

NCTE EDITORIAL BOARD: Gwen Alexander, Elizabeth Close, Cora Lee Five, Ray Levi, Shuaib Meacham, Joe Janangelo, Jaime Armin Mejía, Carolyn Phipps, Kyoko Sato, Zarina M. Hock, ex officio, Kent Williamson, ex officio

# *A Teacher's Introduction to African American English*

*What a Writing Teacher Should Know*



TERESA M. REDD  
*Howard University*

KAREN SCHUSTER WEBB  
*Alliant International University*

*NCTE Teacher's Introduction Series*

National Council of Teachers of English  
1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801-1096

2005

---

## INTRODUCTION

On the first day of class, Jane Smith greets twenty undergraduates in her Composition 101 class at a small four-year private college in Bozeman, Montana. For the first time in her ten-year teaching career, she sees two African American students in the room, and she overhears them conversing in what she assumes is Black English. White, middle class, with little exposure to Black English outside the media, Smith wonders whether she is equipped to teach these students to write expository essays in Standard English.

Meanwhile, thousands of miles away in Newark, New Jersey, cloistered in her office at an inner-city community college, an Asian American composition teacher mulls over a batch of diagnostic essays. Fresh out of graduate school and on her first teaching assignment, Kathy Wu does not know what to make of the profusion of errors in the papers before her. Since virtually all of her students are African American, she wonders whether Black English accounts for most of the errors she sees, and if so, how she should mark and grade the essays.

In an office down the hall, an African American instructor, Reggie Brown, is also troubled as he confers with a thirty-year-old woman who speaks and writes only Black English. He wishes he had taken a course in sociolinguistics. How should he discuss the student's use of Black English? How can he explain its impact on her writing?

These scenarios recur in composition courses across the United States. Again and again, teachers of writing confront what they see as the enigma of Black English, Ebonics, or what most linguists call African American English (AAE). The teachers' puzzlement reflects the national confusion about AAE—confusion that was all too evident in the wake of the Oakland [California] School Board's 1996 resolution on Ebonics. When the board declared

Ebonics the primary language of its African American students, the public furor that erupted revealed how little teachers as well as politicians and pundits knew about research on AAE.

Since the Oakland controversy, a number of linguists and educators have attempted to elucidate AAE for the public. But they have yet to specifically address the concerns of teachers of writing. These teachers need to understand not only what AAE is, but also what role it may play in students' mastery of Standard Written English (SWE), the standard for academic and professional writing. Writing teachers need a concise, coherent, and current source that introduces them to the major schools of thought—without polemics or unnecessary jargon—so that they can draw their own conclusions about AAE and understand how it might influence teaching and learning in their classrooms.

This volume seeks to fulfill these needs. It describes AAE and explores its significance for the teaching of writing by summarizing the best scholarship on AAE and applying theory to practice. Citing leading scholars in the field, the book answers the following questions:

1. What is AAE and how did it develop?
2. What are the distinctive features of AAE?
3. Does AAE affect students' ability to write SWE?
4. How can AAE speakers become effective SWE writers?

Chapter 1 plunges headfirst into the Ebonics debate. Page by page it explores whether AAE is "broken" English, slang, a dialect, or a language. These names matter because they convey messages about the status of AAE speakers inside and outside the classroom. Like the labels attached to AAE, theories about its origins also have educational implications, so Chapter 1 presents three competing theories about AAE's evolution. They range from the Eurocentric view that AAE evolved from the English of Irish settlers to the Afrocentric view that AAE imported features from the languages of enslaved Africans. In between we find the Creolist view, which describes AAE as an amalgam of features from English and West African languages.

Chapter 2 identifies the distinctive features of AAE: its vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and rhetoric. Many of these features can influence students' writing. After showing you how to identify AAE features in writing, the chapter refers you to Appendix A to practice with student writing samples.

Chapter 3 examines several hypotheses about the influence of AAE on students' ability to write Standard English. It first interrogates the claims that AAE is a sign of intellectual inferiority or an obstacle to learning SWE. Then it considers hypotheses that take into account language-learning strategies as well as the differences between speaking and writing. It also explores the role of the composing process as well as students' and teachers' attitudes toward nonstandard dialects.

Finally, Chapter 4 presents the pedagogical approaches that reflect these hypotheses, along with sample assignments (see Appendix B). Beginning with the traditional approach (which relies on grammar lessons, exercises, and revision), it proceeds to strategies designed to aid second language learners and to stimulate dialect awareness. The chapter concludes with a description of two other approaches that draw more heavily on AAE students' language and culture.

To help you apply what you are reading, the book provides five practical aids:

- ◆ Student writing samples with analyses of the AAE-related features
- ◆ Sample assignments illustrating each pedagogical approach discussed in the book
- ◆ Diagrams and tables to clarify concepts
- ◆ A glossary of essential linguistic terms (Throughout the book, glossed terms appear in boldface type.)
- ◆ A list of suggested readings for each chapter
- ◆ A list of recommended Web sites

Although this book will only introduce you to scholarship on AAE, after reading the chapters you should be better equipped to assist composition students who are AAE speakers. In other words, the book should help you diagnose, instruct, and assess.

Hopefully, the book will also motivate you to read more widely and more deeply about this important issue.

---

## THE NATURE OF AAE

Whether you realize it or not, your personal theories about the world guide your teaching. Therefore, if you wish to teach AAE speakers more effectively, you should examine those theories, especially your theories about language. In Part I of this volume, we invite you to do just that: to reexamine your theories through the prism of linguistic scholarship.

We urge you to read Part I carefully because some writing teachers have jumped to conclusions about AAE due to a lack of reliable or sufficient information. The extent of this problem was revealed in a survey conducted by the Language Policy Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). After collecting responses from nearly 1,000 college and secondary English teachers, the committee discovered that almost one-third of the teachers who responded had never enrolled in a course on language diversity (i.e., a course that would introduce them to AAE and other nonstandard varieties of English). Yet 96 percent agreed that such training was a necessity for anyone who was planning to be a teacher today (Richardson, "Race" 45, 54–55).

So what do writing teachers need to know about language diversity if their students speak AAE? Part I of this volume answers that question. Chapter 1 introduces you to AAE—what it is and where it came from—while Chapter 2 shows you how it looks and sounds. Chapter 2 does not, however, attempt to teach you to speak or write AAE; rather, it helps you *recognize* it when you see it in students' writing. At the same time, by surveying a wide range of views on what to call AAE, Chapter 1 prepares you to construct your own perspective—a perspective that will influence how you refer to AAE and how you relate to the students who speak it.

## What Is AAE?

What's in a name? "Everything," says linguist Geneva Smitherman, "as we acknowledge that names are not merely words but concepts which suggest implications, values, history, and consequences beyond the word or 'mere' name itself" (*Talkin and Testifyin* 42). According to Smitherman and centuries-old African traditions (Asante 70; Nehusi 82–84), names wield power, and we can see their impact every day, especially in the composition classroom, where language commands so much attention. The language of our nurture often *names* us in U.S. society, with all of the positive or negative perceptions that are embedded within the name. Because of these perceptions, language, like ethnicity and social class, is a status predictor in the classroom, raising or lowering teachers' expectations and students' self-esteem. Therefore, what a teacher calls African American students' speech—and related features in their writing—is of no small significance.

Many African American students speak what we will call African American English, or AAE,<sup>1</sup> since that is currently the most widely accepted term among linguists.<sup>2</sup> Although all African Americans do not speak AAE, linguists estimate that it is spoken by 80 to 90 percent of African Americans (especially blue-collar workers and adolescents), at least among friends and relatives (Mufwene 32; Rickford, *AAVE* 323–24; Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk* 19). Occasionally, members of other racial and ethnic groups speak AAE as well; hence, they too are part of the AAE speech community.

You may have heard this type of speech referred to as Black English, African American Language, or Ebonics, among other names.<sup>3</sup> But it is the names people use to classify AAE that matter most in our classrooms. Historically, AAE has been labeled "broken" English, slang, a dialect, and a language. These names

night), its subjects and verbs disagree (e.g., *Mary get*), its words lack endings (e.g., *gettin*), and its sentences are poorly structured (e.g., *Don't nobody know what's goin down*).

