African-American language: linguistics, power, and the impact on all children

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African-American Language:

Linguistics, power, and the impact on all children.

by

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the issue of linguistic discrimination in educational settings with specific focus on African American Language (AAL) in historical and political context including: socio-linguistic research; theory of African-American Language (AAL) analysis of syntax and lexical morphology as well as samples texts in hip-hop, poetry, prose and drama with instructional guidelines and field-based summary statement.
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I. Introduction
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A. Rationale

Prominently displayed in the literature room at The Brooklyn Public Library is a large selection of books labeled 'Required Reading.' This collection, designed by the librarians in collaboration with high school administrators and teachers around the city, features literature that is required reading for high school students. Occupying these shelves are such writers as: Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Alice Walker, Herman Melville, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Upton Sinclair, all of whom are considered to have a place within the canon of American literature. These public institutions, the library and the school system, decided that it was important for all high school students to have access to novels detailing the Black experience in this country. In these works of literature there is a distinct language chosen by the author to give voice to the experiences of her/his characters, “[the] rudimentary criteria for good fiction includes the manipulation of language so that the syntax and diction of the sentences will tell you the identity of the speakers, the probable age and sex and class of speakers, and even the locale.” (Jordan 2002, p. 160).

Despite the fact that the public school system deems it necessary to expose high school students to these great works of literature written in African-American language (AAL), they continue to promote an agenda of linguistic discrimination across grade levels. This linguistic discrimination is directed at the AAL speech community. Most of the texts available for students in the primary grades are written in European-American
English (EAE). As a literacy specialist working with elementary school students, I have searched for texts written in AAL to read with my young students and have found very few. Denying students access to their language in print sends a distinct message that the way they speak is not an appropriate form of communication. This kind of linguistic discrimination in the schools perpetuates a dominant discourse that states that there is a direct correlation between a child's language and her intellectual capacities. Many teachers, administrators, and students still hold this view despite the decades of evidence that proves this to be false (Pearson, Conner, & Jackson, 2012). Forty years ago Toni Cade Bambara (1973) spoke directly to this dominant discourse when she described the linguistic prowess of a boy named BJ, whom she calls “the average kid on the corner.” She describes the language skills of this boy as “so heavy that [the people] called him 'prophet.' He could sit around with the old folks and run stuff so wild that the old folks would say, may be he is the One. His rap is so tough that cats from across town would come over here to have him write love letters or tell them how to hit on a sister. BJ be bad.” (p.82). When BJ enters school, however, he is told that his language is defective, that he is “verbally destitute” and is sent to a specialist to correct his speech. “Because BJ can't make a distinction between 'pen' and 'pin' he is weird. He has no IQ, he has no history, no hope, no sense, because he does not have a grasp of language. Meanwhile, on the block BJ is called 'mouth,' 'heavy,' 'rapper.' BJ has skills. These skills, of course are not recognized, legitimized, appreciated in the schools.” (p.82).
The child of BJ represents many children for whom this situation is a reality. Shawn Carter aka Grammy award winning rapper, Jay-Z, is recognized world-wide because of his verbal and linguistic genius. In school though he faced the same situation as BJ, taught by teachers who did not recognize his incredible abilities with language he grew to hate school. (Carter, 2009). Further illustrating this point, Jordan (2002) documented the experience she had reading Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* to her class of university students. She was surprised by the reaction of the students to pieces of the story that were written in AAL (aka Black English). The students complained that the characters “talked funny” that the words of the character, Celie, “don't sound right or look right neither.” Jordan realized that her students had never seen “a written facsimile of the way they talk. None of the students had ever learned how to read and write their own verbal system of communication: Black English.” (p.160). Given the wide-ranging use of the term “achievement gap” applied to academic performance of low-income African American children in this country – especially but not exclusively in the current era of high-stakes testing – the above examples suggest another perspective from which to view this imbalance i.e. a systemic failure of the educational system to recognize and incorporate modes of communication and curricular content in print, media and verbal discourse throughout the grades necessary for all children to succeed in school and in life.

The research presented in this thesis is centered on language and speech communities. The inspiration for this research is the students, not only the BJs and the Jay-Zs of the education system but also the students who do not speak AAL. Every
student must be taught to value language as a system of communication between people. Students must acknowledge that language is deeply embedded in our understanding of who we are and where we come from. Bambara (1973) states that in schools we have to teach “the conventions of language – how it performs for a particular group, what it can produce, what it can do, how it can function. We need to get into the impact language has on our character development, attitudes, values, behavior.” (p.78).

It is through this understanding that we can dismantle the discrimination surrounding language and speech communities. Students can be motivated to learn to speak in a variety of languages in order to better communicate their thoughts and ideas. It is my position that the schools begin to recognize the power of AAL to transcend color lines and make it available for all students to study and use in an environment that serves to encourage young people to value themselves and the contributions they can make.

