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Christelle Lauture
Bridgewater State University

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“African American Vernacular English: A Language Necessarily Adorned”

Christelle Lauture

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Bridgewater State University

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Dr. Emily D. Field, Thesis Advisor

“African American Vernacular English: A Language Necessarily Adorned”

Abstract: African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has been spoken by African Americans for centuries but has only recently been acknowledged as a distinct dialect. It is often used in tandem with Standard English, through a concept referred to as code-switching. Although linguists have done substantial work to validate AAVE, there is an incomplete understanding of why the dialect developed, and, in particular, what functions the dialect serves for its speakers. In order to begin the work of discovering why AAVE developed the specific features it manifests, I synthesized other linguists’ observations into a taxonomy of five categories that account for most of the dialect’s unique features. My project elaborates on the functions of the categories of tense/mode variation, negation, absence, prosody/pronunciation, and what Zora Neale Hurston calls “the will to adorn” in AAVE, in comparison to Standard English.

“A language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity, and the rules of the language are dictated by what the language must convey.”

“The argument has nothing to do with language itself but with the role of language. Language, incontestably, reveals the speaker. Language, also, far more dubiously, is meant to define the other—and, in this case, the other is refusing to be defined by a language that has never been able to recognize him.”

— James Baldwin “If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?” (1979)

English is the modern world's lingua franca, meaning that it has the most second-language learners in the world. It began its journey to succession a little over a thousand years ago. The journey has been a long one with many detours, bumps in the road, and no pre-determined destination in sight. English as a language was one big accident after another, but its success in the world was no accident. The reason English is so powerful today is due not to any features internal to the language itself, but rather to the power of its users. Britain was the most powerful country at the time of modern English's conception, and the United States has since become the most powerful. Perhaps it is this political power that gives some users of this language a perception that the language itself is whole and pure. The concept of "broken English" is usually reserved for non-native second language English speakers, but the reality is that English itself is a broken language that people used enough until it worked for them. English as we know it is a relatively new language, with its first comprehensive dictionary being less than 150 years old (Lerer 236). This relative youth is because this was the first time that English stood still long enough for people to capture it. Before then it was being influenced by other languages and events that changed its face every century.

Events including Viking raids; the influence of the Latin church; the Norman conquest; the immigration of the Anglos, Saxons, and Jutes from modern-day Germany; and the Bubonic plague all led to English becoming the creole that re-creolized itself until it became standard. The act of standardizing English was a relatively arbitrary one. As America was forming in the Colonial period, Americans were trying to forge an identity with a language that would reflect their values. Puritans used English in a way that rejected England's Renaissance and Restoration period uses of language. By the 18th century, there was a growing concern in both England and America about the fact that English was not standard, so scholars on both sides of the Atlantic

took it upon themselves to publish their own views on how the language should look and sound. As some of these scholars' works became more popular than others, such as Robert Lowth, Noah Webster, Dr. Samuel Johnson, and Jacob Grimm, these prescriptions and descriptions began to stick among users.¹

Today, it is commonly held by linguists that language should be what they call descriptive, meaning that as long as it serves its function, then it works. The other camp of thought is that a language should be prescriptive, meaning that the users should strive to regulate it. While some may cling to prescription being necessary as many Early Modern English users did, this view does not allow us to see how English is continuing to change and both influence and be influenced by other languages and cultures (Lerer 178 –79). This false pure origin concept held by many first-language English users is one that neglects the fact that English has been and will continue to be on a journey.

One of the ways English continues its nonlinear journey is through internal change. English dialects are seen all over the world, but one that began at the same time that English was becoming globalized is African American Vernacular English (AAVE). African American Vernacular English came into being as soon as African Americans came into being (Winford 85). American colonists began capturing Africans and enslaving them in the 1600s and continued doing so until slavery was abolished in America in the 19th century. The descendants of these people came to be known as African Americans. Linguists have come up with several hypotheses to explain the inception of the dialect as it relates to the inception of African Americans. Part of linguists' efforts in doing so was to validate that AAVE is, in fact, a dialect and to establish it as an acceptable way of speaking English. Although this dialect has been

¹ See Lerer Chapters 12 and 13.

spoken and changing for the past few centuries, it has only begun to be recognized as such in the past 50 years. Its recognition began in the mid-to-late 1960s, with much credit given to linguist William Labov's work, *Language in the Inner City*. He studied the speech of Black Harlem youth, addressing the structural features, the debate over AAVE's origin and uses, and advocating for the dialect's usage. These topics Labov addressed continued to be at the center of the discussion of AAVE over the decades to come with many other linguists joining the conversation.