Thus, over the centuries, Americans of all colors have characterized AAE as an incorrect form of English: even the African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, who made his name by writing verse in AAE, lamented in "The Poet," "But ah, the world it, turned to praise / A jingle in a broken tongue" (220). More recently, in 1996 when the Oakland School Board declared AAE the primary language of its African American students, critics such as former New York Mayor Edward Koch, CNN talk show host Bob Novak, and *Washington Post* columnist Mary McGroarty characterized AAE as substandard English. And once again some African Americans joined the fray, including comedian Bill Cosby, who called AAE "Igno-Ebonics" (Gilyard, "It Ain't" 203; Vaughan-Cooke 139–52). Such epithets imply that AAE speakers are not educated or intelligent enough to learn Standard English—that is, that they do not know how to follow the rules of a language.

Yet linguistic research shows that AAE speakers are following rules, rules that simply differ from those of Standard English. Linguist John Rickford offers an instructive example of how rules govern AAE pronunciation. Arguing that AAE is "no more lazy English than Italian is lazy Latin," he explains:

One reason people might regard Ebonics as "lazy English" is its tendency to omit consonants at the ends of words—especially if they come after another consonant, as in "tes(t)" and "han(d)." But if one were just being lazy or cussed, or both, why not also leave out the final consonant in a word like "pant"? This is not permitted in Ebonics; the "rules" of the dialect do not allow the deletion of the second consonant at the end of a word unless both consonants are either voiceless, as with "st," or voiced, as with "nd." (AAVE 323)

Ironically, the rule-governed nature of AAE was indirectly confirmed by some of the Ebonics parodies that proliferated in the media and on the Internet during the Oakland controversy. One striking example comes from a column penned by William Raspberry of the *Washington Post*. Attempting to ridicule AAE, Raspberry invents the following dialogue:

both reflect and affect the status of the speakers. Some names may lead teachers to view their African American students as lazy, illiterate, or even learning disabled, while other names invite teachers to see their students as multilingual learners. Likewise, certain names can make African American students feel ignorant or competent, ashamed or proud.

It is easy to imagine how the attitudes instilled by or embodied in these names might influence student performance in writing classes. Since teachers' and students' attitudes toward AAE can play an important role in writing instruction (see Chapter 4), this chapter aims to clarify what AAE is and is not. As we explain below, linguists agree that AAE is a dialect or a language rather than "broken" English or slang, but whether it is recognized as a language depends as much on politics as linguistics.

### Is AAE "Broken" English?

Since enslaved Africans began speaking AAE, it has been regarded by some observers as **broken English**, "lazy English," or simply "bad English"—a fractured form of speech without logic or rules. After all, it appears to violate rule after rule of **Standard American English**, or what the American public calls **Standard English**. This is the variety of English privileged in U.S. academic, government, and professional circles as well as the mainstream media.

Despite its privileged status, the term *Standard English* is somewhat misleading, for there is no universal standard for speaking English in the United States. The spoken standard varies according to region (e.g., the South Atlantic versus New England). For simplicity's sake, however, we will refer to "Standard English" because these spoken varieties share many rules, especially grammatical ones. Moreover, there is a formal written standard, **Standard Written English (SWE)**, which is "codified, prescriptive, and relatively homogeneous" (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 281).

Whether the standard is spoken or written, AAE seems to defy the norm, especially the standard for formal writing. According to the rules of Standard Written English, AAE's verbs are missing or misused (e.g., *You the man* or *She be workin day and*

"What you be talkin' bout, my man?" he said, "I don't be offerin' you my grub; I be saying hello. You know, like, *what's up?*" (A27)

As Rickford and his journalist son Russell Rickford point out, however, this is not AAE, for it violates AAE's grammatical rules governing the use of the verb *be*. An authentic AAE version would read as follows:

"What you talkin' bout, my man?" he said, "I ain't offerin' you my grub; I'm sayin' hello. You know, like, *what's up?*" (208)

So Raspberry errs when he claims that AAE "has no right or wrong expressions, no consistent spellings or pronunciations, and no discernible rules" (A27). Indeed, as Rickford and Rickford observe, if AAE had no rules, how could AAE speakers understand one another? How could generation after generation of African American children learn AAE? (208). Clearly, AAE does have rules (as do all languages and dialects), and Chapter 2 introduces some of them.

Not only do the rules of AAE challenge the notion that it is "broken" English, but so does the very history of language. Drawing on that history in *Spreading the Word*, linguist John McWhorter cites six additional reasons that AAE is not a standard form of Standard English:

1. AAE is not derived from Standard English; it evolved from the English language alongside Standard English (7–8).
2. AAE is the product of the same sort of process that transformed Latin into French. Example: "[I]f the change from Latin *feminae id dedi* to French *je l'ai donné a la femme* was not a breach of Latin grammar, then how could the progression from *There's nobody here* to *Ain't nobody here* be a breach of English grammar?" (6).
3. AAE does not have "primitive" features. Example: AAE's omission of the verb *be* in *She my sister* or *He skinny* is the same sort of omission that occurs in the standard variety of many respected languages such as Russian, Arabic, Hungarian, Indonesian—even the original Hebrew of the Bible. (See *Atah ha-eesh* in 2 Samuel 12:7, which literally means "You the man," as in AAE's *You de man.*) (27–29).

4. Because we do not study AAE in school the way we study Standard English, most of us do not recognize the complexity of AAE, such as its rules governing *be* and pronunciation (10–11, 25).
5. Since AAE is not "frozen on the page" by printing and schooling, it has evolved further than Standard English, for instance, by simplifying sounds. Example: AAE simplifies the peculiar *th* sound in *them, these, and those*, producing *dem, dese, and dose* (25).
6. AAE is no more or less logical than Standard English or foreign languages. Example: AAE's double negative *I don't see nothin* mirrors the standard French *Je ne vois rien* ("I not see nothing"). In fact, the colloquial practice of dropping the first negative (*ne*) is considered "bad" French (26–67).

### Is AAE Slang?

Instead of characterizing AAE as broken English, many Americans refer to AAE as slang or "street speech," that is, the lingo of the ghetto. Indeed, during the Oakland controversy, the Clinton administration and the *New York Times* classified AAE as such (Vaughn-Cooke 140). Unquestionably, AAE, like other varieties of English, encompasses a wealth of slang, words such as *chillin* ("relaxing"), *benjamins* ("\$100 bills"), and *def* ("excellent") (Smitherman, *Black Talk* 65, 91, 105). From the Harlemese of the 1920s to the blues talk of the 1940s, from the Black Power chants of the 1960s to the rap of today's Hip-Hop, slang has remained one of AAE's most memorable contributions.

But AAE is much more than slang, for slang consists of short-lived, informal words coined and shared by a limited group, typically musicians, hustlers, or teenagers of a particular region or social class. AAE, on the other hand, includes words that have endured for decades, known primarily to African Americans regardless of age, gender, class, or region. For instance, surveys have documented that, unlike white Americans, a wide range of African Americans recognize AAE expressions such as *bougie* ("an elitist African American"), *cut your eyes* ("to give a contemptuous look"), and *ace boon coon* ("best friend") (Rickford and Rickford 93–94).

Moreover, any careful observer of African American life can see that AAE is not merely "ghettoese": it inhabits not only the inner-city streets but also most of the lower-, middle-, and even upper-class homes, churches, clubs, and other gathering places in African America. Therefore, to call a student's speech "street" or, in rural areas, "country" may associate the student with a lifestyle he or she does not embrace. Even referring to AAE as "slang" communicates a lack of respect for a tongue that the student's community considers good enough for church or home. Hence, linguist John Baugh found that many churchgoing AAE speakers took pains to distinguish "black street speech" from "the home language, which was devoid of 'foul language' or other 'bad words'" (*Beyond* 105).

But there is a more compelling reason why AAE is not slang: slang is simply vocabulary, and, as Rickford and Rickford remark, AAE is "much more than the sum of its words" (91). As we now explain, AAE possesses additional features—a distinctive pronunciation, grammar, and rhetoric.

### Is AAE a Dialect?

Most linguists have classified AAE as a dialect since the 1960s, when they began to document the rules that govern its pronunciation and grammar. Dialects are variations of a language that are mutually intelligible but include some grammatical and/or pronunciation patterns that are unique to speakers in certain regions, social classes, or ethnic groups. Like other languages, English consists of dialects that possess distinctive features. Thus, even Standard American English is a dialect—just one member of the family of dialects that constitute the English language.<sup>4</sup> Yet much of the public wrongly assumes that the standard dialect is the English language because it is the dialect promoted by the people in power.

