

Ling 201 – Some Aspects of Black English Grammar

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Abbreviations:

AAVE – African-American Vernacular English (also called Black English, Ebonics, etc.)

SAE – Standard American English

SWVE – Southern White Vernacular English – the informal variety spoken especially by working class southerners, including those in Appalachia.

Grammar of AAVE differs from SAE in many other aspects than just those mentioned here. There are many regional dialects of AAVE; the features mentioned here are common to most of them, particularly those in urban centers.

1 Origins

- Emerged among slaves in the southern colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries, and transported to northern cities during migrations beginning in the early 20th century.
- A dialect of English sharing many of its characteristics with SWVE. They both have their source in regional dialects in British English including Scots Irish of N. Ireland. AAVE differs in various ways from SWVE and other dialects of African American English because of influence from earlier creole and some degree of internal change.

pidgin –

creole –

e.g. English, French, Dutch are bases of creoles in the West Indies

- Majority of black Americans speak some version of AAVE. Some African Americans may not speak AAVE, though they are familiar with it. Persons who are not African American (e.g. Puerto Ricans in NYC), also speak some version of AAVE.

2 Phonetics/Phonology

2.1 [r]

A distinctive feature of most varieties of AAVE (especially in the South) is lack or limited use of [r] following a vowel. Many varieties of British English, particularly in the south, share this feature.

(1) *guard* [gad], *nor* [nɔ], *sore* [sɔ], *fort* [fɔ], *court* [cɔt]

2.2 Monophthongization

Where other varieties of American English use diphthongs, AAVE and SWVE typically use monophthongs, hence:

		AAVE	SAE		AAVE	SAE
(2)	<i>now</i>	[na]	[naʊ]	<i>why</i>	[wa]	[waɪ]
	<i>side</i>	[sɑd]	[saɪd]	<i>wow</i>	[wa]	[waʊ]
	<i>time</i>	[t ^h am]	[t ^h aɪm]			

2.3 Lack of certain consonant clusters

AAVE tends to lack word-final consonant clusters, particularly those ending in stops in SAE.

(3) *mist* [mɪs], *blind* [blaɪn]

Absence of these stops tends to be more frequent before another consonant, hence [wɛs ko:z] ‘West Coast’.

Such final consonants tend to be used more frequently when they have morphemic status, for instance, past tense /t,d/, etc.

- [t] or [d] represents the past tense morpheme.

<i>past</i>	/pæst/	→	[p ^h æst]	– more likely	(SAE: [p ^h æst])
<i>passed</i>	/pæst/	→	[p ^h æst]	– less likely	(SAE: [p ^h æst])
- [s] or [z] represents the plural morpheme.

<i>Keats</i>	/kits/	→	[k ^h ɪt]	– more likely	(SAE: [k ^h ɪts])
<i>seats</i>	/sɪts/	→	[sɪt]	– less likely	(SAE: [sɪts])

Note that SAE also often simplifies word-final consonant clusters, when the following word begins with a consonant: *West Coast* is pronounced usually as [wɛs koʊst]

2.4 Interdentals

- AAVE often uses [d] where SAE has [ð], particularly at the beginning of words, hence [dæt] *that*, etc. Between vowels, AAVE sometimes has [v], as in [mavə] *mother*.
- Most AAVE speakers use [θ] in initial and word medial positions, as in *thing* and *nothing*. In final position, AAVE often has [f] where SAE has [θ], hence [tu:f] *tooth*. This also happens in some British dialects.

2.5 Nasals

Some dialects of AAVE drop word final nasal consonants. However, the preceding vowel stays nasal as if the consonant were still there. By the same process, French developed nasal vowels.

- (4) French *mot* originally: [mot] now: [mo] (word)
mon originally: [mõn] now: [mõ] (my)
- (5) SAE: *bin* [bĩm] ([i] is nasal because of the following nasal)
 AAVE: *bin* [bĩ]

2.6 Stress

The word stress is sometimes on the first syllable when not in SAE. This reflects the influence of Southern US English.

- (6) SAE: *police*, *define*
 AAVE: ***police***, ***define***

3 Syntax

3.1 3rd person singular

In many dialects of AAVE, the 3rd person singular is not marked by -s.

- (7) a. She want to go.
 b. He need a book.

3.2 Multiple negation

AAVE allows multiple negation.

- | SAE | AAVE |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| (8) I know something. | I know something. |
| I don't know anything. | I don't know nothing. |

- (9) Rules

- a. SAE: verb is negated: *something, somebody, some ..* → *anything, anybody, any ..*
 b. AAVE: verb is negated: *something, somebody, some ..* → *nothing, nobody, none ..*

Multiple negation was common in Old English. This is also the only correct way in French, Slavic languages, etc.

- (10) French:
 Tu dis jamais rien.
 You say never nothing.
 'You never say anything.'

(In formal French, there is even one more negative word: *Tu ne dis jamais rien.*)

3.3 Copula deletion

In AAVE, the copula (the verb *to be*) is absent in situations where SAE would use it, particularly when it can be contracted in SAE:

- | | AAVE | SAE |
|------|------------------------|--|
| (11) | He nice.
They mine. | He is nice. / He's nice.
They are mine. / They're mine. |

Both SAE and AAVE use the full form copula in cases where contraction is not possible:

- | | AAVE | SAE |
|------|---|---|
| (12) | How beautiful you are.
*How beautiful you.
Here I am.
*Here I. | How beautiful you are.
*How beautiful you're.
Here I am.
*Here I'm |

Swahili, Hebrew and Russian also lack a copula in the present tense:

- | | |
|------|---|
| (13) | Russian |
| | Ona krasivaya.
she nice.
'She is nice.' |

3.4 Habitual be

AAVE expresses habitual or recurring situations by means of so called habitual *be* – invariant *be*.

- | | BE | SAE |
|------|---|---|
| (14) | She late.
She be late.
#She be late right now.
They fighting.
They be fighting. | She is late.
She is always/usually/repeatedly late.
#She is always late right now.
They are fighting.
They are always fighting. |

This feature of AAVE has also been attributed to Irish influence in the Southern U.S, as well as to creole influence.

4 Conclusion

AAVE is a systematic and rule-governed system (like any other language or dialect). The features that distinguish it from Standard (American) English are present in many other languages (French, Russian, Swahili, etc.); they are in no way strange or random.

As any language, AAVE has a grammar; it just happens to be slightly different than the grammar of Standard English.