The origins of AAVE have been debated, with a number of theories being valid contenders for explaining how the dialect developed. Two main theories are regarded as the most plausible and accepted by linguists today: the Creole origins hypothesis originally developed by William Stewart and the English Origins Hypothesis developed by Beryl Bailey, both in the 1960s. The first theory is that AAVE resulted from the retention of West African languages that have been creolized (two groups speaking different languages created a common tongue that was sustained through generations) with Standard English but separate from it, and de-creolized itself into AAVE. It has since been developed by creolists such as John Rickford, who have maintained that there is a creole origin, but that the origins are much more nonlinear and multifaceted than Stewart proposed. The original version of the theory took into account that enslaved Africans spoke their own languages in their home countries and needed to find a common tongue with each other, as well as their captors. The other, more popular theory, known as the English Origins Hypothesis (EOH), maintains that AAVE developed from within English and "the English component of AA[V]E has become obscured over time, as the variety has undergone its own internally driven change, and the relevant linguistic features have disappeared from other varieties, especially from the Standard American English" (Van Herk 23). Other

theories fall under two camps of either monolithic or multivalent approaches with different levels of attention to sociohistorical contexts, ecological factors, second language acquisition, and other factors and sources.²

Linguistic structures have been another popular area for research into AAVE. To prove that AAVE is indeed a dialect, it needs to be clear what its distinctive linguistic features are. Linguistic features like copula absence (i.e. “she talking”), the habitual “be” (i.e. “she be talking”), and familiar markers (i.e. “up in here”), have come to be accepted by linguists as features unique to AAVE and will be addressed further in the next section. Another area often discussed in the study of AAVE is language learning and education. In the 1990s, the use of AAVE came to the national spotlight with the Oakland “Ebonics” controversy. “Ebonics” is a portmanteau of “ebony and phonics” that was a more commonly used term by linguists at the time. In 1996, the school board of Oakland, California, classified Ebonics as a derivation of African languages and asserted that its speakers should be considered English language learners. AAVE is now more accepted by the educated community, with code-switching between two dialects arising as a topic of discussion in turn. Despite the existing study and legitimizing the dialect by linguists, there is still more work to be done.

A discussion that is yet to be had about what the qualities of AAVE mean about its users, and why it developed in the direction that it did. I have developed a taxonomy of five categories that attempt to cover the distinctive qualities of AAVE. Tense/mode variation, Negation, Absence, Prosody/Pronunciation, and The Will to Adorn are five categories in which most of the specific features of AAVE that linguists have described comfortably find a place. These categories are a synthesis of linguists’ findings on the study of AAVE into a taxonomy

² For further reading see Van Herk (23–34).

contextualized by the function for the user. In essence, these are five ways that AAVE continues to separate itself from Standard English in various different forms for linguistic functions. I argue that these categories arose from necessity, as implied by my title, but also that the categories are necessary for scholars examining AAVE. The categories are in no hierarchy of importance, except for the last “Will to Adorn” which may be the most important of the five. It captures the essence of all of the categories as well as AAVE as a whole. The Will to adorn is African Americans' refusal to use a language that does not include their experience and subsequently does not suffice to express their experiences.

In theory, the taxonomy I created covers all of the features of AAVE and hypothesizes their meanings. The categories are not comprehensive or exhaustive, as it is the categories distinctions and not necessarily examples that fall within them that is essential. Some features could fit under multiple categories, but their qualitative functions for users will be the deciding factor in their placement, while their other possible placements will be noted. The features explained in these categories are covering a range of uses that are mostly still seen in contemporary AAVE. This deliberate choice to explicate modern features and qualities results from my proximity to and understanding of contemporary usage as a user of AAVE, but it will also allow me to transpose these findings onto earlier vestiges of the dialect. Seeing the language for what it has to offer, observing the language in its natural habitats, will bear more fruit than seeing how it fits into preexisting notions. As Zora Neale Hurston says in her essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934), “If we are to believe the majority of writers of Negro dialect and the burnt-cork artists, Negro speech is a weird thing, full of ‘ams’ and ‘Ises.’ Fortunately, we don't have to believe them. We may go directly to the Negro and let him speak for himself” (Hurston 1061).

Zora Neale Hurston, by profession, was an anthropologist, folklorist, and writer. But, she was also, in some ways, a linguist, and there is abundant value in viewing her as such. This kind of heuristic approach to analyzing Hurston and her work allows us to discover deeper implications about the dialect. The value inherent in Hurston's works comes from two interrelated factors about her: firstly that she is an informed observer and secondly that she is part of the ingroup of the observed, and a user of the dialect. Walt Whitman puts it adeptly when he says, "Language is not an abstract construction of the learned, or of dictionary-makers, but is something arising out of the work, needs, ties, joys, affections, tastes, of long generations of humanity, and has its bases broad and low, close to the ground" (V.9.4-7). This kind of understanding of language is why it is necessary to view Zora Neale Hurston as a linguist and as a major proponent for AAVE.