As our definition indicates, to qualify as a dialect of English, AAE must not only resemble other varieties of English but also vary systematically in distinctive ways. Many linguists argue that it does. For instance, linguist William Labov declares that AAE is "more different from standard English than any other dialect

### What Is AAE?

spoken in continental North America" ("Testimony"). According to Smitherman, the most distinctive grammatical difference between AAE and Standard English lies in the use of the verb *be* (*Talkin and Testifyin* 19). AAE speakers use "habitual *be*" to signal a recurring condition and "future *be*" to express future time.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, they omit forms of *be* when the condition is fixed in time, unless it is essential for meaning, such as to indicate the past (*Talkin and Testifyin* 19–21). The sentences in Table 1.1 illustrate this complex grammatical pattern.

In the following scenario, Smitherman illustrates how the AAE usage of *be* can confuse teachers who do not understand it:

SCENE: First-grade classroom, Detroit

TEACHER: Where is Mary?

STUDENT: She not here.

TEACHER (exasperatedly): She is *never* here!

STUDENT: Yeah, she be here.

TEACHER: Where? You just said she wasn't here. (*Talkin That Talk* 25)

Chapter 2 summarizes other distinctive patterns of AAE, including pronunciation rules and rhetorical strategies that set AAE apart from Standard English.

Despite these striking differences, linguists such as Baugh, Labov, and McWhorter, as well as Wolfram, maintain that AAE is still a dialect of English because it shares most of the features of other American English dialects. That is why, they maintain, despite some baffling words, speakers of American English can usually understand AAE speakers. What these speakers say may sound different, but the underlying meaning (the **deep structure**)

TABLE 1.1. Contrasting Uses of *Be* in AAE

Feature	AAE	Standard English
Habitual <i>be</i> :	<i>He be busy.</i>	= <i>He is always busy.</i>
Future <i>be</i> :	<i>He be busy soon.</i>	= <i>He will be busy soon.</i>
Absent <i>be</i> :	<i>He busy.</i>	= <i>He is busy right now.</i>
Past <i>be</i> :	<i>He was busy.</i>	= <i>He was busy.</i>



remains the same. Although Smitherman has recently reevaluated this assumption, in her 1977 book *Talkin and Testifyin* she explains the concept well:

[O]ne American English speaker might say, *John hit the ball*. Another might say, *The ball was hit by John*. In the deep structure of English, these two sentences are really the same; thus despite being expressed in different ways, their meaning is clear to speakers of English. Similarly, one [AAE] speaker might say, *He do know it*. And another [Standard English speaker] might say, *He does know it*. Again, both statements are the same in the deep structure, and the two different versions are simply two ways of saying the same thing. (193)

So similar is the vocabulary of AAE and Standard English that some linguists doubt those American English speakers who claim to misunderstand it. Pointing to the popularity of AAE in mainstream music, advertising, and media, linguist Anna Vaughn Cooke declares, "There is abundant evidence that mainstream speakers not only understand Ebonics, they often borrow words and phrases from it, especially when these borrowings are economically and socially beneficial" (145). In turn, AAE speakers can readily understand media and print written in Standard English. To sum up, because AAE and Standard American English are so mutually intelligible, many linguists consider them both English dialects.

A number of linguists also argue on historical grounds that AAE is a dialect of English. Taking what is known as the Eurocentric view of AAE, they have proposed that AAE is a variety of English sharing far more features with British and American English dialects than with West African languages. Labov (*Linguage*), for example, as well as Walter Wolfram, Carolyn Temple Adger, and Donna Christian have compared many AAE features to Appalachian speech, which is spoken predominantly by southern white Americans. Meanwhile, other linguists have found that some AAE rules are consistent with older forms of American and British English, such as rules that substitute *was* for *were* and produce questions such as *Why I can't play?* (Poplack). These linguists maintain that such structures were already part of the colonial English spoken by the whites with whom enslaved Afri-

cans were forced to communicate, especially Irish indentured servants. Hence, Shana Poplack contends that "the grammatical core of contemporary AAVE developed from an English base, many of whose features have since disappeared from all but a select few varieties" (1).

Rickford, however, questions this Eurocentric view because some of AAE's most distinctive features (e.g., *be runnin*, *be be runnin*, *he BIN runnin*) are practically nonexistent in other varieties of English (AAVE 325). Moreover, he challenges the assumption that enslaved Africans readily learned the dialects of white colonists. Such an assumption, he insists, "requires a rosier view of their relationship than the historical record and contemporary evidence suggest" (AAVE 326).

Like the supporting evidence, the educational implications of the Eurocentric view are also not clear. On the one hand, if AAE is a dialect of English, the differences between AAE and Standard English may not be significant enough to account for most of the difficulties that AAE speakers have encountered in English classes. If so, we must look elsewhere for the major sources of their difficulties, such as pedagogical practices as well as teachers' attitudes toward AAE and toward the students who speak it. On the other hand, the similarity between AAE and Standard English may breed the sort of confusion that a Spanish-speaking student might experience while learning Portuguese. In fact, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes observe, "in some ways, it may be easier to work with language systems that are drastically different" (287). In other words, because many of the differences between AAE and Standard English are subtle, the differences may be difficult for AAE speakers to identify.

### Is AAE a Language?

Although most linguists consider AAE a dialect, most would also admit that the distinction between a dialect and a language is not cut-and-dried. According to *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*, dialects are "subdivisions of languages" (Crystal 114). So what is a language? Linguistic research has established that three rule-governed components identify a system of speech as a lan-

gauge: (1) pronunciation rules (phonology), (2) rules that convey meaning (semantics), and (3) grammatical rules (syntax). As we have seen, however, so-called dialects like AAE *also* possess rules for pronunciation, meaning, and grammar. That is why many linguists apply the test of mutual intelligibility to distinguish a dialect from a language: in other words, if speakers of African American English, Appalachian English, and Standard American English can understand one another fairly well, then theoretically all are speaking dialects of the English language.

Nonetheless, in the real world this test of mutual intelligibility has proven unreliable, as the Linguistic Society of America acknowledges in a resolution it passed during the Oakland controversy:

The distinction between "languages" and "dialects" is usually made more on social and political grounds than on purely linguistic ones. For example, different varieties of Chinese are popularly regarded as "dialects," though their speakers cannot understand each other, but speakers of Swedish and Norwegian, which are regarded as separate "languages," generally understand each other.

Clearly, the classification of AAE as a dialect versus a language depends as much on politics as linguistics. As linguist Max Weinreich once quipped, a language is a dialect with an army behind it (Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk* 139). Considering that AAE speakers have historically occupied the least powerful positions in U.S. society, it is not surprising that, officially, AAE has not enjoyed the status of a full-fledged language.

Indeed, a growing number of African American scholars insist that the classification of AAE as a dialect rather than a language stems from racism—from the same institutional forces that tried to dehumanize Africans to justify exploiting them as slaves and as second-class citizens. Africologist Kimani Nehusi explains, "Since language is a distinguishing feature of humans, the denial of language is the same as the denial of humanity" (78).

In his criticism, Nehusi echoes linguist Ernie Smith, who has accused linguists of using a double standard to classify AAE. Smith claims that they have unjustly cited similarities in vocabulary to classify AAE as a dialect of English. If they applied the same

criteria to English, he contends, English would be classified as a dialect of Latin or French. "It is universally accepted that English has borrowed the bulk of its lexicon from the Romance or Latin Language family," Smith states. "Yet English is not classified as being a Latin or Romance language but as a Germanic language" (52).

Since linguists cite similarities in grammar to prove that English is Germanic, Smith reasons that they ought to do the same to prove that AAE is a variety of English. But, he insists, they have not and cannot. They have not done so, he charges, because the weight of the evidence suggests that AAE has an "African grammar with English words" (55). To illustrate his point, he argues that AAE speakers do not "omit" a form of *be* in sentences such as *He busy*. They have simply retained an African sentence structure that can connect such words (*be* and *busy*) without a linking verb such as *be* (57). Nehusi cites other African continuities in AAE's verbs, adjectives, possessive case, vocabulary, tone, and intonation to demonstrate that, as enslaved Africans learned English, they molded it to fit the patterns of their West African (Niger-Congo) languages (111).