In spite of the research done to affirm the history, linguistic properties, and cultural and historical relevance of African-American Language it continues to be denied a place within the educational system. The research on AAL is not new, in fact scholars and linguistics have been studying this language for more than seventy years.

“Since the 1930s, a number of scholars have posited that African-American speech is an African Language System. These include Carter G. Woodson (1933), Lorenzo Turner (1973), Melville Herskovits (1941, 1958), Janheinz Jahn (1961), Nathan Hare (1965), L.Merriwhether, and Adrian Dove (1967), Mervyn Alleyne (1971), Robert Twiggs (1973), Ernie Smith (1974), Robert L. Williams (1975), Anita DeFrantz (1975), Garrett X. Duncan (1995), Aisha Blackshire-Belay (1996), and Karen Crozier (1996). These scholars have maintained that in the hybridization process, it was the grammar of the Niger-Congo African languages that was dominant and the the extensive word borrowing from English stock does not make Ebonics a dialect of English. In fact, they argue, because it is an African Language System, it is improper to apply terminology that
has been devised to describe the grammar of English to describe African-American linguistic structures.” (Smitherman in Delpit and Perry 1998, p.55-6).

In the following pages I will highlight the ways in which AAL is a language complete with grammatical, syntactical, and semantic rules that govern its usage.

B. Definition of terms

It is important to examine some of the terms that have historically been used to classify AAL. This terms, when used incorrectly serve to perpetuate the linguistic discrimination toward the AAL speech community. AAL is often referred to as a dialect, meaning that it is a way of speaking a particular language but does not have an identity that is separate from that language. In the United States there are many regional dialects referred to as: southern, mid-western, northern, and so on. Within these regional categories there are many branches that further classify and distinguish speech patterns according to more specific regions. These forms of speech are often referred to as accents; but they are technically dialects, as they are different ways of speaking a particular language, in this case English.

Generally the classification of language is left up to the speakers of that language. The people who have the most influence over what a language is called and how it is classified are the people who hold positions of power within a society and who have a voice within that structure. For example, some varieties of Norwegian and Danish languages sound so similar that their speakers can understand one another without
switching languages. Despite this fact, Norwegian and Dutch are considered different languages and thus are classified in this way. On the other hand, “some dialects of Chinese […] differ so much that their speakers cannot easily understand one another, yet they are not considered different languages, but dialects of a single language.” (Keulen, 1998, p. 50). In both of these examples it is political considerations that distinguish between a language and a dialect and not an objective comparison of how alike or different they are. “Languages are defined politically not scientifically.” (O'Neil as cited in Delpit & Perry, 1998, p.41). Or, as in the quote popularized by linguistics scholar and advocate Max Weinreich (d.1969): “A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.”

There are other classifications that are used to further show discrimination toward the AAL speech community. AAL is often defined as slang by people outside of the community. Slang occurs in every language, and is defined as, words within the lexicon that are used in ways that people outside the language are unaware of. There are multiple expressions of slag in every language as the participants in every speech community are involved in a perpetual process of reinventing the language and adopting new ways of communicating with one another. Language, as the system of communication between people, is just as alive and evolving as the people who speak it. There is a distinct difference to be addressed here between identifying that slang exists within every language and classifying an entire language as slang. AAL is not a slang version of EAE, to maintain this point of view is to ignore the documented research done on AAL. African-American Language is a linguistic system that incorporates slang within its
structure, as every language does.

Another term commonly used term used to incorrectly describe AAL is vernacular. Steward (1970) defines the linguistic interpretation of vernacular to be, “language that lacks standardization in the sense of prescribed forms of correct usage, and a body of written literature” (as cited in Keulen, et al, p. 50). While AAL is present in schools most often in the form of verbal discourse, it is important to know that there are a plethora of written forms of this language (samples of which will be explored in section III). To call AAL a vernacular is incorrect because the published works, fiction and non-fiction, poetry and prose written in this language is extensive and present a language that is complex and rule-governed. In the next section I will highlight the ways in which AAL exists as a linguistic system. My intention in presenting this information is to highlight the complexity of this language and the value it has in education.
II. Findings – African-American Language
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A. Origin of African American Language

Various theories on the origin of AAL have emerged in recent decades, foremost of which is Creolist hypothesis, Afrocentric scholars have recently challenged this theory and reshaped it to better illuminate the true West African origin of the language. In order to fully explore and understand this theory and the recent Afrocentric research one must be familiar with the terms creole and pidgin and how they classify language. Creole is defined as a mixed language, “that derives its lexicon [word bank] primarily from a certain existing language but contains words and grammatical patterns from various languages.” (Keulen, et al, p.51). The word pidgin is defined as an emergency code consisting of a limited vocabulary adapted and used during times of warfare and trade for quick communicate between speakers of different languages.