Linguistics, in the most general sense of the term, is the study of language. There are many subfields and approaches to studying linguistics that place language in different contexts. Language functions on varying levels, from biological, to psychological, to social, and beyond. For that reason, any way that language is studied is viable to the field of linguistics. One of the more important methods for studying language is anthropology. Language only exists as groups of people exist, and invariably, part of studying people is studying their language. Anthropology is a method or means toward an end. The end can vary; in the case of linguistics, it is toward describing and understanding language. Although the end to which Hurston was applying anthropology was not to describe language in the same way that linguists do, her contributions in observing language proved themselves just as valuable.

Even more relevant to the reason why we should look to Hurston as a valuable source for studying AAVE is her intentional use of the dialect. Her use of dialect was purposeful, which means she has to have some awareness of what the dialect had to offer. The texts that we can look to see this are *Mules and Men*(1935), *Their Eyes Were Watching God*(1937), “Story in Harlem Slang”(1942), and most recently published posthumously, *Barracoon*(2018). In all of these works, language plays an important role in developing meaning and ultimately in representing Black people. Henry Louis Gates presents a theory of African American literary criticism in his book *The Signifying Monkey*, in which he positions Hurston’s work as notable texts for analyzing signifyin(g). In this book, he speaks of both signifying in the standard sense as well as how it has developed in the Black discourse. Signifying in linguistics refers to the process of relating concepts to figures. Developed by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, “the signifier” refers to the physical embodiment or form of a concept or “the signified”. What’s important about this concept is that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, and only exists through a community’s agreed-upon context. Gates explores the meaning of signifying and its use as it refers to usage in the African American community. He assesses the convoluted multiple definitions between standard English and as it has been used in the Black vernacular. One of the ways he describes “signifyin(g)” (as opposed to the SE spelling “signifying”) is as “[having] as its associated concept all of the rhetorical figures subsumed in the term *Signify*. To Signify, in other words, is to engage in certain rhetorical games...” (Gates 54). For our purposes, this succinct and magnanimous definition is the most suited. Zora Neale Hurston, an important user of language, has exploited these semiotic figures in a way that renders her work a significant place to explore African American Vernacular English.

Hurston used her position as a (somewhat) supported writer and her knowledge of anthropology and race to create a work that both appealed to a wide audience as well as providing a noteworthy analysis of race politics in her time. *Mules and Men* is a collection of folk stories written by Zora Neale Hurston and published in 1935. In this work Hurston collects and retells tales from Eatonville and Polk County Florida, where Hurston grew up, and New Orleans, Louisiana. The book is an autoethnographic piece, as Hurston uses it to explore her past and herself within a greater context of African American history. In a letter to Franz Boas, Hurston's mentor and patron, as well as the man who is considered the "Father of Anthropology," she writes that *Mules and Men* is "unscientific," because she wishes to attract the "average reader" by using the "spy-glass of Anthropology". It's crucial to understand the context of the publishing industry that existed in relation to Hurston's race and sex. Hurston, a black woman, needed Franz Boas, an established white man to back her book for it to be published and successful. Because of that, Hurston had to write in a way that both appealed to him and his counterparts while presenting a work that held significance to her and her people. In other words, Hurston had to signify in Gates's sense to be heard and understood. Hurston expresses her culminating experience of collecting these folktales that "the folktales she had always heard were not merely amusing stories or even relics of slavery, but living forces, strategies used in her own day for dealing with power inequities" (Meisenhelder 107). This strategy she is speaking of is precisely what she uses in her career to appease and defy simultaneously.

The innovation of Zora Neale Hurston's work, especially regarding her language use, lies in the center of the axis of how Gates and Saussure describe signifying. In the introduction to *Mules and Men*, Hurston writes "the theory behind our tactics: 'The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind

for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song'" (Hurstun 3). This quote is emblematic of what Hurston is doing with this work, with language, as well as the larger context of her professional career.

In many ways, *Mules and Men* is about language, which means it must be about much more than language. It is also one of the first, if not the first, Black texts to use and define signifying in the context of African American usage. Hurston offers her own definition in this work in her footnote of an interaction between a couple as it meaning "to show off". At this moment she is using the rhetorical strategy of signifyin(g) to define signifying. Which, in turn, allowed her to (re)signify (SE) through this new context. In "Characteristics of Negro Expression," the essay in which Hurston most directly lays out her theory of African American Vernacular English, Hurston writes, "the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphs" (Hurstun 1051). This distinction is why we should pay attention to Zora Neale Hurston's use of language to present the lives of the Negro in *Mules and Men*. Within the circumstances, the content of the book, and the greater contexts of African American culture and history, *Mules and Men* becomes a world to explore AAVE. Much like Hurston was one of the first voices in the discourse on signifying, she catalogs many uses of the features of the taxonomy. Drawing from examples from *Mules and Men*, we can see what AAVE has looked like within the vernacular, and by making comparisons to the present, deepen our understanding of the dialect. In the following section I will present the functions of categories as seen in the present and in *Mules and Men* to examine the continuity between AAVE one-hundred years ago and today, and the implications of said continuity.