This Afrocentric view of AAE's evolution is shared by scholars such as Aisha Blackshire-Belay, Clinton Crawford, and Charles Debose and Nicholas Faraclas. Since West African languages vary significantly, however, some linguists demand stronger evidence of an African structure for AAE (Rickford, *AAVE* 325). As an alternative, they offer a Creolist view of AAE. Creolists such as John Rickford (*AAVE*), John Holm, and Walter Edwards and Donald Winford agree that AAE evolved from a pidgin that fused English and West African languages. The most frequently cited evidence is the omission of the linking verb *be* (e.g., *They happy*), the absence of endings (e.g., *two boy*), and the simplification of consonant clusters (e.g., *them = "dem"*). All of these features have been traced to Africa through the Sea Islands' Gullah language of South Carolina (Stewart; Dillard; Jones-Jackson; Turner).

At this point, it would be logical to ask, "If AAE evolved from a pidgin, where did the pidgin come from?" A pidgin is not a native language for any speech community but rather a simplified language created for limited communication between two

communities that speak different languages. Harris cites three conditions for the development of a pidgin:

1. Restricted access to the target language (in this case, English)
2. A shortage of bilingual speakers
3. The need to communicate

The history of slavery in the United States suggests that all three conditions were present. First, their enslavers limited the Africans' access to English. Second, although some enslaved Africans spoke more than one African language, only a select few had the opportunity to learn English well enough to serve as interpreters. Finally, although the need to communicate was forced, it was also a need to survive.

Over time a pidgin becomes the dominant language in a speech community. When this happens, the pidgin expands its vocabulary and grammar to serve the language needs of the community, and a creole is formed. This process takes place over many years, during which features from more than one language may shape the pidgin before a creole is born. The creole is then taught to the new generation as its language of nurture; thus arose Haitian Creole (from French and African roots) and Jamaican Creole (from British and African roots). In the African American context, AAE may have evolved from a local pidgin or from a creole imported by enslaved Africans from Jamaica, Barbados, or the slave trading forts of western Africa (Rickford, AAVE 327). Therefore, some creolists view AAE as a language that is distinct from English (Dillard; Turner).

Today Smitherman agrees that there is something "un-English" in the underlying structure of AAE grammar:

[H]ow do you explain that there is a distinction in meaning between "The coffee cold" and "The coffee be cold"? The first statement means that the coffee is cold today, or right now, as we speak, but the second statement means that the coffee is cold on more than one occasion and perhaps most of the time. . . . [T]here are indeed deep-structure linguistic differences. (*Talkin That Talk* 15-16)

Smitherman also questions classifying AAE as a dialect on the basis of mutual intelligibility. She points out that sometimes listeners misunderstand AAE because they are not familiar with AAE communicative strategies, such as reversing the meaning of a word. As an example, she cites the "international diplomatic disaster" that occurred during the Cold War when boxing champion Muhammad Ali declared, "There are two bad white men in the world, the Russian white man and the American white man. They are the two baddest men in the history of the world" (*Talkin That Talk* 137). At that time, much of the white English-speaking world thought Ali was insulting the two leaders instead of implying, in the AAE tradition, that the men were powerful, tough, great.

Because of such differences, Smitherman has started speaking of the "language" rather than the "dialect" of African America. Recently, however, linguist Arthur Palacas proposed that the "mother tongue" of African America is *simultaneously* a dialect and a language. On the one hand, Palacas classifies AAE as a dialect of English because AAE and English are mutually intelligible, thanks to a large shared vocabulary and certain common grammatical features such as English word order (338). On the other hand, Palacas views AAE as a separate language when he looks at features that distinguish types of languages—for instance, whether a language requires its subjects and verbs to agree. He observes, "English and Ebonics are structured oppositely in many respects at their core—in the grammar of noun phrases and verb phrases and in the grammar of subject-verb agreement" (334). Even when AAE and English look alike, he notes, the similarity may stem from different grammatical rules. Both Standard English and AAE speakers might say, for example, "He is messed up," but the AAE speakers are unconsciously following a rule that also produces *You is messed up*. The rule differs dramatically from the Standard English rule that results in *You are messed up* (333).

If indeed AAE qualifies as a language, the educational implications could be far-reaching. As Smitherman observes, "[I]f we are dealing with a language, then the barriers reside not only in [teachers'] attitudes, but also in actual linguistic interferences that

hamper communication" (*Talkin' That Talk* 139). If such linguistic barriers exist, teachers may need the sort of linguistic training that an English as a Second Language program offers so that they can better assist AAE speakers in their classrooms. As for AAE speakers, Palacas contends that the discovery that AAE is a language may instill pride in them. After introducing AAE as much more than a dialect, he heard students who said in their own words, "I always thought I was just stupid because of the way I talked; but now I realize that I'm bilingual!" (345).

### Should We Even Ask?

While other linguists have been debating whether AAE is a dialect or a language, linguist Salikoko Mufwene has questioned whether linguists should presume to answer the question "What is AAE?" He suggests instead that they should pay attention to how AAE speakers classify their speech, and AAE speakers normally do so without identifying a certain number of distinctive features. Even when they do, AAE speakers tend to pay more attention to vocabulary and pronunciation than grammar (36). "[I]n many communities," Mufwene observes, "a language means no more than the particular way its members speak" (21). The preoccupation with whether AAE is a language or a dialect, he argues, stems from the stigma placed on AAE speakers (36). After all, he remarks, "we do not go around asking people to define or describe Cockney, Japanese, or Swahili for us . . . in order to determine what they are" (21). Thus, he concludes that there is no need to characterize AAE "otherwise than as 'English as it is spoken by or among African Americans'" (37).

### Summary

Historically, AAE has been labeled broken English, slang, a dialect, and a language. These names both reflect and affect the status of AAE speakers. Linguistic research shows that AAE is neither broken English nor slang, for it possesses not only an enduring vocabulary but also its own rules for grammar and pronunciation.

tion. Linguists disagree, however, about its classification: While most agree that any classification will reflect politics as well as linguistics, those who consider AAE a dialect point to the similarities that make AAE and English mutually intelligible most of the time. On the other hand, those who call it a distinct language single out certain differences in grammar and communicative strategies. Finally, there are those who question whether linguists should attempt to classify it at all.

Whether AAE should be labeled as a dialect or a language also depends on a person's view of AAE's origins. Researchers of AAE do not possess the type of historical or written records they have for many European languages. Therefore, it has been more difficult for linguists to trace AAE's evolution. Whether Eurocentric, Afrocentric, or Creolist, however, all hypotheses acknowledge that AAE is different phonologically, syntactically, and semantically from Standard American English; it is the "why" that is debated, not whether there is a difference. The debate will continue as each hypothesis builds on new discoveries and as AAE continues to evolve.<sup>6</sup>

### Notes

1. Terms in boldface type appear in the glossary, unless they are sub-headings.
2. The term **African American Vernacular English** is also quite popular among linguists since the word **vernacular** (meaning "common everyday language") distinguishes it from the formal English spoken by many African Americans.
3. According to some scholars, these terms are not synonymous. For instance, the term **Black English** theoretically could encompass the languages of all English-speaking blacks, not just African Americans. Likewise, the term **Ebonics** was coined to embrace the multitude of languages spoken by people of African descent in the Caribbean as well as the United States (Williams vi). The terms also differ in terms of classification: *Black English*, for example, refers to a dialect of English, while *African American Language* suggests such speech is a language rather than a dialect.
4. Consequently, U.S. Standard Spoken English and Standard Written English are subdialects of Standard American English.
5. Lisa Green has observed that "habitual *be*" can also signal a permanent

nent property of a subject, as in *Some of them be big and some of them be small* (49).

6. Grammaticalization is the most recent hypothesis offered to explain the origin of AAE features. Through this process, the speech community invents grammatical items by using words in a variety of ways (Hooper and Traugott). The use, for example, of the innovative *bad* with the past tense (Cukor-Avila and Bailey) produces "We *bad* became real good friends" instead of the simple past, "We became good friends." This example represents a reanalysis of the Standard English past perfect. Proponents and critics alike, however, concede that much more research needs to be done to understand the nature of grammaticalization in AAE, and the reasons for its occurrence.