“The West African areas from which many of the ancestors of African Americans came are extremely multilingual. In Nigeria alone, for example, over 200 different languages are spoken. The millions of African people captured and forced into slavery included speakers of many different African languages such as: Yoruba, Hausa, Twi, Ibo, Efik, Fulani, Ewe, Wolof, Mende, and Mandinka.” (p.51). One way that the European slave traders were able to maintain control over the people they captured was by deliberately separating people who spoke the same language. As such enslaved people had to establish a new system of communicating with one another, it is under this circumstance that a pidgin form of the language developed. Once in this country,
enslaved Africans had to maintain this pidgin in order to communicate with one another and with their captors.

According to the Creolist hypothesis, as future generations of children were born into slavery, they acquired a creole form of the language that has become what we think of today as AAL (Dillard 1972, as cited in Keulen et al). When Dillard presented this Creolist hypothesis, he used evidence from two major sources of documents, not only were these documents written from an outsider's perspective but they also served to degrade the speakers of this language. The sources that Dillard drew upon were letters and texts written by Europeans who traveled through the South and recorded the speech patterns of the enslaved people living there. These recordings, void of context which, is one of the essential linguistic features of AAL, became the guidelines used to structure the speech patterns of African American characters in fictional books written by Europeans. Many later linguists declared that Dillard's evidence, based as it was on outsider interpretations of the language usage of this speech community, was not a substantial examination of AAL. As these linguists began delving deeper into the roots of AAL, they did found similarities between AAL and English creoles, such as Gullah (a creole spoken in the sea islands of South Carolina and Georgia), Jamaican Patois, Guyanese Creole, and Taki Taki of Surinam (Alleyne 1980, as cited in Keulen et al). These same similarities also arose when linguists compared AAL and West African languages. After much research they decided that there was nothing about the Creolist hypothesis that could be discredited according to the evidence; but Afrocentric scholars
and linguists proposed a shift in the collective understanding of AAL. This is a shift away from considering the ways in which this language lacks linguistic features found in European-American English toward highlighting the linguistic features it retains from the languages of West Africa. This way of understanding AAL, referred to as African continuities, serves to place the emphasis on the West African roots of the language.

B. African American Language as a linguistic system

Three components of language study examined here are: phonological features (rules governing the production of sound), syntax (sentence structure), and semantics (rules governing usage), This does not represent a full examination of all the features of this rich language. Throughout this section I will use the labels: African American Language (AAL), West African languages, and European-American English (EAE) to refer to different languages. It is not my intention to generalize all the languages of West Africa into one group and proclaim that they are all the same. It is my intention, however, to note that there are similar linguistic features that exist in many of these West African languages that also exist in African American Language. By placing the patterns of AAL in context with the patterns of EAE I understand that I am presenting an examination of this language from the outside. Green (2011) emphasizes that “when children acquire language mostly from AAE [AAL] speakers, they do not learn just pieces of a system that are defined by their difference from another variety. Rather, children learn a full system with some elements unique to AAE [AAL] and others in common with GAE [EAE].” (as cited in Pearson, Conner, Jackson, 2012, p.35). The historical context of AAL establishes
that it is a language born in the intersection of West African and European languages and thus it is problematic to only define it by the ways in which it is different from or similar to European-American English.

1. Phonological features

Interdental fricative sounds spelled /th/ in EAE are rare in the rest of the world. In French, for example, there is no such phoneme /th/, native French speakers often substitute the phoneme /z/ for the EAE /th/ making words that sound like zis or zat. The phoneme /z/ is a voiced dentoalveolar fricative that sounds close enough to the EAE interdental fricative /th/ to be comprehended by EAE speakers. Speakers of AAL do the same thing when they use the phoneme /d/, as in French, the interdental fricative /th/ does not exist in many West African languages so speakers of AAL use the phoneme /d/ which is a voiced dentoalveolar stop to form the words that sound like, dis and dat. (Keulen, et al. p. 52-3). In many West African languages the typical phonotactic patterns of consonant vowel arrangement in words permits the sequences of consonant-vowel (abbreviated CV), and consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) but not the pattern CVCC. This is because in West African languages “homogeneous consonant clusters do not occur” (Smith in Perry & Delpit, 1998, p. 56). This CVCC pattern is found in many English words, such as told and test. The consonant-vowel patterns typical in West African languages and in AAL explain the word 'ax,' which many speakers of AAL say when faced with the EAE word 'ask.' The homogeneous consonant cluster 'sk' at the end of that word is not a feature found in AAL.
2. Sentence structure / syntax

a. Expression of time in AAL

“The assumption of the presence of life governs all of Black English. Therefore, overwhelmingly, all action takes place in the language of the present indicative.”