1. Tense/aspect/mode variation³:

Tense refers to the time of action, aspect refers to the relation to time, and mode/mood refers to the reality and intention of the verb. These features are variations in tense or mood that do not occur in Standard English. Standard English's uses of tense and mode are flexible because of heavy reliance on auxiliary verbs, such as “be,” “will,” or “might.” AAVE also makes use of this flexibility by changing combinations of compound verbs with mode as well as changing the use of morphological changes to indicate tense.

A. Habitual “be”/ “been”

- the speaker uses “be” as a marker of a habitual activity/ emphasizing how long the subject has been participating in an activity (Cukor-Avila and Bailey, “Grammaticalization in AAVE” 401– 404).

Example:

AAVE: “she be dancing”; “she been dancing”

Standard English: “she dances often”; “she has been dancing”

- The amount of stress and carrying out of the vowel sound in “been” indicates the longevity of the activity

³ See DeBose (371–386).

Examples:

- “She bin dancing” suggests that she has been dancing for a long amount of time, within a specific time frame.
- “She been dancing” suggests she has been dancing for a long amount of time and is thoroughly experienced.
- “She BEEEEEN dancing” suggests she might as well have walked out her mother’s womb dancing.

B. “a” + present progressive verb

the speaker uses “a” in combination with a verb in the present progressive verb as an indicator of a lack of urgency and likelihood for the action to continue

Example:

AAVE: “just a sittin’ and a rockin’”

Standard English: “just sitting there and rocking”

C. Existential “it’s”

- the speaker uses it to establish or question the existence or presence of something, making the use of a contraction possible in more scenarios

Example:

AAVE: “it’s a bear over there!”; “it’s gonna be bears there?”

SE: “There is a bear over there!”; “Will there be bears there?”

D. Preterite *had* + verb

- The speaker uses this combination to indicate the simple past as well as the past perfect. In Standard English, this combination is used in the past perfect to indicate the order of two or more things occurring in the past. In AAVE, however, this form can be used to talk about anything that happened in the past. The use of the SE simple past is also perfectly acceptable in AAVE, but the difference is when they are used. Preterite *had* + *verb* is most often used in narration, as a means to divide action, indicate complicating action, as well as emphasize the subject of the action. When *has* + verb is used, the emphasis of the statement shifts from the action itself onto the subject acting. “Had” acts an audio/visual buffer between the subject and the action, creating distance between the two parts, allowing them to function separately.

Example:

AAVE: “Then he had walked down the street.”

SE: “Then he walked down the street.”

E. Multiple modal

- The speaker uses multiple modal auxiliaries (can, could, may, might, must, ought to, shall, should, will, would, and need) in succession. In Standard English, one must choose one of these modes to describe the plausibility of action. However, one auxiliary may not suffice in describing the possibilities or intentions of the

speaker (Cukor-Avila and Bailey, “Rural Texas AAVE”). In AAVE ⁴ the ability to both “might” and “could” do one thing exists, as, after all, they do exist in reality, as seen in the example below.

Example:

AAVE: “I might could go to the store with you.” Here the speaker uses “might,” by which they are speaking to their own will to do an action. They also use “could,” which speaks to the possibility of that action occurring.

SE: “I might go to the store with you.”/ “I could go to the store with you.”

Mules and Men:

There are quite a few examples of tense/mode variation in *Mules and Men* with different features than the above examples, that work similarly to them. One thing that is still present in usage is the consistency and proof of systematic usage. Let’s examine tense/mode variation in the sentence below.

“We coulda *done* been gone if we had a knowed dat” (Hurston 92).

“*done*” + “been” - The italics of done indicates an emphasis similar to the “BEEEN” featured in the habitual be section. This indicates that they could have been gone a very long time ago if they were privy to the information necessary.

⁴ This feature is also seen in Southern American English. It remains consistent between speakers of AAVE throughout the continent and is considered a distinct feature of the dialect. For more on this discussion see Cukor-Avila and Bailey (181–200).