### Suggested Readings

- McWhorter, John. *Spreading the Word: Language and Dialect in America*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000.
- Mufwene, Salikoko S. "What Is African American English?" *Sociocultural and Historical Contexts of African American English*. Ed. Sonja L. Lanehart. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2001. 21–51.
- Palacas, Arthur L. "Liberating American Ebonics from Euro-English." *College English* 63 (2001): 326–52.
- Rickford, John R. "Suite for Ebony and Phonics." *African American Vernacular English: Features, Evolution, Educational Implications*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999. 320–28.
- Smith, Ernie. "What Is Black English? What Is Ebonics?" *The Real Ebonics Debate: Power, Language, and the Education of African-American Children*. Ed. Theresa Perry and Lisa Delpit. Boston: Beacon, 1998. 49–58.
- Smitherman, Geneva. *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*. 1977. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1986.
- Vaughn-Cooke, Anna F. "Lessons Learned from the Ebonics Controversy: Implications for Language Assessment." *Making the Connection: Language and Academic Achievement among African American Students*. Ed. Carolyn Temple Adger, Donna Christian, and Orlando L. Taylor. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1999. 137–68.
- Wolfram, Walter, and Natalie Schilling-Estes. *American English: Dialects and Variation*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.

## What Are the Distinctive Features of AAE?

In spite of the controversy over its classification, linguists agree that AAE is a distinct and rule-governed variety of speech. What, then, are the features that distinguish it from Standard American English or other nonstandard American varieties such as Southern White American English? Wolfram and Schilling-Estes point out that in some instances a particular *aspect* of AAE pronunciation or grammar is unique rather than the feature itself, while in other instances the uniqueness is a matter of the frequency of use:

For example, -s third person singular absence (e.g., *she walk*) is found in both African American and Anglo American vernaculars but . . . [s]ome African American speakers show levels of absence between 80 and 90 percent while comparable Anglo American speakers show a range of 5 to 15 percent absence. (171–72)

In addition to such differences, anthropologist Arthur Spears has demonstrated that AAE includes **camouflaged forms**, constructions that look like those in other varieties of English but possess unique uses or meanings in AAE (see "Black English" 850), as in *be come talkin bout gittin a job* and *be call himself workin*, both of which express indignation in AAE.

While certain aspects of AAE are unique, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes conclude that much of the uniqueness of AAE lies in its distinctive *combination* of features. Although the particular combination may vary from Connecticut to Mississippi to California to Texas to North Carolina or from rural to suburban to urban areas, there is a "basic core" of AAE features that crosses geographical boundaries (174–75). Some AAE speakers do not

use all of these features or use them only some of the time, but nearly all African Americans understand them (Dandy 39).

In this chapter, we explore some of the distinctive features of AAE's vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and rhetoric, especially those that may surface in a student's writing. If you wish, you can practice identifying these features in the student writing samples in Appendix A.

## Vocabulary

One unique set of features that is most recognizable and important is vocabulary. According to Smitherman, African Americans have forged a unique vocabulary from West African languages (e.g., *cola*), the traditional black church (e.g., *git the spirit*), black music (e.g., *funky*), and racial oppression (e.g., *the Man*) (*Black Talk* 17). As we stated in Chapter 1, these words include but are not limited to slang. AAE vocabulary can accommodate slang, historical words, novel meanings, and, at times, obscenity, just as Standard English does. The AAE speaker does not, however, have to use any of these words.

## Slang

Typically coined by African American teenagers and musicians, AAE slang reflects the endless creativity of the African American people. Consider, for instance, such metaphorical terms as *bat up* ("leave"), *lame* ("out of step"), and *nickel n dime* ("petty") (Smitherman, *Black Talk* 159, 189, 210). Hip-Hop music in particular has generated some of the most noteworthy words. As anthropologist Marcyliena Morgan notes, today's Hip-Hop artists have transformed Standard English words in ingenious ways ("Nuthin'" 199):

- ◆ By changing the part of speech (e.g., the verb *fly* becomes the adjective *fly*, meaning "attractive")
- ◆ By turning prefixes into words (e.g., *dis-* from *disrespect* assumes the meaning of the whole word, as in *She dissed him*)

## What Are the Distinctive Features of AAE?

- ◆ By attaching suffixes (e.g., *converse* becomes *conversate* and *beautiful*, *beautifullest*).

AAE speakers also invent new slang terms by replacing words in a phrase. The phrase *get your groove on* ("get something going" as in dancing), for example, inspired *get my chill on* ("rest"), *get my grub on* ("eat"), and *get my praise on* ("worship") (Green 30–31).

But African American students are unlikely to incorporate such language in their high school and college essays: they recognize these words as slang and are mindful that most teachers frown on colloquialisms in academic writing. If they can switch to Standard English easily, they may even avoid using slang in class discussions. Therefore, writing teachers are most likely to encounter AAE slang during students' peer review group sessions and other types of collaborative learning activities, on electronic discussion boards and listservs, and in written dialogue, personal narratives, or creative writing.

To the typical American writing teacher, some of these slang words should sound familiar. As Smitherman has documented in her dictionary *Black Talk*, some African American slang has "crossed over" into mainstream English, enriching the vocabulary of the whole country (29). Long ago, when African Americans were concentrated in the South, AAE words of all kinds diffused into the speech of white southerners. Today, however, AAE slang in particular usually spreads via African American music to teens of all colors and then into mainstream newspapers and advertising (Rickford and Rickford 97–98). AAE sells everything from sneakers (e.g., *You the man* in a Nike ad) to vacations (e.g., *Chill out* in an airline ad) (Smitherman, *Black Talk* 29). Indeed, because of the influx of AAE words, celebrated writer James Baldwin once characterized AAE as "a language that permits the nation its only glimpse of reality, a language without which the nation would be even more *whipped* than it is." In a 1979 essay, he explains:

Now I do not know what white Americans would sound like if there had never been any black people in the United States, but they would not sound the way they sound. *Jazz*, for example, is

a very specific sexual term, as in *jazz me, baby*, but white people purified it into the Jazz Age. *Sock it to me*, which means, roughly, the same thing, has been adopted by Nathaniel Hawthorne's descendants with no qualms or hesitations at all, along with *let it all hang out* and *right on!*

Although imitation is supposed to be the highest form of flattery, many African Americans resent this wholesale borrowing. Smitherman points out some of the cruel ironies of AAE cross-overs:

What is it about the language and culture of U.S. slave descendants, these outcasts on the margins of American life, that makes crossover so rampant, especially given the fact that the people who create the language and culture can't cross over. . . . What ever the motivation for crossover, one thing is certain: in these postmodern times, there is a multibillion-dollar industry based on Black Language and Culture, while at the same time, there is continued underdevelopment and deterioration among the people who produce this language and culture. (*Black Talk* 30–33)

Given that so much African American slang is “out on loan to white people [w]ith no interest,” it is not surprising that a new term replaces the old one in the African American community almost as soon as the old one is picked up by whites (Ralph Wiley qtd. in Smitherman, *Black Talk* 33; Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* 70). For instance, Lisa Green found that *phat* (“extremely good-looking, tasty, or nice”)—a term popularized by African Americans in the 1990s—was no longer in vogue with her African American college students by 1999, although it was still popular among her white students (27). Smitherman concludes that

this dynamism is due, in part, to today's rather extreme cultural chauvinism among blacks, which says all whites are lames and if they are using this expression, it's gotten stale and unhip. . . . The other part of the explanation may be due to the historical inimical relations of blacks and whites which dictated the necessity for a black linguistic code. (*Talkin and Testifyin* 70)

Thus, teachers who try to keep up with their African American students' slang may find themselves on a fast-moving treadmill.

Says Clarence Major, author of *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang*, “Black slang is a living, breathing form of expression that changes so quickly no researcher can keep up with it” (xxix).

### Historically Black Words

In contrast to the ever-changing slang, the words that Rickford and Rickford call “historically black” extend across generational, geographical, and social boundaries in African America (94). Many of these words, such as *asby* (“dry skin”) and *suck teeth* (“to suck air through the teeth to express annoyance”), refer to characteristics of African American life, including cultural traditions, social distinctions, and physical appearance, yet many African Americans have no idea that other Americans may not understand the words (94–95). Hence, these are the AAE words that are most likely to surface in students' essays. We advise teachers, therefore, to have on hand Smitherman's *Black Talk* or Major's *Juba to Jive* for easy reference (see the suggested readings at the end of this chapter).