(Jordan, 2002, p. 163) One linguistic feature of the EAE language is that every verb in a sentence is marked as past, present, or future tense based on the first member of the verb phrase (for example: have written, will write, am writing). While EAE speakers are “obligated to grammatically mark the occurrence of an event as past or present tense, many African languages and creoles are set up to classify events in terms of completive or noncompletive aspect based upon whether the predicate is classified stative or nonstative” (Mufwene 1983, Turner 1949, as cited in Keulen et al, p. 54). The syntactical rules of AAL state that events in a sentence are expressed as either complete or incomplete, in other words, it is “not time itself that governs verb choice but the way time is expressed” (Smitherman, 1977, p.19-22).

In AAL, a condition that occurs habitually is marked by a form of the predicate be, “sometimes pronounced bees or be’s (p.19). In AAL the statement, The coffee bees cold, would refer to the fact that the coffee is cold everyday; as opposed to the AAL statement The coffee is cold, which would indicate that today the coffee is cold but usually it is not. While be is used in this way to indicate habitual occurrence it is “omitted when referring to conditions that are fixed in time and to events or realities that
do not repeat themselves,” - for example, *They shoes right here.* (p.21). Another way
that *be* is used to indicate habitual occurrence is in combination with *do* in a question
form, for example: *Do they be playing all day?* *Be* can also used in combination with
*do* for emphasis, as in, *They do be messing around a lot.* (p. 20). In AAL *be* is also used
to convey a sense of future time, *The girl be here soon.* These different uses of the word
*be* depend upon the social context. The presence of a listener is a concept that is essential
in AAL as the “language is structured around the assumption that there are always at least
two living and active participants, the speaker and the listener. “(Jordan, p.163).

The word *been* is used in AAL to “express past action that has recently been
completed.” (Smitherman, p.21). The important thing to know here is that the word
*recently* depends upon the words in a sentence that express time and not the amount of
time itself. For example, it is correct usage of AAL to say, *She been tardy twice this
semester.* Since AAL is its own language the use of the word *been* is not dependent upon
EAE grammatical rules of subject and tense. Smitherman suggests, “As a rule of thumb,
you can say that generally where [AAL] speakers use *been*, [EAE] speakers would use
*have, has, or had plus been.*” (p.22). *Been* is also used in AAL to “show emphasis,
regardless of the amount of time that has elapsed since an action took place. *She BEEN
there.*” (p.23). In this statement the subject may have just gotten there or may have been
there for a long time – the amount of time is not important, what is important is the fact
that the speaker knows without a doubt that she is there. The word *been* can also be
combined with other verb forms to “suggest emphatic assertion, He BEEN gone.” (p.23).
As the above example illustrates, what is important in this statement is the fact that the speaker is certain that the subject is gone. It is also important to note that there are no other words in the sentence to indicate how long he had been gone. If the speaker were to say *He been gone a long time* the word *been* would not be emphasized because the phrase *a long time* indicates the amount of time past.

Another predicate used in AAL that draws its meaning from the content of the sentence is the word *done*. Used by itself *done* indicates past or recently completed action, *I done my homework today* or *I done my homework yesterday* are both correct usage of the word *done* in AAL. An AAL statement “containing only *done* can usually be understood to mean the [EAE] *did.*” (Smitherman, 1977, p.24). When *done* is used in AAL in combination with another verb it denotes recently completed action, remember that 'recently' is dependent upon the content of the sentence and does not necessarily mean amount of time past, *I done finish my homework today*. In this case if one were to translate an AAL statement containing the word *done* into EAE one would replace the word *done* with a form of *have* (has, had, have). In AAL *done* can be combined with *be* to form the future perfect tense (a tense rarely used in EAE) for example, *He be done left by the time we get there.*” Since indication of time in AAL relies heavily on the content of the sentence it is not necessary to change the tense of the verb. Thus “there is no -ed in either past tense or past participle constructions.” (p.26).
b. Negation in AAL

“Whereas the old double negative goes back to Shakespeare and is in abundant use among whites today, triple and quadruple negatives are the sole province of Africanized English” (Smitherman, 1977, p. 30). The rules for sentence negation in AAL, as outlined by Smitherman: “if the statement consists of only one sentence, negate every item [for example, don't nobody never help me with my homework] if the statement consists of two or more sentences combined as one, all negatives indicate 'positives,' and all negatives plus one positive indicate 'negatives.’” (p.31).

c. The copula in AAL

The copula or “linking verb” which establishes an identity between subject and complement in the EAE language does not exist within the African Language system. African languages are not the only languages in which the copula does not exist, in fact, according to Labov (1972) “a great many languages show no present copula – e.g. Hungarian or Hebrew. The French Creole of the Caribbean (Solomom 1966) […] and the English Creole of Trinidad.” (p.68). In AAL the sentence Rosie is at the store is incorrect because of the presence of the copula, is. The correct AAL form of this sentence would be, Rosie at the store.

d. Rules of context in AAL

As stated earlier, speakers of AAL rely on the content and context instead of what is termed subject - verb agreement in EAE to indicate subject number. “The same verb
form serves for all subjects, whether singular or plural.” (Smitherman 1977, p.26).