“had a knowed” – As “knowed” is not a proper form of “know” in Standard English, it’s equivalent is the past perfect “known” with the conditional “if” preceding. Standard English makes use of the simple past “knew” and the perfect “known.” The usage for these two is based upon the context of their tense, mode, and aspect. In *Mules and Men*, “knowed” is used as both the simple and the perfect past. What we see here is the tendency towards what is called analytical phrase construction in Standard English. This is when morphemes (smallest unit of meaning) and word order are the content that varies to construct meaning. The AAVE usage features both the analytical features of SE, but there is also a use of agglutination and inflectional variation to indicate syntax. Agglutination is when individual morphemes hold meanings that don't change in context but are arranged together to create new meaning. The use of “-ed” in Standard English indicates pastness, but not every verb uses this suffix. AAVE makes use of the morpheme’s indication and attaches it as is. What this unique usage tells us about AAVE is that there is an underlying logical system that is consistent with itself and language construction at large.

2. Negation: Negation refers to making a statement negative rather than affirming it. In English, this is a relatively simple process of negating words such as “not” or “never” before or after said verb or with morphological changes (changing a word) such as “nothing” or “disagree.” In Standard English, it is considered wrong to have a double negative as a means of negation. However, language has no obligation to adhere to the laws of logic; even English in its most “refined” version fails to do so. This is because as English developed throughout centuries with

influences all over the world, it kept forms from all of its influences and embraced them. Double negatives are only accepted in SE as a means of coded positives, e.g., “you shouldn't not do that” means that you should not neglect to do it, without the forcefulness that “you should do it” brings. This exception is a glimpse of the binary that exists in human experience, and between positive and negative, that should be reflected in language, which AAVE does do. Some may also not consider “ain't” to be “proper” English or even a word (despite it being recognized in dictionaries as such), but the abilities of “ain't” function beyond the capacities of any single Standard English word or phrase. English makes abundant use of contractions, many of which are used in negation. “Aren't,” “isn't,” “didn't,” “hasn't,” “haven't,” as well as “am not” are all able to be expressed through the singular phrase of “ain't.” If we are speaking strictly for functionality's sake, “ain't” is undoubtedly a useful term. Linguist Joan Fickett puts it sensibly when she says of Black English, “It has a system of tenses which indicate degrees of pastness and degrees of futurity, it can talk about how long ago things didn't happen, or how far ahead they aren't going to happen” (90).

Double/triple-negative

- The speaker uses a double or triple-negative to intensify the negation of the statement as well as to connote the seriousness in the speaker's statement. Interestingly enough, Standard English similarly uses double negatives. Take for example, the response “not now, they aren't,” which establishes that the action is not occurring at the present, as well as the fact that the subject is not doing it. Either part of the answer would suffice, but the speaker chooses to use double negatives to emphasize the negation of the answer.

Examples:

Double

AAVE: “ain’t never”

SE: literal: “is/has/have/did not never” → received “is/has/have/did not ever”

Triple

AAVE: “can't nobody tell me nothing” (From record-breaking Billboard hit, “Old Town Road”– Lil Nas X, 2019)

SE: “nobody can tell me anything”

Other specifications in negation:

- negation in inceptive: “ain’t singing, don’t sing”
- negation in recent: “done sung”
- negation in imminent: “ain’t sung”
- negation in post imminent: “ain’t gonna sing”

Mules and Men:

“Ain’t you never hea’d dat in Polk County de water drink lak cherry wine?” (Hurston 55).

This use is similar to “ain’t never,” except it interjects the pronoun “you” in between and begins the question with the negation. This furthers the emphasis on the negative, highlighting the absurdity that she may not have heard that.

“not one nary place to root” (Hurston 37).

This example is similar to not no one or not nothing. Nary is not often used in 21st century English, so this usage exemplifies how AAVE changes as SE changes and both are living and growing languages.

3. Absence: Absence refers to the omitting of a feature seen in Standard English. There are many examples of absence in AAVE; below I have listed a few that linguists regularly recognize. The use of absence in AAVE is seen throughout different linguistic categories, including grammar, pronunciation, syntax, etc. The two main purposes of absence seem to be skimming off the unnecessary or adding to/changing the aural aesthetic of speech.

Copula absence/zero copula

- the speaker neglects the copula, a form of the verb to be, adding concision to speech.

Copula absence works off of the assumption that the receiver of the speech understands the copula tense is in the present or present progressive. It establishes present as the standard, not needing to be specified, and any other tense should be specified. Copula absence is a contextually driven function depending on how the copula is being used, or not used (Wolfram 502).

Example:

AAVE: “She good.”; “They bad.”; “He alright.”; “She doing her homework.”

SE: “She is good.”; “They are bad.”; “He is alright”; or, “he is doing alright.”;

“She is doing her homework.”

