What Did You Say?

Exploring AAVE and Its Ties to African American Identity

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Introduction

Among all humans, there seems to be one commonality that binds us all together – the need or desire to belong. People constantly search for ways to change or discover themselves in efforts to be assimilated and accepted by a particular group. Reasons for why a person chooses one group over the other vary greatly, dependent upon various factors, including personality, culture, economic status, person goals, etc. However, to be accepted – to achieve this ever longing desire to belong to someone or something – is not only a means to an end, but creates a sense of identity for the individual. The individual is now capable of identifying with a particular group, and, therefore, has *become* part of the group.

The subject of identity is a unique and complicated area of discussion, deep and vast in and of itself, taking on many different facets. Identity can be manifested in many different ways. Some find their identity through various hobbies, such as sports, cars, and cooking. Others find their identity through volunteering, a career, or even culturally; yet, what of language? Can identity be found through a common language shared with others? What are the implications of identifying oneself with a language, and, subsequently, the group of people affiliated with that language? Linguists have studied this phenomenon for decades, concluding "language can be used as a protector of ethnic identity or as a signal of one's individual status" (Jones, 2008, p.17). To give further insight to this idea of ethnic identity, or, in general terms, group identity, Wardhaugh (2010) explains, "An individual's feelings of identity are closely related to that person's feelings about groups in which he or she is or is not a member, feels strong (or weak) commitment (or rejection), and finds some kind of success (or failure)" (p.119).

In order to better understand this concept of group identity through language, an examination of the African American community's relation to African American Vernacular

English (AAVE) and how identity is manifested through this variety of English will be given. To begin, I will give a brief history of AAVE, followed by defining characteristics of this variety that set it apart from Standard English. I will also address and debunk common misconceptions associated with AAVE and its speakers before presenting my analysis.

History of AAVE

In exploring the linguistic phenomenon of African American Vernacular English and how African Americans perceive themselves in relation to that vernacular, a brief history of AAVE and its origins should be addressed. When slaves were first brought from Africa, they had no knowledge of the land, it's people, or even the language of the strangers who captured them. As more slaves were carted from Africa, a means of communication emerged out of necessity, due to the various languages the slaves brought with them from their own countries and the need to communicate with their new masters. (Wardhaugh, 2010, p. 365-66). Over time, these mesh of languages soon found a lingua franca with English. This lingua franca then formed into a pidgin suitable for personal communication and a vehicle for assimilating themselves into the New World (Jones, 2008, p. 4).

As first generation slaves began having children, their offspring and the offspring of succeeding generations were taught the new pidgin. Eventually, this pidgin became the generation's primary language, which then constituted it as a creole (Jones, 2008, p. 5). It is important to note that, initially, slaves were being taught English through interaction with their White masters and were readily exposed to mainstream English of their time. However, once this variety of English became established as a creole, slaves were learning the language from one another, rather than from their masters. With the absence of White influence, cultural and personal influences from the *slaves'* perspective began to influence the language, allowing slaves

to establish their own cultural identity (Jones, 2008, p. 5). With the Abolitionist movement and the eventual abolition of slavery, Blacks now had to prove themselves as equal to their White counterparts. This required learning how to speak 'properly', which ultimately led to the de-creolization of this particularly cultural linguistic variant, as newly freed blacks attempted to assimilate themselves into American society through learning Standard English (Jones, 2008, p. 6).

Presently, African Americans continue to struggle with how they identify themselves within American society through language. Although AAVE began to de-creolize during the onset of the Abolitionist movement, the Civil Rights movement, along with the introduction of the term "African American" in the 1980s, Blacks were feeling empowered and began to re-creolize Black English (Jones, 2008, p. 36). Throughout the years, AAVE has influenced multiple facets of American culture, including music, art, sports, and many other areas. AAVE has influenced American culture so much that African Americans are no longer the only ones who use this variety of English. Its use has been common among other minority ethnic groups, such as Asian and Latino communities, as well as younger generations of White communities, and shares similarities with varieties of English spoken by southern Whites. Despite its undeniable influences on the construction of American culture, AAVE has notably been marked as an inferior variety of English. Due to many social implications, African Americans who choose to continue speaking in this marked variety instead of acquiring the standard variety, face an insurmountable socioeconomic hurdle that only seems achievable through the discarding of one's linguistic identity marker.