Thus, *She have us say it.* In this example the verb *has* does not change to agree with the subject as it does in EAE. It should also be noted that plural and possessive concepts exist in the language but are not expressed with *s* or ‘s, as they are in EAE. In AAL it is correct to say, *Two girl just left* or *Mr. Johnson store burn down.* Since AAL is a person-centered language, sometimes stress is placed on the subject of the sentence, *My son, he,* - “As an African system, the division of an equative clause sentence structure is into “topic” and “comment” constitutions” (Smith, as cited in Delpit & Perry, p.57) not noun phrase, verb phrase as in EAE. “One main benefit following from the person-centered values of Black English is that of clarity. […] The motivation behind every sentence is the wish to say something real to somebody real.” (Jordan, p.163).

3. Semantics

The historical context surrounding the birth of AAL is essential to understanding the semantics present in this language. As AAL was passed on through the generations, there were many influences on the semantics of the language, these include: music, religious practices, storytelling, and words from West Africa that were incorporated into the AAL lexicon. Since it was declared illegal for enslaved Africans to read and write, AAL relied heavily on oral transmission to keep it alive. In addition, because there were many laws dictating when, where, and for how long enslaved Africans were allowed to converse, the language adapted. The semantic features that define AAL are those that allowed for the rapid transmission of ideas, coded so as not to be understood by white
plantation owners. (Smitherman 1977 & 2006).

4. Style of communication (oral tradition)

Speakers of AAL have a distinct narrative style that they may use to engage their audience while telling a story. Heath (1983), having spent many months living with and recording AAL speakers in North Carolina came to this conclusion about narratives in AAL: “[They] are intended to intensify social interactions and to give all parties an opportunity to share in not only the unity of the common experience on which the story may be based, but also in the humor of the wide-ranging language play and imagination which embellish the narrative.” (p.166). Communication in AAL is an interactive process, the narrator relies on feedback from the audience. Jordan explains, “[O]ur language is a system constructed by people constantly needing to insist that we exist, that we are present. Our language devolves from a culture that abhors all abstraction, or anything tending to obscure or delete the fact of the human being who is here and now.” (p.163). This is essential for teachers to recognize because this style of communication is extremely different from the style of EAE speakers which tends to more reserved.

There has been one court case that proclaimed the legitimacy of AAL and validated the labeling of students who speak AAL and EAE as bilingual. This case, *Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children v. Ann Arbor School District Board*, filed in 1977 and decided in 1979 in Ann Arbor, Michigan, was brought before the courts by the parents and families of 15 children at this school. “The plaintiffs
charged that school officials had improperly placed the children in learning disability and speech pathology classes; that they had suspended, disciplined, and repeatedly retained the children at grade level without taking into account their social, economic, and cultural differences; and that they had failed to overcome language barriers preventing the children from learning Standard English and learning to read.” (Smitherman in Delpit & Perry 1998, p. 164). The Judge in this case, Judge Joiner, encouraged the plaintiffs to focus on section 1703 (f) of the 1974 Equal Education Opportunities Act (EEOC) which states, in part: “No state shall deny equal educational opportunity to an individual on account of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin, […] or by the failure to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instructional programs.” (p. 165). By ruling for the plaintiffs Judge Joiner upheld that African American Language qualifies as a language and speakers of this language are entitled to rights under the language provisions section of the EEOC. This was a major step toward the recognition of children who speak AAL and EAE as bilingual. Unfortunately, this important decision is not widely known or cited within the speech community. This court case came at an important time in the recognition process of AAL, just four years earlier at a conference in Missouri entitled, Language and the Urban Child, teachers and scholars searched for an autonomous label of the complex linguistic system then referred to as Black English.