The following examples are of phonetic absences in comparison to their Standard

English pronunciations. These features in their essence highlight two facets of AAVE and the progress of a language/dialect in general. Firstly, languages tend to have a “use it or lose it” factor when they are not standardized, and sometimes even when they are, in more casual speech. Take for example the loss of the initial consonant clusters gn, and kn in English. Up until the time modern English was developing, the words “knight” and “gnaw” would have been pronounced with the initial consonant “k” and “g” sound. But as those sound combinations are not easy or useful in English, they began being used less and less, until they fell out of spoken usage, only remaining in written form.

Secondly, there is a rhythmic quality to AAVE that these absences allow. These absences in many cases allow for one word to flow into the next without much effort or a chance for slipping up. Although these absences may be more prominent in AAVE, they also occur in casual speech by Standard English speakers.

Examples:

- g-dropping: “talkin”
- r-lessness: “fear/fea”
- s-dropping: “he hear you/he hears you”
- t-dropping: “sof/soft”

4. Prosody/Pronunciation: Prosody refers to the aural and rhythmic qualities in language, including stress and tone. Although all languages have some prosodic features, English has a relatively low number of prosodic features, especially compared to the level seen in many tonal African languages. This is important to note because the prosody of AAVE is comparable to that

of African languages, and some vestiges from African Languages may remain (Thomas 427). Pronunciation refers to how a word or phoneme (the smallest unit of sound in a language) is spoken concerning sound. Pronunciation in English largely differs by region and by the influence of other languages and accents. Many pronunciation features found in AAVE are regional or overlap with regional pronunciations. For the exploration of pronunciation in AAVE, it is important to make the distinction of whether the feature is of the dialect or of the region. The difference between prosody and pronunciation is that prosodic features are indicative of meaning while pronunciation and meaning are arbitrary. As both relate to sound, they are categorized together to relate how sound is important to the dialect.

Pronunciation: Similar to the phonological qualities of absence, these are changes occurring in the way speech sounds. Just like the pronunciation changes in English before AAVE, there is no definitive explanation for these changes. What matters most is that they did occur, and they did so naturally. Sound shifts are the speakers' impositions on what feels most natural in their speech. As linguist John McWhorter says in *Talking Back, Talking Black*, "Your sound holds on tight deep within you" (80). These are examples of such sounds that made their way into AAVE.

Examples:

- interdental fricative: "baf/bath"
- "pin/pen" merger
- L-vocalization: "foo/fool"
- "ar/or", "car/cor", "aj/oj"

Mules and Men:

“he ‘skeered’ dem people so bad” (Hurstun 23).

One might still hear this pronunciation today, but other pronunciations such as “scurred” or “skeəd” may also be heard. It seems like the combination of the a and r sound are avoided at all costs with AAVE speakers.

Prosodic:

A. Front-stressing

- A speaker stresses the front syllable of the word rather than the end, which is more commonly seen in English. This creates asymmetry and angularity to the speech, making the stresses and accents even more accented. When a syllable is stressed after a stressed syllable, the second stress sounds even more stressed. This also emphasizes the subject/s of the statement.

Example:

AAVE: “Look at the **PO-lice** on the **TEE-V**” - trochaic (stressed/unstressed) syllables in nouns, mixed meter with double stresses and unstressed syllables.

SE: “Look at the **po-LICE** on the **T-VEE**” - iambic (unstressed/stressed) syllables in nouns, trochaic (stressed/unstressed) sentence.

B. Double stress

- A speaker repeats a word with extra stress on the first utterance to double the emphasis on that word.

Example:

AAVE: “mad/mad”

SE: “very mad, livid”

5. The Will to Adorn: “The will to adorn” is a description originally coined by author and activist Zora Neale Hurston in the essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934). As I use the term, it refers to many features and subcategories, which all fall under this same quality of a need for inventiveness. Hurston writes, “The stark, trimmed phrases of the Occident seem too bare for the voluptuous child of the sun, hence the adornment. It arises out of the same impulse as the wearing of jewelry and the making of sculpture—the urge to adorn...perhaps the [African American's] idea of ornament does not attempt to meet conventional standards, but it satisfies the soul of its creator” (1051–52). While the features below may seem like a miscellaneous category, these features are all consistent with the will to adorn, to embellish, to add flavor, to a language (standard English) that simply does not do enough for these users.

A. Familiarity: Hurston contends in this same essay that “this [the absence of privacy] ought not to seem strange when one considers that we are an outdoor people accustomed to communal life” (Hurston 1057). This sentiment can be seen in linguistic uses and features that indicate familiarity. It is not necessarily that there is no privacy, but that the users are connected on a familial level that they must be able to express. The familiarity of AAVE is not for the purposes of excluding those outside of the ingroup, but instead affirms those within it.

I. Associative “and them”

The speaker uses “and them” after naming a subject, with whom the “them” are associated. This is a phrase that only works in context if both the recipient of the statement is aware of the “them” and the subject is familiar to all parties. It is assumed that the “them” is a relatively consistent group of people that the subject is associated with.