In order to overcome this social marker, African Americans have sought after education as a means for socioeconomic advancement, and, essentially, equality. But, does then social

equality equate loss of identity? And if so, how do African Americans cope with this ideology? If not, in what other ways do Blacks find equality *without* compromising their identity? To answer these questions, I will examine various perspectives about AAVE, both positive and negative, within and outside the African American community, from scholars and non-scholars alike, and how these perceptions affect the African American individual in relation to his or her identity with the African American community at large.

Before diving into the analysis, a few points should be noted. The information and studies taken from this research majorly address middle-class African Americans. According to Rahman (2008), little attention has been given to this group within the African American community (p. 144). I would also suggest that more attention has been given to the middle-class in more recent studies because there is a tendency within this group to be more educated than the working-class, and, therefore, have the ability to switch between AAVE and SE more readily. It is also of interest to researchers which variety middle-class Blacks will tend to lean towards, given the social implications of AAVE and how it affects socioeconomic mobility.

Defining AAVE and Common Misconceptions

AAVE is commonly known under various pseudonyms, which include Black Talk, Black English, Black English Vernacular, African American English, and Ebonics, among many others. I will use a variety of these terms throughout my analysis. While both praised and condemned for it's unique attributes, AAVE is distinguished by its grammar, style, phonological, morphological, and syntactic characteristics. Particular characteristics that help define AAVE from SE are final stops, loss of final *d* and *l*, monophthongized and nasalized dipthongs, absence of third-person singular in present tense verbs, lack of *be* (zero copula), function substitution of *it*

for *there* (Wardhaugh, 2010, p. 364), primary stress to auxiliary verbs, perfective *done*, use of *ain't* for *didn't*, *have*, etc., and headless prepositional phrases (Linnes, 1998, p. 343).

These few characteristics of Black English are reflective of African American culture; however, they have also been pejoratively marked as incongruous to "the language of the socially, politically and economically prestigious people" (Toliver-Weddington, 1973, p. 108) of American society. The language of prestige, or societal standard, is known as Standard English (SE), or Mainstream American English (MAE). Any varieties that do not meet these standards are subsequently deemed inferior (Toliver-Weddington, 1973, p. 108). In return, speakers outside of these standardized varieties "racialize" them as "talking white" (Rahman, 2008, p. 142). This concept of labeling 'proper' English as "talking white" is not new. Within the African American community, African American adults and children have been known to attribute proper ways of speaking to white people, while they view their own ways of speaking as slang or poor English (Ogbu, 1999, p.160).

It is commonly believed that AAVE is spoken among all African Americans, to which all speakers of AAVE must speak the same; however, not all African Americans speak AAVE, and, just as English has many varieties and factors that contribute to the emergence of these varieties, so to does AAVE (Rahman, 2008, p. 148). Language patterns of AAVE are contingent upon "sex, age, social class, family structure, community size, degree of family and environment assimilation, amount and type of exposure to white communities, and geography" (Toliver-Weddington, 1973, p. 109). The idea of solidarity is very important when deciding to what *extent* AAVE will be used, or *if* AAVE will be used at all. The goal of solidarity, subject to *who* or which *speech community* the speaker is attempting to achieve solidarity with, will determine AAVE usage (Linnes, 1998).

In Linnes' (1998) analytical study of linguistic characteristics of AAVE, her results indicate that African Americans are not required to speak only AAVE to be accepted in the community. A combination of SAE and AAVE are perfectly acceptable. In fact, in a study conducted by Rahman (2008), some African Americans even declared that their ability to "talk white" or their higher education had automatically deemed them acceptable within the African American community: "I speak Black English when I am around those with whom I am most comfortable and in the most familiar settings. . . By the same token, I also get vibes from black people that they respect my 'white' speech as a reflection of a high level of education" (p. 150). According to Rahman (2008), if an African American has higher education and economical status, "community members expect them to present a linguistic demeanor that reflects that status" (p. 149).

Contrariwise, this is not always the case as we see in Speichler and McMahon's study (1992) of Black English Vernacular (BEV). In this study, a female staff member expressed her need to switch from SAE to BEV when around her friends because "their reaction would be that I was trying to put on airs with them or something, [as if] I had a different attitude toward them or something" (p. 395).