The word Ebonics is a combination of the words Ebony (black) and phonics (sounds). Dr. Robert Williams, attendee at the conference explains, the term Ebonics
refers to “linguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represent the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and United States slave descendant of African origin.” (Smitherman, in Perry & Delpit, p. 29). Many people at the conference recognized this term, Ebonics, as a new way of describing this speech community without placing it in comparison to the European-American speech community, the way the label 'Black English' did. Following this momentous recognition of the linguistic discrimination faced by speakers of Ebonics, the Oakland Board of Education stated that it, officially recognized the existence, and the cultural and historic bases of AAL. “Be it further resolved that the Superintendent in conjunction with her staff shall immediately devise and implement the best possible academic program for imparting instruction to African-American students in their Primary language for the combined purpose of maintaining the legitimacy and richness of such language...” (Resolution of the Board of Education Adopting the Report and Recommendations of the African-American Task Force, 1996, as cited in Perry & Delpit, p. 144-5). Unfortunately, this decision met with a torrent of angry backlash from the public and Oakland Public Schools were forced to defend and clarify their practices. The dedicated teachers and administrators continue to value their students bilingual education and eventually the opposing voices quieted. Although never fully accepted as a model of public school reform, Oakland Public Schools continue to combat what Bambara (1973) calls the “tradition of linguistic imperialism in the public schools.” (p.77). It is my hope that all schools will follow the path set by the Oakland Public school system and reexamine their teaching practices to ensure that every student is given the same chance to succeed.
In the following section I present four texts in AAL that teachers could use to help their students understand and appreciate this complex language.
III. AAL in literature: Selected texts
III. AAL in literature: Selected texts

Literature in AAL is typically excluded from reading programs in the U.S., especially in elementary and middle schools. Thus children are not exposed to this rich literary corpus, which includes spoken and written forms of this language. I have included excerpts of four texts written in AAL that I would recommend reading with upper elementary school students. These texts include: hip hop song, a poem, a published collection of Folktales, and an award winning play. For each I have provided a brief introduction to the writer and some background knowledge about the larger context from which the excerpt is taken. Following each excerpt I have written an analysis of the use of AAL within the text. It is important to note here that facing one's own personal bias toward AAL is an essential step in recognizing preconceived notions about language, speech, and intelligence. It is my hope that knowledge of the linguistic structure of AAL can be a powerful tool for dismantling these stereotypes which limit possibilities of learning and interaction for all children.

A. Hip Hop lyrics: Common, “The Corner” ©®

Common, aka Common Sense, aka Lonnie Rashid Lynn Jr. is a rapper from Chicago. In high school he joined with two other friends to form a rap trio, C.D.R. They gained success opening for popular Hip Hip acts nation-wide. In the early nineties he released his first album under the name Common Sense. Throughout his career he has gained national and world-wide acclaim and has been nominated for and won several Grammy Awards. His album Be the album on which this song is featured was nominated
for four Grammy awards and sold over 800,000 copies. For this song Common collaborated with Kanye West, who produced the track, and with The Last Poets who performed a spoken word poem. The Last Poets are often referred to as the pioneers of hip hop music in this country. Reciting political poems over a drum beat, The Last Poet's became popular in the 1970s. By sampling The Last Poets on this track Common is considers the hardships Black men have faced from 1970s to today and to question what is happening to the future generations of children growing up on the corner.

“The Corner” by Common ©®

Verse 1.
Memories on corners with the fours & the moors (pronounced foes and moes)
Walk to the store for the rose talking straightforward to hoes
Got uncles that smoke it some put blow up they nose
To cope with they lows the wind is cold & it blows
In they socks & they souls holding they rolls
Corners leave souls opened & closed hoping for more
With nowhere to go rolling in droves
They shoot the wrong way cause they ain't knowing they goal
The streets ain't safe cause they ain't knowing he code
By the fours I was told either focus or fold
Got cousins with flows hope they open some doors
So we can cop clothes & roll in a Rolls
Now I roll in a "Olds" with windows that don't roll
Down the roads where cars get broke in & stole
These are the stories told by Stony & Cottage Grove
The world is cold the block is hot as a stove
On the corners

[Hook: Kanye West ©®]
I wish I could give ya this feeling
I wish I could give ya this feeling
On the corners, robbing, killing, dying
Just to make a living (huh)
[Spoken: The Last Poets ©®]
We overstated, We underrated, we educated
The corner was our time when times stood still
And gators and snakeskins and yellow and pink
And colored blue profiles glorifying that

[Hook]

[Verse 2]
[Spoken: The Last Poets ©®]
The corner was our magic, our music, our politics
Fires raised as tribal dancers and
war cries that broke out on different corners
Power to the people, black power, black is beautiful
[Hook]

[Verse 3]
[Spoken: The Last Poets ©®]
The corner was our Rock of Gibraltar, our Stonehenge
Our Taj Mahal, our monument,
Our testimonial to freedom, to peace and to love
Down on the corner...