### Novel Meanings

While teachers may encounter AAE words that do not exist in standard dictionaries, the most baffling words may prove to be familiar ones to which AAE has assigned a novel meaning. In AAE, for example, *kitchen* becomes the curly hair at the neckline, *fresh*, “excellent”; and *deep*, “serious.” Sometimes the AAE term alters the standard meaning only slightly; hence, *wack*, meaning “incredibly deficient,” is derived from *wacky*, defined in Standard English as “absurd or irrational” (Morgan, “Nuthin” 198). At other times, the AAE term conveys the opposite of the standard meaning: it “flips the script.” The classic example is *bad*, meaning “very good,” but there are a host of others, such as *rags* (“stylish clothes”) and *shut up* (“talk on”) (Smitherman, *Black Talk* 241, 260). In addition, traditionally negative words sometimes assume positive connotations in AAE, among them *mean*, *stupid*, *dope*, and *phat*, all meaning “excellent.” Accord-

ing to Spears, this type of **semantic inversion** is just one way in which AAE speakers exercise their broad sense of "semantic license," which entitles them to invent words as needed ("Directness" 248).

### So-Called Obscenity

Perhaps the least understood AAE words are what most other Americans and even some African Americans consider obscenity. For instance, Smitherman discusses the notorious AAE term *muthafucka* (or *mutha* or *M.F.*). Although it can sting like a curse word (*That no-good muthafucka*), it can also express admiration (*He a bad muthafucka*) or add weight to a statement (*You muthafuckin right!*) (*Talkin and Testifyin* 60). Some students may submit poems or post online messages that draw on this vocabulary—much to the shock and dismay of their teachers. If so, Spears urges us to keep in mind that many AAE speakers do not consider such terms obscene ("African-American" 242). Though he concedes that "obscenity, in the final analysis, is in the ears of the hearer," he argues that some "obscene" AAE words have been "neutralized" because they are "negative, positive, or neutral in force depending on how they are used" (232). In fact, sometimes an AAE speaker will employ such words merely for their rhythmic quality (237). This so-called obscenity illustrates what applies to most AAE vocabulary: to understand it, you must know the sociocultural frame of reference.

### Pronunciation

At first glance, AAE pronunciation may not seem as relevant to writing instruction as vocabulary is. A writing teacher might assume that the pronunciation of AAE—the sounds of words and the intonation—rarely influences students' written work. Yet research suggests that AAE pronunciation can affect students' spelling as well as the comprehensibility of their speech (O'Neal and Trabasso 185; Gilyard, *Let's Flip* 69), especially when students are learning to read and write. Even college students may write what they hear other AAE speakers say: English professor Charles

Coleman has found instances of *stalk* for *stork*, *use to* for *used to*, *doggy dog world* for *dog eat dog world*, and other aural/oral misspellings in their academic writing (488–89). Spelling, though, is not the only relevant issue. AAE pronunciation deserves our attention because it can lead to gross educational injustices. As a result of AAE pronunciation, many AAE speakers have been placed in special education and speech therapy classes, or they have become the targets of discrimination (Bailey and Thomas 85). Thus, there are a number of reasons we should take a closer look at the AAE sound system.

In some ways, AAE speakers sound like southern white Americans. After all, both groups pronounce *l* as "Ah" and *pen* as "pin" (Rickford and Rickford 99). Such similarities, however, do not make AAE pronunciation any less distinctive. First of all, it is likely that in the South, where 90 percent of African Americans lived until the twentieth century, white families on plantations and tenant farms picked up these features from African Americans (Rickford and Rickford 100). Second, Bailey and Thomas have documented how changes in Southern White pronunciation since the mid-1800s have magnified the differences between Southern White and African American speech (106). Most important, AAE includes features of pronunciation that are not found in Southern White speech (Rickford and Rickford 100). Consequently, McWhorter remarks, "Most Americans, and especially black ones, can almost always tell that a person is black even on the phone, and even when the speaker is using standard English sentences" (*Word* 133).

So what makes AAE sound "black"? According to Smitherman, "the real distinctiveness—and beauty—in the black sound system lies in . . . its speech rhythms, voice inflections, and tonal patterns" (*Talkin and Testifyin* 17). For instance, AAE speakers sometimes vary vowels for emphasis (*Sang good now, y'all*) or adopt a lyrical tone (*I say Lo-rd, Lo-rd, Lo-rd*) (*Talkin and Testifyin* 18, 135). We explore these musical qualities when we turn to rhetorical strategies at the end of this chapter. Now, however, let us consider how AAE speakers articulate vowels and consonants and the syllables that contain them. As Rickford and Rickford explain, these pronunciations are "highly systematic, and not the careless or haphazard pronunciations that observers



often mistake them for" (104). Just recall Rickford's example in Chapter 1: although AAE speakers omit the final consonant in *test* and *hand*, they retain the final consonant in *pant* because *pant* does not end with two voiceless consonants (such as *st*) or two voiced consonants (such as *nd*) (AAVE 323).

### Syllables

AAE speakers may stress the first syllable of a word instead of the second ("PO-lice"). On the other hand, if a syllable is unstressed, they may omit it, as in "fraid" (from *afraid*) or "sect'ry" (from *secretary*) (Rickford, AAVE 5).

### Vowels

In AAE, vowels may change substantially (Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk* 23–25; Rickford, AAVE 4–5), as illustrated below:

- ◆ *Ing/ink*: In words such as *thing* and *think*, *ing* sounds like "ang" and *ink* sounds like "ank," producing "thang" and "thank."
- ◆ *Complex vowels*: Complex vowel sounds (diphthongs) like those in the word *nice* are often simplified so that *nice* sounds like "nabs."
- ◆ "E": Before nasal sounds such as *m*, *n*, and *ng*, the vowel *e* sounds like *i*, making *pen* sound like "pin."

### Consonants

AAE transforms consonants far more than vowels and in ways that resemble the sounds of West African languages (Smith 56). As the following list reveals, AAE tends to omit or simplify consonants, especially at the end of a word:

- ◆ *Th sounds*: pronunciation of initial *th* in a syllable as "d" or "v" (*them* = "dem," *brother* = "bruvver") and final *th* as "f" or "t" (*mouth* = "mouf")
- ◆ *R sound*: absence of *r* after a vowel (*more* = "mow")
- ◆ *L sound*: absence of middle and final *l* (*help* = "hep")

### What Are the Distinctive Features of AAE?

- ◆ *V and Z sounds*: pronunciation of *v* as "b" and *z* as "d" before a nasal sound (*seven* = "seben," *isn't* = "idn")
- ◆ *Str*: pronunciation of *str* as "skr" when *str* begins a syllable (*street* = "skreet")
- ◆ *Ing*: pronunciation of *ng* as "n" in multisyllabic words ending in *ing* (*walking* = "walkin")
- ◆ *Consonant clusters*: simplification of most consonant clusters at the end of a word (*test* = "tes")
- ◆ *Adjacent consonants*: transposition of adjacent consonants (*ask* = "aks") (Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* 17; Rickford, AAVE 4–5)

AAE also contracts whole words; for example, *I don't know* becomes "I'on know"; and *them*, "nem"; and *I am going to*, "I gon" or "Ima" (Rickford, AAVE 5, 7; Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk* 23–25, *Talkin and Testifyin* 17–18).

### Spelling

From these pronunciation patterns, you can see how easy it is to confuse certain words from AAE and Standard English. As reading specialist Evelyn Dandy observes, AAE produces many words that are pronounced the same but spelled differently; for example, "den" could mean *den* or *then* and "coat" could mean *coat* or *court* (46). According to English professor Keith Gilyard, such AAE-related homophones account for some of the misspellings he sees in AAE speakers' papers, such as the misspelling of *mind* in *I really wouldn't mine having an Acura Legend* (*Let's Flip* 69). Therefore, to avoid misunderstandings, teachers must pay attention to the context of such words.

But what about the AAE words that are spelled the same yet pronounced differently? Hip-Hop artists have attempted to avoid writing homonyms by inventing spellings that reflect AAE's distinctive pronunciation and meanings. Morgan lists some Hip-Hop spelling rules:

*Er*: The *-er* ending on words with two or more syllables is spelled *-a*, *-ub*, or *-ab*, as in *brotha* ("brother").

*Ing*: The *-ing* ending is written as *-in* or *-un*, as in *sumthin* ("something") and *thumpun* ("thumping").

*Reduced Words*: Syllables are reduced and vowels assimilated so that "all right" is spelled *aight*. ("Nuthin'" 201-204)

Although such novel spellings may appear in students' creative and informal writing, they probably will not emerge in students' academic essays. In fact, AAE accounts for only a small proportion of AAE speakers' misspellings of Standard English words. In fact, in one experiment most African American children did not spell even AAE-related homophones the same as long as the words were presented in a sentence (O'Neal and Trabasso 179).

