the word "mitt" sounds more like "meet," and the word "met" becomes a diphthong. Table 2 presents common vowel variations that are used by speakers of AAE. Some vowel variations that are found among Southern white speakers are found among African American speakers throughout the country. Due to variation in the ways that vowels are pronounced, it may be quite difficult for African American children to determine what words rhyme. As Dr. Connor discusses (current issue), it has been hypothesized that this difficulty might interfere with phonological awareness and the acquisition of reading. Oetting (2005) describes challenges with the assessment of African American vowel patterns due to these differences. Vowel misarticulations are often diagnosed using non-word repetition, but due to differences in AAE and SAE vowel production, the tests may over sample for vowel misarticulations among African Americans.

Table 2. Vowel Variation in African American English.

Vowel variation	
Name	**Examples**
pen-pin merger before nasal consonants	*pen* as *pin, ten* as *tin*
/iy//i/, /ey/ /e/ merge before /l/	*feel* and *fill*; *fail* and *fell* rhyme
diphthongs as monophthongs	*oil* and *all*; *time* and *Tom* may rime
/er/ as /ur/ word finally	occurs in words such as *hair, care,* and *there*

Grammatical Variation

The grammatical features of AAE are well studied because they are unique to the language variety and thus of interest to linguists. Grammatical features of AAE are often more noticeable and distinct than are the phonological features described previously. It is important to remember, however, that despite their uniqueness, the features are systematic and regular and thus not indicative of a degraded or defective form of School English. Wyatt (1996) describes the acquisition of the rules of the copula in AAE from an SLP acquisition perspective. The grammatical features described in Table 3 are more unique to speakers of AAE than many other English dialects.

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Table 3. Grammatical variation in African American English.

Grammatical variation	
Name	**Examples**
Negative concord/multiple negation may be used.	*He doesn't see anything* as *He don't see nothing*
Irregular verbs may be regularized.	*I saw her* as *I seened/seent her*
Done may be used to mark distant past tense.	*He failed out ages ago* as *He done failed out*
Ain't may be used as an auxiliary verb or copula.	*He isn't shy* as *He ain't shy*
Double modals may be used.	*I could have done that* as *I might could have done that*
Subject-verb agreement is not required.	*They weren't there* as *They wasn't there*
The copula may be deleted where it can be contracted in SAE.	*She is funny* and *She's funny* as *She funny*
Stressed BIN may be used to mark the completion of an action.	*I finished long ago* as *I BIN finished my homework*
The copula BE may be used to mark habitual action.	*He talks nonstop* as *He be talking all the time*
Steady and *come* may be used to mark habitual action.	*He is always talking* as *He steady talking*
The auxiliary *had* may be used with the simple past tense.	*What happened was* as *What had happened was*
Existential *it* and *dey* are used to mark something that exists.	*There is a dog in here* as *It's a dog in here*
A plural may be unmarked.	*fifty cents* as *fifty cent*
A possessive may be unmarked.	*my mama's house* as *my mama house*
Third person singular verbs may be unmarked.	*He talks too much* as *He talk too much*
Hypercorrected forms may occur where AAE has a variable form.	*I had to go to the store* as *I haddeded to go to the store*
Inversion of subject and auxiliary is not obligatory in questions.	*Is he behind me?* as *He is behind me?*
Relative clauses are not obligatory	*You are the one that she knows* as *You the one she knows*

Oetting (2005) found that the Diagnostic Evaluation of Language Variation (DELV; Seymour, Roeper, & de Villiers 2005) allowed for a greater variety of dialect range with respect to grammatical features. She also found that the DELV normed referenced test may be more useful than the previous criterion referenced version. In the examination of other popular measures, Oetting found that the Index of Productive Syntax (IPSyn; Scarborough 1991) scores remained unaffected by the removal of AAE utterances. Changes were found for mean length utterance, however, which were higher when the AAE features in utterances were left in the analyzed utterances. In contrast, the Developmental Sentence Score (DSS; Lee 1974) led to lower scores when the AAE utterances were left in the scored items.

Prosodic Variation

Many listeners report that the melody and rhythm of a speaker's voice may mark a speaker as African American, even if all other aspects of the speaker's language sound standard. Rhythmic patterns are often preserved in speakers who do not use many of the more socially stigmatized lexical,

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phonological, and grammatical features of AAE. Charity (2005) found differences in the way that teachers asked questions and the way that children imitated these questions in several major cities in the United States. Teachers' voices more frequently rose at the end of the question sentence, while many of the students did not produce a rising intonation when forming questions. While the absence of a rise at the end of the question may be a neutral dialectal feature of AAE, the lack of rising intonation in questions is also used in SAE to mark disengagement and disinterest. The confounding of the expression of emotion in SAE with features in AAE that do not display the same emotion may cause students to be improperly evaluated academically, socially, and emotionally. Reading instructors commonly use generalized qualitative evaluations of intonation to mark students' general fluency and engagement in the text (Downhower, 1997). Due to dialectal differences in rates of speech, such general measures may not be the best predictor of reading fluency.

Intonation differences may be important in interpreting emotion across dialects. The lack of melodic variation in the voice among African American students, especially males, may simply reflect dialect variation, but it is often misinterpreted as boredom, lethargy, or as an indication of a general sense of apathy. Misunderstandings regarding the expression and comprehension of emotion are possible (Collins & Nowicki, 2001).