Example:

AAVE: “who’s going to be there?”/ “Ricky and them.”

SE: “who’s going to be there?”/ “Ricky and his friends.”/ “Which ones?”

“who’s going to be there?”/ “Ricky and his group of friends.”

Other Familiarity Examples:

- “up in /their/her/his”- “he be up in his boy’s house”
- “up in here/there”- “ who all up in there? “
- “peoples”- “Me and my peoples going out”

B. Interjections: Standard English has plenty of interjections, which are sounds that carry meaning but are not able to be clearly defined. Interjections are highly contextual prosodic features, as their intonation and placement in use can indicate further meaning. “Wow,” “hmm,” or “gee” are all forms of interjections, as well as greetings. AAVE has added to the list of English interjections by way of adopting some that are diasporic and used by Black people all around the world including African Americans, and others that were born from the dialect itself.

- mtchew (teeth sucking): a speaker uses this sound to indicate distaste, disagreement, contempt, and the like. The length, volume, and dramatization of this

sound correlate to the severity of feeling.

- aht aht: the speaker uses this to say indicate a negative reaction with the connotation of annoyance or irritation.
- yo/yer: the speaker usually uses this to get someone's attention or as a greeting, but it may be used in various contexts as a buffering sound.
- “word”: the speaker uses this to agree with or acknowledge information, or as a question seeking confirmation. It also can express mild contempt, usually with an inflection at the end, indicative of a sarcastic tone.

Mules and Men:

“They laughed a great big old ‘kah kah’ laugh and got closer together.” (Hurston 68)

This is similar to modern-day usage of “kee kee“ which indicates a snickering laugh, or as a sarcastically toned response to someone else’s snicker. Furthermore, in the African American queer community, having a “kiki” refers to getting together and having a good time, a good indicator of which is laughter.

In synthesizing and analyzing this relatively small pool of features from AAVE, we begin to see an important commonality between the features: they all serve to fill a gap of what Standard English does not provide for African American speakers. English in its entirety has been stripped down in all the years of its development, to something not heavily adorned. If we

look at the time of Shakespearean English or Chaucer's English, we can see English was at one point adorned in similar ways that AAVE has been adorned⁵. Take for example, Shakespeare's invention of the word assassination. "Assassin" was originally an Arabic term for "hashish eater" or someone who would smoke hashish before committing heinous acts. It was adopted by English but only in reference to a killer of a public figure. Shakespeare took the word "assassin" and adding the Latin ending "-ion" to make the act itself into a noun. This word was first seen in Macbeth's soliloquy and served to emphasize the disorderly and unprecedented actions that Macbeth was contemplating and would go on to commit (Lerer 135–136). Black English re-adorns English with its users' new experiences in a similar fashion. For example, the phrase "kill-dead" that Zora Neale Hurston categorizes as a double descriptive in "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1052). This phrase takes an existing English verb "kill" and an existing English adjective "dead" that emphasizes both the action ("kill") and the state of being resulting from that action ("dead") simultaneously.

American English was intentionally stripped down by both authors of literature and grammarians/lexicographers. The literary movement that began with the birth of America was driven by the Puritans that migrated from Britain. These authors wrote in "Plain Style," an unembellished, direct approach to writing and expression. As expressed before, there was growing anxiety from English speakers to regulate a language that was constantly changing. This concern extended to Americans with the added desire to separate themselves from Britain, for this new use of language to reflect a new identity. Noah Webster, of the now-famed dictionary Merriam-Webster, wrote grammar/spelling books and dictionaries in his time (1758-1843). He was advocating for a "Federal English" that would fit the American identity, one that was

⁵ For further reading see Lerer Chapters 5 and 9.

unadorned both physically and economically (fewer letters in print costs less money). There was a deliberate intention to simplify spelling, which led to changes seen today such as “colour” to “color” and “cancelled” to “canceled.” But for African Americans, this stripped-down English did not and does not do or say enough.

What African Americans did was not much different from what early American settlers did with the language: they made it their own. Their inventiveness in the language represents the fact that they too had to invent and redefine themselves in a language that did not include them. As Zora Neale Hurston says of the musical quality of “Negro Expression,” “Each unit has a rhythm of its own, but when the whole is assembled it is lacking in symmetry. But easily workable to a Negro who is accustomed to the break in going from one part to another, so that he adjusts himself to the new tempo” (Hurston 1054). This sentiment is not only true of music but of the Black experience historically, and particularly in language. This ability to adjust within a parameter not set by this group and unpredictable in nature is the embodiment of the African-American experience. The will to adorn was more than a desire to make something pretty or different; rather, it was rooted in a desire to make something their own. Language is a living construct that encodes a collective memory and experience. Without the African Americans’ Will to Adorn the language that was imposed upon them, they would never be able to own themselves or their history.