## Grammar

Of all the features of AAE, grammar is the most distinctive for linguists and the most relevant for writing teachers. Compared to Standard American English, AAE relies less on word endings to convey grammatical information, boasts a more complex verb system, and accesses a wider range of sentence patterns.

Below, we look at the most striking characteristics of nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, verbs, and sentence patterns in AAE. As we examine these features, keep the following principles in mind:

1. AAE is "streamlined" (Palacas 340): just as Old English evolved into a language with fewer grammatical word endings, so has AAE, surpassing Standard American English (Gilyard, *Let's Flip* 68).
2. AAE can depend less on word endings because it depends more on contextual clues in the sentence or situation (Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* 2.5).
3. In spite of its tendency toward streamlining, AAE retains a highly complex verb system that emphasizes *how* something happened rather than when it happened (Nehusi 93-94).
4. For many of the grammatical peculiarities of AAE, there are parallels in the languages that West Africans spoke before they

## What Are the Distinctive Features of AAE?

were enslaved (Nehusi 92-99; Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* 55-57).

5. Many grammatical forms that look standard are camouflaged: they possess different meanings and uses (Spears, "Black English" 850).
6. Use of AAE grammar varies according to social class, gender, and age: African Americans who are working class, male, or young are more likely than others to use AAE grammar (Rickford and Rickford 126-27). An individual will, however, employ certain features of AAE grammar to varying degrees, depending on the particular sentence, audience, topic, or some other aspect of the situation. As Smitherman says, "[D]o not expect all Black English speakers to use all these patterns all the time" (*Talkin and Testifyin* 31). In short, like speakers of Standard English, AAE speakers exercise their "linguistic options" (Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* 2.5).
7. In many ways, AAE is converging with Standard American English. Caught in this transitional stage, AAE speakers may alternate between AAE and standard forms in the same breath. Also, because African Americans were denied an adequate education for centuries, AAE speakers produce some **hypercorrections**, forms created as a result of overgeneralizing from standard rules (Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* 28, 32).
8. AAE grammatical features are not errors; they simply conform to a different set of rules than Standard Written English does. In situations where the average reader would expect SWE, however, we use the term *SWE errors* to refer to all features (AAE or otherwise) that violate SWE rules.

With these principles in mind, let us turn to specific features of grammar. We have drawn most of our explanations and examples from Rickford's *African American Vernacular English* and Rickford and Rickford's *Spoken Soul*. Other sources are cited as needed.

## Nouns and Pronouns

Both AAE nouns and pronouns exhibit the same tendency: to rely on contextual clues instead of word endings to indicate plurality or possession. According to linguist Lorenzo Turner (223-24, 227), anthropologist Ivan Van Sertima (140), and Nehusi

(92), this characteristic is typical of many African languages. Although AAE speakers normally add the plural *-s* to a noun to indicate "more than one," if another word in the sentence (e.g., *two*) already signals that the noun is plural, AAE speakers usually omit the *-s*, as in *two boy* (Rickford, AAVE 7). In contrast, Standard English is extremely redundant. As Dandy points out, the Standard English sentence *There are three books on the chair* "has indicated plural in three ways at once: *are, three, and the -s on books*" (48).

The presence of contextual clues also accounts for the AAE possessive. If a word such as *Jamal* precedes a noun (e.g., *house*), AAE speakers may assume that the juxtaposition of that word and the noun indicates who owns what. Hence: *Jamal house*. As Table 2.1 reveals, this practice extends to the pronouns *they* and *y'all* ("you all").

Do not assume, however, that all plural and possessive SWE errors are rooted in AAE grammar. Sometimes overgeneralizing from the standard rules for plurals and possessives leads AAE speakers to produce hypercorrections that have nothing to do with AAE's rules. For instance, AAE speakers may add the plural *-s* to nouns that have irregular plural forms, producing errors such as *mens* (Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* 28). Other common plural and possessive SWE errors are simply a matter of spelling. Both AAE and non-AAE speakers may omit or mis-

TABLE 2.1. Distinctive Plural and Possessive Features of AAE Nouns and Pronouns

Feature	AAE	Standard English
NOUNS		
Absence of plural <i>-s</i>	<i>two boy</i> <i>Jamal house</i>	<i>two boys</i> <i>Jamal's house</i>
Absence of possessive <i>-s</i>		
PRONOUNS		
Additional plural forms	<i>y'all</i> <i>Tina an' em</i> (or <i>nem</i> )	<i>You</i> (plural) <i>Tina and her</i> <i>associates</i>
Absence of possessive form for <i>y'all</i> and <i>they</i>	<i>y'all ball</i> <i>they ball</i>	<i>your ball</i> <i>their ball</i>

place the apostrophe after a singular possessive noun (e.g., *a girls coat* or *a girls' coat*). Such SWE errors do not stem from AAE grammar since they reveal an underlying understanding of possession in Standard English. Unlike the AAE form *a girl coat* (which indicates possession through juxtaposition), these forms include an *-s* sound to indicate possession just as the standard form does (i.e., *a girl's coat*). The same sort of spelling mistake also turns up when students add the possessive *'s* instead of *-s* to make a noun plural, producing phrases such as *five bouse's*. This too is not derived from AAE (which omits the *-s*) since the students clearly understand that they need to add an *s* sound to signal plurality.

### Adverbs and Adjectives

Like nouns and pronouns, some adjectives and adverbs also lack grammatical endings. For instance, adverbs such as *sometimes* may omit the *-s* ending (Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* 30), while past participles such as *concerned* that act like adjectives may omit the *-ed* ending in sentences such as *I am concern* (Smitherman, *That Talk* 170).

### Verbs

The AAE verb system differs from Standard English in the way it indicates when something happened (i.e., tense) and how something happened (i.e., aspect). Let's consider tense first.

#### TIME OF ACTION

To convey the present tense in sentences where *is* and *are* function as linking verbs, AAE needs no verb at all. Instead of saying, "They are happy," AAE speakers can simply say, "They happy" (Rickford and Rickford 114-16). Meanwhile, to convey the past tense, AAE speakers can exercise a number of options in addition to using the standard past-tense forms. Like speakers of some West African languages (Van Sertima 141), they can rely on a contextual clue (*last night*) instead of a word ending (*-ed*) to signal the past, as in *I look for him last night*. Alternatively, they

can use a lone past participle (*She seen him*). Or they can combine *had* and a past participle to indicate the past (*Then we had played*), especially while narrating (Rickford and Rickford 121-22; Green 91-92).

Linguistically speaking, the present and the past are the only tenses in Standard English, and the same applies to AAE. Therefore, like Standard English, AAE has no word endings to express future time. Instead, it employs unconjugated *be* (*He be here tomorrow*) or *gon* for "amis/are going to" (*We gon win*). Or it uses *finna* (derived from *fixin' to*, a regional term) to refer to the immediate future (Rickford, AAVE 6). Table 2.2 summarizes these features.

MODE OF ACTION

Van Sertima found that West African languages "place more emphasis on the 'mode of action' than on the 'time of action'" (145). Like these African languages, AAE dedicates more of its resources to specifying how something happened than when it happened (Nehusi 93). Consequently, AAE offers speakers diverse ways to indicate that an action is in progress or has been completed. For instance, to refer to an action that is going on now, AAE omits the helping verb *be* before the *-ing* verb: *He*

TABLE 2.2. Present, Past, and Future in AAE

Feature	AAE	Standard English
PRESENT		
Absence of <i>is</i> and <i>are</i>	<i>They happy.</i>	<i>They are happy.</i>
PAST		
Past participle	<i>She seen him yesterday.</i>	<i>She saw him yesterday.</i>
Verb stem	<i>I look for him last night.</i>	<i>I looked for him last night.</i>
<i>Had</i>	<i>Then we had played outside.</i>	<i>Then we played outside.</i>
FUTURE		
Unconjugated <i>be</i>	<i>He be here tomorrow.</i>	<i>He will be here tomorrow.</i>
<i>Gon</i>	<i>We gon win.</i>	<i>We are going to win.</i>
<i>Finna</i> (or <i>fitna</i> )	<i>He finna go.</i>	<i>He's about to go.</i>

*talkin*. But *be* reemerges in its unconjugated form if the action is habitual: *He be talkin*. On the other hand, if AAE speakers wish to emphasize how long the action continues, they can add *steady*: *He be steady talkin* (Rickford, AAVE 6). Compare these forms in Table 2.3.