Analysis:
It is important to listen to this (and other hip hop) songs in order to get a full understanding of the true lyrical genius that defines a successful rapper. The three qualities of AAL syntax that Jordan (2002) outlines are: “the presence of life, voice, and clarity.” (p.163). Common exemplifies these qualities in his rap. He takes a very complex issue, the plight of Black people in the U.S., and presents it to the audience cloaked in metaphor and dripping with subtext. He critically examines what it means to grow up in the ghetto surrounded by poverty and disillusionment. Common comments on the belief that many people hold, that the only hope of climbing out of that pit of poverty is making a lot of money in one of three ways: playing professional basketball, rapping, or drug dealing. The verses of The Last Poets present another view of life in the ghetto, this one during the 1970s at the height of the Black Power movements. The Last Poets preach
about feeling a kind of nationalistic pride on the corner. The comparison to present day
that Common presents is stark and troubling in its hopelessness.

B. Poem: “We real Cool” Gwendolyn Brooks

Gwendolyn Brooks was born in 1917 in Kansas. During her career she authored
over twenty books. Winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1949 for her book, Annie Allen. In
addition she was named Illinois's Poet Laureate in 1968 and served as Consultant in
Poetry to the Library of Congress for a year. She lived in Chicago until her death in 2000.
(Giovanni, N, 2008)

We Real Cool  By: Gwendolyn Brooks

The Pool Players.
Seven at the Golden Shovel.
We real cool. We
Left school. We
Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We
Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We
Jazz June. We
Die soon.

Analysis:

After reading this poem I am reminded of another poet's comment about AAL,
that the intention when speaking this language should be to use a “minimal number of
words for every idea: this is the source for the aphoristic and/or poetic force of the
language; eliminate every possible word.” (Jordan, 2002, p. 164). Another way that one
can tell that this is written in AAL is the fact that the verbs are very precise and
descriptive because they do not rely on the copula to define them. Finally, the part of speech that speakers of EAE refer to as adverbs does not exist in AAL. Therefore Brook’s line, “We real cool” is strong and clear. I would include this, and other poems written in AAL, in a poetry unit to encourage the students to cultivate their voice and use language that they feel is the most powerful vehicle for expressing their ideas.

3. **Folktale: Why men have to work, retold by Julius Lester**

Julius Lester was born in 1939 in Missouri but he spent the majority of his childhood in the South. While in college he became involved in the Civil Rights Movement. His first book was about Black folk music, he then went on to write many books for adults as well as children. He has served since the early 1970 as a professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. (Hilbun, J., 1999).

This is an excerpt from the folktale entitled *Why men have to work*. This story begins when the sky used to be very close to the ground and whenever people got hungry they would just pull off a piece and eat it. So, you see, they never had to work to make money to feed themselves. As this went on however, the sky became upset with the people because they would pull off more then they could eat and just throw the rest away. “One day the sky spoke out and said, “Now look-a-here! Can't have this! Uh-uh. Can't have you people just breaking off a piece of me every time your stomach growls and then taking a little bite and throwing the rest away. Now if y'all don't cut it out, I'm going to move so far away no one will ever touch me again. You understand?” (Lester, 1969, p. 39).
Analysis:

In this folktale, the sky is the most powerful character and it speaks in AAL to address the people who have been disrespecting it. An interesting point to note is that the only time Lester uses AAL in this tale is when the sky is addressing the people. In this retelling Lester chose to code-switch between ALL and EAE, this is an important skill for students to learn and this text could be used in the classroom to help students understand the benefits of code-switching.


Suzan-Lori Parks was born in Kentucky but traveled a great deal as a child because her father was in the military. Parks had a passion for writing but was discouraged by her high school English teacher who said that her spelling was not good enough. Her passion was reignited in college when she attended a fiction writing workshop taught by the writer and political activist, James Baldwin who encouraged her to write for the theater. In her career as a playwright she has won 2 Obie awards for Best New Play, as well as the Pulitzer Prize in 2002 for her play *Topdog Underdog*. (Suzan-Lori Parks Biography, 2010)

The play *Topdog Underdog* takes place in a studio apartment shared by two brothers. One brother has a job posing as Abraham Lincoln as tourists live out their John Wilkes Booth fantasies by sneaking up behind him and shooting at him with a cap gun. The other brother is trying to make it as a street hustler playing 3-card monte. In the introduction Parks says, “This is a play about family wounds and healing.” In this
excerpt one of the characters, Lincoln, is telling his brother, Booth, about his job as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator.

“Lincoln:

They say the clothes make the man. All day long I wear that getup. But that don't make me who I am. Old black coat not even real old just fake old. Its got worn spots on the elbows, little raggedy places that'll break through into holes before the winters out. Shiny strips around the cuffs and the collar. Dust from the cap guns on the left shoulder where they shoot him, where they shoot me I should say but I never feel like they shooting me. The fella who had the gig before I had it wore the same coat. When I got the job they had the getup hanging there waiting for me. Said thuh fella before me just took it off one day and never came back. Remember how Dads clothes used to hang in the closet?