Looking at these two examples, it is clear that language carries an explicit connection to identity within the African American community. To speak 'proper' or evade from using typical speech patterns known to the African American community can potentially threaten one's ability to identify with those in that community. It is also obvious that not all African Americans believe speaking 'proper' is required or a necessary criterion for rejecting someone from the community. However, perceptions of AAVE, both negative and positive, vary among Black people. While some perceive AAVE as a cultural informant and defining element of African American culture,

others have been inundated with negative perceptions of AAVE that span from the times of slavery to present day. I will now exam these perceptions, including scholarly and non-scholarly input, and how they affect perceptions of AAVE within the African American community.

Social and Academic Perceptions of AAVE

In light of its uniqueness, scholars have described the characteristics of AAVE as creative, rhythmic, and original (Speichler and McMahon,1992, p. 386). According to Toliver-Weddington (1973), AAVE is a defining and highly expressive component to Black culture. She continues, expressing that MAE is not comparable to AAVE when attempting to communicate African American ideas and thoughts. In addition, AAVE provides a feeling of solidarity that "white culture" cannot provide within the African American community (p. 111). A student participant from Rahman's study (2008) supports these claims, stating, "I don't really like to speak 'proper' English because I don't feel like that language really belongs to me" (p. 168). Two other participants expressed the same undeniable sense of belonging and identity: "Often I feel that Black English expresses my feelings more accurately than Standard English" (p. 167); "I think the spirit, creativity, resilience, and soul that black people have shows through in the way we speak" (p. 168). Notice in the last quote the speaker said "we". By using "we" instead of "I", the speaker shows her positive attitude toward AAVE, but more importantly, how she identifies herself with the rest of the AAVE speech community.

While these scholars and members of the community share positive outlooks on AAVE and embrace its natural value and ability to connect with the community, other scholars and members do not. Historically, "BEV was considered an illiterate, illogical code without rules; in short, poorly learned English" (Speichler and McMahon, 1992, p. 385). Many words, such as "unacceptable", "wrong", "bad", "incorrect", and "improper" (Jones, 2008, p. 34), have been

associated with AAVE; one scholar even referred to it as “the worst English in the world” (Jones, 2008, p. 33). When linguists began studying Black English Vernacular, studies deduced the variety to “baby talk”, insinuating the inferiority of Blacks to Whites (Jones, 2008, p. 33). It has also been suggested by linguists that African Americans be taught, or learn, MAE (Toliver-Weddington, 1973, p. 110), due to its atrociousness.

Outside of academia, social implications of AAVE have stigmatized not only its form of speech, but also its speakers. In the work place, middle-class employers do not tolerate use of AAVE (Toliver-Weddington, 1973, p. 110). A sense of professionalism is required and expected, to which most Blacks are aware of: “If I’m in an interview for a job, under no circumstances will I speak BE [Black English]. None” (Rahman, 2008, p. 167). In the classroom, teachers discourage students from using AAVE and tend to attribute learning disabilities among African American students to the use of AAVE; however, sufficient evidence to support this accusation does not exist (Toliver-Weddington, 1973, p. 110, 112). Aside from social pressures at large, in addition to teachers encouraging students to adopt a new form of speech, young Black students face other linguistic pressures at school.

AAVE is not only evident in speech, but also through students’ writing. In her study to identify the disconnect between African American students and successful academic writing, Richardson (2005) identifies Black rhetorical patterns in the writings of two, first-year college students over the course of a semester. Richardson, following Smitherman’s criteria, defines Black rhetoric as “‘rhythmic, dramatic, evocative language’; ‘reference to color-race-ethnicity’; ‘use of proverbs, aphorisms, Biblical verses’; ‘sermonic tone…’; ‘direct address-conversational tone’; ‘cultural references’; ‘ethnolinguistic idioms’; ‘verbal inventiveness’; ‘cultural values-community consciousness’ and ‘field dependency’” (p. 7). Although these are intrinsic qualities

that reflect Black culture, they are not helpful or are rarely praised for their individualistic traits in the classroom. Students who are well versed in AAVE and perhaps have not been exposed to other varieties, or their exposure to SAE has been limited, face the challenge of translating their unique style of writing to accommodate the academic standard, or lose their culturally sensitive style altogether. Richardson shares with her readers the experience of student, Mickey: "He said that he learned a lot from writing [the paper] and that his teacher told him his writing style would not be accepted by White America. When [Mickey was] asked, 'why not?' He explained that 'I write from my heart, not from my mind'" (p. 9).