Pragmatic Variation

Discourse level differences in AAE have also been well documented. Smitherman (1977) and Morgan (1998) note verbal styles that are more frequent and prominent among AAE speakers. For example, direct commands are frequently used in AAE, such that AAE-speaking students may understand commands couched in politeness strategies as suggestions and, therefore, not obey them: "let's get lined up," instead of "line up now," and "I like the way you all are talking quietly" instead of "please talk quietly." Practitioners can work this approach to language variation and style shifting into remediation sessions.

Instigation, the initiation of spoken commentary or insult in order to provoke response, is a form of going on the verbal offensive either in a playful or more serious manner. The great danger with instigation is that playful teasing may quickly turn into a more heated or intense argument. Instigation may cause problems in the classroom or on the playground because the teasing is misinterpreted and used as a segue to other forms of confrontation. Verbal confrontation in the classroom may lead to conflict with the teacher, which may lead to the alienation or suspension of the student.

Variability Within Speakers

The construct of AAE is complex and variable. AAE varies by the age, gender, region, and social class of the speaker. Most sociolinguistic studies do not examine every given feature of a dialect, and it is difficult to make cross-study comparisons of feature use over space, time, and demographic group. Many of the features and characteristics of AAE that have been reported thus far in the literature, however, have been measured or described for African Americans across the United States. Still, differences have been reported in the frequency of use of certain features by age, gender, region, and degree of

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segregation of the African American population in a given area (Rickford, 1999). Examinations of social class differences are limited, but the use of AAE features has been observed in the speech of middle SES African Americans (Horton-Ikard & Miller, 2004). Horton-Ikard and Miller report that Lower SES African Americans use more features of AAE in their speech with greater frequency when compared to their middle SES peers, but there have been few studies that document the speech of middle SES speakers to see what features of AAE they actually use.

The use of AAE features is not an absolute. Speakers vary in the frequency of appearance of features. The rate of use varies for most all of the linguistic features listed in this article relating to both social and developmental sources of influence. Young male speakers have been observed to use features of AAE, especially stigmatized features, more often than female speakers (Charity, 2005). For example, the acquisition of "th" does not occur until later in childhood (sometimes not until age 6), but is also a feature of AAE, so the analysis of dialect versus deficit may be confounded overall, but is especially likely to be misdiagnosed in African American males when it occurs more frequently. Stockman (1996) cautions that only through a comprehensive examination of an individual's speech can the patterns of dialect versus deficit be established.

Males have been shown to be less likely to ascribe to general cultural standards across races and social groups than do females (Labov, 2001). For example, women may ascribe more social capital to the standard forms of English and may be passed down from mother to daughter and also from educators to students. Educators are more likely to be female in our society, such that girls may be more sensitive to teachers' instruction in the classroom. Boys generally develop language at a slower rate than do girls (Van Hulle, Goldsmith, & Lemery, 2004) and, therefore, might miss teachers' verbal/social cues in their formative years. Instead, they may attend more to the language of their peers. Large numbers of African American boys face other challenges, such as discipline and attention issues, which may become conflated with linguistic differences. Overall, boys are subject to more frequent placement in special education courses, suspension, and expulsion than are African American girls (Ferguson, 2000). Moreover, SLPs are disproportionately female, which may also lead to the characterization of female speech as the target or exam standard.

Practical Considerations and Resources

As a whole, research indicates that it is important to consider what teachers and other educators know about their students' language varieties and how this information can be shared, imparted, and used to inform diagnosis and intervention. Brief, yet comprehensive Web sites designed for specific practitioners include http://www.rehabmed.ualberta.ca/spa/phonology/Features.htm (Pollock, Bailey, Berni, et al., 1998) for speech-language pathologists and http://heaski.people.wm.edu/ (Askin, 2007) for classroom teachers. Rickford, Sweetland, and Rickford (2004) present a topic coded bibliography of work on AAE and education. ASHA has created a CD-ROM reference guide (Adger,

Schilling-Estes, & Wolfram, 2003) to help professionals who serve AAE-speaking populations to learn more about the dialect.

Conclusion

In order to implement change in teacher attitudes, educators and SLPS must emphasize what can be learned about language use in the clinical and school setting. The future challenge will be how to best determine how this information can be integrated into process. In the classroom setting, there are a variety of students from different backgrounds and social networks, but they are taught in very similar ways. A combination of efforts by educators and scholars from various disciplines can help bring the relation between oral and written language to the forefront in the educational process. Research thus far on AAE has shown that the speech of African Americans is not unsystematic and deprived. The assessment and treatment of African American children should continue to better reflect such findings. The papers that follow will further examine the relation between AAE and speech, language, reading, and writing considerations for African Americans. Dr. Carol McDonald Connor discusses connections between language and literacy and presents recent findings on the relations among AAE speakers use of the language variety and other factors, such as SES, which may influence students' acquisition of language and literacy. Dr. Nicole Patton Terry focuses on practical considerations for literacy instruction. Both papers discuss implications for assessing children who use AAE. Our goal is to provide useful information and practical advice to SLPs working with students who use AAE.

Acknowledgment

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