Booth:

He had some nice stuff. What he didn't spend on booze he spent on women. What he didn't spend on them two he spent on clothes. He had some nice stuff. I would look at his stuff and calculate thuh how long it would take till I was big enough to fit it. Then you went and burned it all up.” (Parks, 2002, p 29).

Analysis:

It is important to remember that AAL is a very oral language and when the words written on the page are given life by the speaker they change in a way that gives them rhythm and flow. When reading AAL one must take into account all the features of the language explored in section II of this thesis. The words in AAL have a living and breathing quality as this language is very centered in the here and now and with the assumption of an active audience. The act of speaking is a performance in and of itself, which is why it is important to study a play written in AAL with students in order to solidify this idea.
IV. Personal Reflection
IV. Personal Reflection

In my capacity as a literacy specialist I worked at an elementary school with a small group of second graders. The children who attended this school were bilingual, with AAL being their dominant language. Given only books written in EAE I found that I had an extremely difficult time engaging the students in the reading material. Realizing that I needed to change what I was doing, I decided to bring in my favorite hip hop song to play for the students and asked them to listen and write a response in their journals. I played it for them twice as they wrote in their journals. This was more writing than I had seen anyone of them do in reading group before. Afterward we shared our reactions to the music and the students really engaged with beat, the language, and the meaning that they gathered from the song. They understood the message and the mood of the song and were able to analyze this particular artist's hip hop style and explain the ways in which it was different from more mainstream artists. I attributed this response to the fact that this song was a text that was familiar to them because it was written in their dominant language. Their thoughtful examination and discussion of this piece of music allowed them to feel successful and proud of their home language.

I had another opportunity to work with texts in AAL, this time the student I was working with was 12 years old and repeating the fifth grade. As far as his literacy development was concerned Jay (pseudonym) struggled with the fundamentals of the EAE language in print. He had a difficult time breaking words apart into manageable chunks in order to sound them out. He knew the sounds that each letter makes and he
knew many sight words but he lacked the practice and the energy to break down words. As he read independently he skipped over words or changed them to a similar word with the same first letter, keeping the semantics of the sentence in tact but changing the words.

The first time I met him I picked up on his witty sense of humor and his interest in science and music. I could also tell that he had too much pride to sit and read simple EAE books, even in the privacy of our sessions. He was skeptical of me from the beginning, because he had been subjected to many different tutors throughout his school years and was not a fan of having to sit and read boring “baby” books. I decided to bring a text that would be interesting and that he would be able to feel successful reading. I brought in lyrics to hip hop songs that he knew. I thought he could use his background knowledge of the music and of the language to help him decode the text. Together we listened to the song, then he read the lyrics out loud and we talked about what the rapper was trying to say. At first Jay was a little bit reserved because he did not know what to make of his crazy new reading tutor who brought him hip hop music to read; but eventually he came to trust me and even look forward to our sessions together. I found that not only was he able to decode the words in AAL with more ease than he was with words in EAE he also felt more successful as a reader. This increased his motivation to read material written in EAE. Additionally, he and I were able to establish a rapport very quickly and I earned his respect because I valued him as a complete person and made it clear that I knew that he could be successful. Several months into our sessions one of Jay's teachers told me
that she had seen him walk over to the classroom library and begin looking at books completely of his own volition. She said she had not been able to get him to open a book just to look at the pictures and now he was choosing to spend his time in the library.

Bringing texts written in AAL into the classroom has a positive impact not only on the children who already speak the language but also on the children who do not. Everyone can benefit from exposure to multiple languages and children need to know that the hierarchical systems of language are socially and politically constructed and are not grounded in scientific or linguistic evidence.

In my research on using spoken word poetry in the classroom, I came across the wise words of a high school English teacher in the Bronx:

“As long as you are assuming that there is a certain kind of English that only belongs to a certain kind of people then you're already trapped. So for me the English language belongs to the children. It is our responsibility to teach them the full breadth and scope of the language and to never be ashamed of proficiency. And at the same time to redefine that proficiency.” (Ubiles as quoted in Fisher 2007, p. 3).

In order to redefine that proficiency we have to know the value of presenting material to our students in AAL and encourage students to use multiple languages of home, school and wider social contexts to become empowered learners. The research on AAL is too compelling to ignore. Teachers, administrators and policy-makers must confront biases toward this language and establish a place for it in the education system.
V. Bibliography
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B. Selected AAL texts and media:


C. Recommended resources:


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