AAVE encompasses passion and color because it is spoken from the *heart*. Although Mickey's teacher continued to encourage him to write in his own style, it should be noted that this type of "writing from the heart" is simply not acceptable within academic standards for writing, which employs objectivity, continuity and logic, rather than personal reflection and conversational orientation. Whether writing or speaking, personal perspective is key in AAVE. The most important aspect in communicating is establishing a connection – a relationship – with the audience. Instead of finding a balance between a student's vernacular influence and academic standards in order to cultivate an authentic voice, many students are encouraged to abandon the cultural perspective they have to offer in their writing. When this is done, students' true meaning is suddenly stifled due to the academic construct (p. 8).

While teachers discourage African American students from using AAVE in the classroom, students are threatened by potential isolation and rejection from their peers if they *do not* use AAVE. One African American student lamented his experience in high school, saying he was "not befriended by most of the African-American students in his high school until he learned to 'talk the talk'" (Linnes, 1998, p. 349). A female student experienced ridicule from her peers

that conditioned her to changer her speech. When "a Korean American who 'hung out with whites'" hit her while playing field hockey, Rhonda "screamed, 'Ouch, that hurted!' The Korean American schoolmate corrected her speech while everyone laughed and she cried. She said her white friends used to correct her all the time too, and this helped her to learn to code switch early on in certain situations" (Richardson, 2005, p. 11-12). Despite the harshness of this experience, Rhonda quickly learned that her home vernacular was not always acceptable and that a definite standard was being impressed upon her, to which, if she wanted to be accepted, she needed to conform to.

These types of experiences seem to occur in predominately white primary or secondary schools. The fact that these African American students are the minority (in most cases) may cause a sense of need to band together with other African American students, in Mickey's case, or with the majority, as in Rhonda's case, in order to cultivate a sense of solidarity. In regards to students, it would be appropriate to assume that not only their home upbringing, but the instruction from their teachers and peer pressure they experience at school, are also defining elements that influence how they feel about AAVE, whether or not they choose to use it, or will continue to do so once they become adults.

Influencing Identity within the African American Community

Another result of these negative perceptions is the concept of in-group prejudice, or resistance. It may be said that there are two types of Blacks within the African American community – those who recognize that AAVE encompasses Black culture and identity and, therefore, choose to speak AAVE, and those who choose not to use AAVE or limit their use of AAVE due to beliefs that they must distance themselves from it in order to gain socioeconomic mobility. In return, within the African American community, those of the first group are looked

down upon because they perpetuate stereotypes that bring negative attention and suppress opportunities for socioeconomic mobility, while those of the second group are rejected by those who do speak the vernacular because they are perceived as abandoning the culture or sacrificing their identity in exchange for socioeconomic advancement (Rahman, 2008, p. 142).

Negative perceptions of AAVE from outside and within the African American community have conditioned many African Americans to believe that "black communicative patterns are inferior and inadequate" (Toliver-Weddington, 1973, p. 111). In her piece, *Middle Class African Americans: Reactions and Attitudes Toward African American English* (2008), Rahman supports this claim when she quotes Smitherman (2006), who says, "Blacks have believed that the price of the ticket for Black education and survival and success in White America is eradication of Black Talk" (p. 142). It is clear how these negative views toward the vernacular have affected members of its speech community, even to the point of inner turmoil.

In the same breath, there is also dissention in regards to whether or not AAVE should be learned within the African American community. Some believe AAVE should be learned among all African Americans because of its cultural implications, but also because those who primarily use AAVE may not always understand SAE, and those who primarily speak SAE may not always understand those who speak AAVE; therefore, if everyone learns AAVE, the vernacular can bridge the gap between both speakers in order to achieve adequate understanding. Others believe AAVE is not important for African Americans to learn at all, chalking it up to "a hindrance and far from a code that…would be valuable or important", and a potential learning block (Speichler and McMahon, 1992, p. 399). This is not a widely shared idea within the African American community at large, but, in light of in-group prejudices, I find it is worth noting.