The Will to Adorn is a category of necessity because it features specific usages not found in standard English as well as it being a necessary quality of expression in AAVE. While it is a category of necessity, it serves as much more for the dialect. Underlying these specific systematic differences in the use of English are certain attitudes that inform the qualities that these features reflect. This notion is rooted in the linguistic concepts of linguistic relativity and

cultural transmission. Linguistic relativity is the weaker form of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which posited that language informs our perception. It claims that language and perception are not a one-way causality, but that we inform language based on perception and language cyclically informs our perception. The thing driving that cycle is cultural transmission. Language is a learned structure that is maintained and passed down through culture. With that being said, culture is also passed down through language.

In languages we see these concepts manifesting through differences in categorical expressions. An example of these cultural differences in language or dialect that can be seen in English as it has been maintained through time is our words for animals as beings and the words for animals as food. The distinction we make today between “cow” and “beef” or “pig” and “pork” are hypothesized to be direct consequences of Norman conquest and the subsequent class strata that occurred as a result. The farmers who raised the animals were of the working class, at the time being anglos and Saxons, speaking a Germanic tongue. The consumers of the meat they cultivated were the French, or in contact with the French, were French-speaking. What we get is Anglo-Saxons saying Cu (cow), Picg (pig), and the French saying Buef (beef), Porc (pork), and their eventual coexistence in Modern English. This example shows how experience can encode language, but there are also ways that values can do the same. Take for example the values of collectivist cultures like with the Japanese, for whom family is very important. There are different words to refer to family members depending on their relationship to you in age, whether you're talking about your own family or someone else's, and different contexts of formality.

Much like these categorical expressions differing, with cultural undertones being the common ground, so is it with AAVE. The Will to Adorn is one of the attitudes that inform the dialect of AAVE. Hurston writes that “the Negro’s greatest contribution to the [English]

language is: (1) the use of metaphor and simile; (2) the use of the double descriptive; (3) the use of verbal nouns” (Hurstun 1052). These are all rooted in the Will to Adorn, and their wealth and breadth in AAVE will be seen for centuries to come. What's even more telling about the use of AAVE and the Will to Adorn is the use of literary devices as a whole. One could explore the use of literary devices ingrained in AAVE to no end to see how they reflect this Will. Hyperbole, metonymy, allusion, and metaphor, to name a few are devices that AAVE users use on a regular basis. It serves a lens that can be used to explore the features and origins of AAVE further. In understanding this, we can look further into AAVE to discover in which ways this Will has been reflected in language, and more importantly how the experience of African Americans in relation to the Will has influenced the dialect.

Although the Will to Adorn is significant in understanding what made AAVE and what continues to drive it, what it reveals about what we don't know about the language and what can be known is even more significant. What the above analysis proved most important is the continuity that has existed throughout the use of AAVE. Examining *Mules and Men* for the same features still seen today reveals that there is a strong foundation underlying the dialect. The Will to Adorn is merely a glimpse of what part of that foundation consists of. It is a profound layer of foundation that indicates there are still more layers to be discover. This understanding can lead to a world of discovery of how African Americans cultivated a language that is wholly theirs out of a language that was imposed upon them.

The ways in which English has changed since its Standardization are mostly due to groups upon whom English was imposed. This often results in the creolization or dialectization of the language. These are similar processes, with creoles having a more obvious appearance, as the two distinct languages they come from are easy to recognize. The oppressive powers often

ignore/neglect/denounce the experience of the oppressed, using their own language to do so, while the creole captures the collective experience and memory of the oppressed group. English also has many dialects because when people bring their languages from around the world and assimilate, they do not always completely lose their native tongue. African American Vernacular English has a unique distinction among these other dialects and creoles, one that reflects the unique experience of African Americans. African Americans and Americans are both Americans, both speak American English; this is the only dialect that has grown from within the dialect of American English and is continuing to change the usage from the inside. Pop culture website BuzzFeed published an article titled “A 43-Year-Old High School Teacher Has Been Keeping A Personal List Of ‘Gen Z’ Slang Terms He Overhears His Students Using.” It features entries like “low key”, “big mad”, and “no cap”; these as well as nearly every other entry on the list, are features of modern AAVE. AAVE is the language of the future in America, while Standard English is a dialect reserved for specific spaces. As for the culture, the youth, and the community of the United States, AAVE is the favored use of English in everyday speech. Without fully understanding what African American Vernacular English is, where it came from, and where it's going, we cannot fully understand the same for Standard English, and African Americans are once again stripped of the proper credit that is due for their impact on the world.

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