Further dissent within the African American community has stemmed from the controversial topic of labeling the community's particular vernacular, which escalated in 1996 due to the introduction of Ebonics (the combination of *ebony* 'black' and *phonics*). While some embraced this as an opportunity to truly identify themselves as African Americans through their culturally unique variety, others disagreed, deeming it unnecessary and, arguably, offensive. This unexpected ambivalence, which quickly turned into a national debate, was rooted in the belief that the characteristics of AAVE that set it apart from SAE were only the speakers' natural way of speaking; therefore, it was, and is currently believed to be, unnecessary to classify it as a legitimate language, or variety, specific to African Americans: "If I was sitting around with my friends…we wouldn't call it anything. It was just the way we talked…There was no label for it" (Speichler and McMahon, 1992, p. 389).

This offense stirred hostile feelings within the community at large, bringing heavyweights such as Maya Angelou, Jesse Jackson, and Kweisi Mfume (Jones, 2008, p. 25) who expressed their distain, or, in some cases, outrage for such a proposal being made. In the eyes of the opponents, to legitimize this would be perceived as perpetuating pejorative linguistic and cultural stereotypes that have long imposed themselves upon the African American community, or, "just another way of 'conveniently ascribing race where it doesn't belong'" (Speichler and McMahon, 1992, p. 390).

What is desired is a sense of equality; a sense that Blacks are no longer inferior, but considered as equivalent to their, so called, "social superiors"; a desire for a sense of freedom from the invisible chains that remain around the hands and feet of those who strive for more.

In regards to the legitimization of the vernacular, I think it can be said of those who stood against the movement that, while fighting for equal opportunity, they also sacrificed the

opportunity to have the unique, bold, and colorful voice of African Americans officially recognized, and, potentially, widely appreciated and accepted. Implications of this are not evident, for there is no proof to prove such a statement, at least in my research. May it be noted that I am not imposing my own ideas or personal preference here, but am simply posing the thought of what might have happened if the African American community were more concerned with establishing their linguistic identity, rather than conforming to the established societal standard.

Concluding Remarks

After researching and analyzing the materials and evidence, I have arrived at my own definition of AAVE: African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is the variety of English that is culturally and linguistically relevant to the African American community, employing unique grammatical, stress, and stylistic patterns that are majorly classified as an African American variant. The cultural implications in this vernacular are irrefutable; therefore, the speaker reflects their culture whenever they speak it. This language is a representation of historical and personal background that is used to unify a common people.

Although there seems to be quite a divide within the African American community in regards to how they *feel* about the vernacular and how they *use* it, there is no denying that Blacks are aware of the positive and negative implications of AAVE, and largely view it as "important to their identity and cultural survival" (Rahman, 2008, p. 173). There is also recognition that Blacks are not required to speak any form of AAVE in order to be accepted within the African American community. Socioeconomic advancement is a common goal within the community, and America; therefore, if one achieves socioeconomic success or social equality with their "social superiors", it does not necessarily mean that they have lost of sacrificed their identity

with the African American culture. Of course, each individual has their own personal perspective on the matter, but, when speaking generally, individuals are still capable of maintaining their identity regardless of whether or not they actively participate in using AAVE.

I do find negative perceptions of AAVE to be harmful to the African American psyche. I believe the positivity of AAVE and its value needs to be reinforced within and outside of the African American community, in order to promote cultural and linguistic pride. I also believe learning Standard English is nearly impossible to avoid and is quite necessary, but I would hope that teachers and school systems will continue to work with Black students in helping them find a vocal balance in their academic writing. Oral tradition is an important element of African American culture, and to lose this in writing would be a true loss.

Lastly, I would like to address my interest in the concept of in-group prejudice. I have found that not much research has been done with this subject, and I hope to contribute to this field in the future.

In an effort to promote equality and solidarity with all, I would like to part with this short poem from Elaine Richardson's work, *Coming from the Heart: Black Students on Literacy Experiences*:

> If you (are) white, that's alright
> if you're yellow, you're still my fellow
> if you brown, keep gettin down
> And if you black, you on the right track (Richardson, 1995, p. 15)

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