If you think the progressive is complicated, take a look at the perfective. Although other English speakers may use a few of these forms, the range of perfective forms available to AAE speakers is astounding. As the following table illustrates, instead of combining a form of *have* with a past participle, AAE speakers can use unstressed *been* by itself (*He been sick*), the past tense after a form of *have* (*She had went*), or just the verb stem after a form of *have* (*They have work hard*) (Rickford, AAVE 6-7; Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk* 170). To indicate that the action was recently completed, AAE speakers need not include the word *recently*. Combining the helping verb *done* with a verb will do the job—and with extra emphasis: *He done finished it* or *He done finish it*. On the other hand, if the action was completed long ago, they can stress *been* (which we spell here as *BIN*): *He BIN finished* or *He BIN finish* (Rickford, AAVE 6).<sup>1</sup> Notice that when AAE speakers use *have*, *done*, and *BIN* as helping verbs, they often omit the *-ed* or *-en* ending on the following verb; in other words, they use only the verb stem. This occurs in the passive voice as well: *I am lock in my room* (Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk* 170). Table 2.4 summarizes what we've covered so far.

In addition to using standard helping verbs (e.g., *be* and *do*) in unconventional ways, AAE speakers have invented others such as *liketa* (meaning "nearly did") and *poseta* (short for "supposed to") while turning the verb *come* into a helping verb that expresses indignation (Rickford, AAVE 6-7). See Table 2.5.

TABLE 2.3. Alternative Progressive Forms in AAE

Feature	AAE	Standard English
Absence of <i>is</i> or <i>are</i> helping verb	<i>He talkin.</i>	<i>He is talking right now.</i>
Habitual <i>be</i> (or <i>bees</i> )	<i>He be talkin.</i> <i>Bees dat way.</i>	<i>He usually talks.</i> <i>That's the way it is.</i>
<i>Steady</i> as an intensifier	<i>He be steady talkin.</i>	<i>He keeps talking on and on.</i>

Overwhelmed? There's more, but we'll stop here. From the preceding analysis, it is easy to see why Toni Morrison once declared, "It's terrible to think that a child with five present tenses comes to school to be faced with books that are less than his own language" (qtd. in Rickford and Rickford 231). Although Morrison apparently counts the progressive forms as tenses, she vividly conveys the complexity of the AAE verb system.

**SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT**

Since AAE shuns endings for most verbs, it is not surprising that it does not require an -s ending to show that a verb takes a third-person singular subject in the present tense. Thus, in AAE, present-tense verbs are usually identical: *I walk, you walk, be walk, we*

TABLE 2.4. Alternative Perfective Forms in AAE

Feature	AAE	Standard English
Unstressed <i>been</i>	<i>He been sick.</i>	<i>He has been sick.</i>
Past tense after <i>have</i>	<i>She had went.</i>	<i>She had gone.</i>
Verb stem after <i>have</i>	<i>They have work hard.</i>	<i>They have worked hard.</i>
<i>Done</i> before <i>have</i>	<i>He done finish.</i>	<i>He has already finished.</i> (recent past)
Stressed BIN	<i>He BIN finish.</i>	<i>He finished long ago.</i>

TABLE 2.5. Unique AAE Helping Verbs

Feature	AAE	Standard English
<i>Done</i>	<i>She done finish.</i>	<i>She has already finished.</i> (recent past)
Stressed BIN	<i>She BIN finish.</i>	<i>She finished a long time ago.</i>
<i>Liketa</i>	<i>I liketa drown</i>	<i>I nearly drowned.</i>
<i>Poseta</i>	<i>You don't poseta do it that way.</i>	<i>You're not supposed to do it that way.</i>
Indignant <i>Come</i>	<i>He come walkin in here like he owned the place.</i>	<i>He had the nerve to walk in here as if he owned the place.</i>

*What Are the Distinctive Features of AAE?*

*walk, they walk.* In contrast, Standard English is inconsistent. As Dandy points out, the third-person singular -s ending is "an irregularity, since no suffix is used to mark present tense with other persons" (50).

There are occasions, however, when AAE speakers use a verbal -s ending where Standard English does not, though the usage may vary regionally. If the verb is *be*, for example, many AAE speakers add an -s to mark the verbs for *you* and plural subjects. Thus, they will say, "you was" and "they is." They may also add a verbal -s for emphasis, as in *You know I wants to win or I loves my baby* (Pitts; Baugh, *Out* 127). Or they may attach an -s ending to indicate a recurring activity: *I gets my check on the first of the month* (Green 100-101; Smitherman *Talkin That Talk* 24). Table 2.6 includes these options. Notice that this table does not include all types of SWE subject-verb agreement errors. SWE errors in sentences such as *The cost of the books are too high* stem from the difficulty of finding the subject, not from AAE rules of agreement.

**Sentence Patterns**

So far we have focused on the structure of words. But the structure of some types of sentences also distinguishes AAE from Standard English. In particular, AAE constructs negative statements,

Table 2.6. Distinctive AAE Rules of Subject-Verb Agreement

Feature	AAE	Standard English
Absence of 3rd person singular present tense -s	<i>She walk.</i>	<i>She walks.</i>
<i>Is</i> and <i>was</i> with plural subjects and <i>you</i>	<i>They is some crazy folk.</i> <i>You was right.</i>	<i>They are some crazy folks.</i> <i>You were right.</i>
Emphatic -s	<i>I loves my baby.</i>	<i>I love my baby a lot.</i>
Habitual -s	<i>When I think about him, I gets excited.</i>	<i>When I think about him, I get excited.</i>
Narrative -s	<i>The man asked for some money. So I looks in my pocket. . . .</i>	<i>The man asked for some money. So I looked in my pocket. . . .</i>

QUESTIONS

The negative inversion shown in Table 2.7 is not the only instance of AAE inversion that distinguishes AAE from Standard English. AAE also inverts the subject and the helping verb in indirect questions when Standard English retains the usual word order and inserts *if* or *whether*. For instance, AAE produces *I asked him could he come* instead of the standard version *I asked him if he could come*. Ironically, while AAE prefers inverted word order in indirect questions, it allows speakers to forgo inversion in direct questions. Thus, instead of asking, "Why can't I play?" an AAE speaker may choose to ask, "Why I can't play?" as indicated in Table 2.8 (Rickford, AAVE 8).

THERE/HERE STATEMENTS

AAE offers speakers alternatives to structures such as *There is* and *Here is*. Sometimes, AAE speakers substitute *it* for *there* in sentences such as *It's a school across the street* or *It a school on her street*. At other times, they substitute *they* for *there* as in *They got some hungry women inside* (Rickford, AAVE 8-9). They can also replace *there* are with *there* go to present something or someone: *There go my friends in the front row* (Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk* 23). As Table 2.9 reveals, *here* go operates in a similar fashion.

MIXED OR FUSED CONSTRUCTIONS

Many of the unconventional sentence structures that writing teachers see in AAE speakers' essays may be rooted in AAE grammar.

TABLE 2.8. Question Formation in AAE

Feature	AAE	Standard English
Inverted word order in indirect questions	<i>I asked him could he come.</i>	<i>I asked if he could come.</i>
No inversion in direct questions	<i>Why I can't play?</i>	<i>Why can't I play?</i>

questions, and sentences beginning with *There* and *Here* in different ways. Also, AAE sentence patterns are reflected in some of the constructions that writing teachers label as "mixed" or "fused" in students' papers.

NEGATIVE STATEMENTS

To negate statements, AAE speakers have retained the *ain't* of early British English but have expanded its use so that it represents not only *am not* but also *isn't*, *aren't*, *doesn't*, *don't*, *hasn't*, and *haven't*. So an AAE speaker can say not only *I ain't lyin* ("I am not lying") but also *He ain't never seen it* ("He hasn't ever seen it") or *He ain't got no further than third grade* ("He didn't get any further than third grade"). If AAE speakers use *ain't* but, however, they merely mean "only": *She ain't but six years old* (Rickford, AAVE 8; Rickford and Rickford 122-24).

Two of the preceding examples illustrate another noteworthy characteristic of AAE: double negatives. While AAE shares this trait with some other nonstandard English dialects, AAE boasts triple negatives, as in *I don't owe nobody nothing* ("I don't owe anybody anything"). Moreover, AAE speakers are free to invert the subject and helping verb to construct negative statements such as *Can't nobody beat us* (Rickford and Rickford 123). Table 2.7 presents all of these options.

TABLE 2.7. Negative Statements in AAE

Feature	AAE	Standard English
<i>Ain't</i> for <i>am not</i> , <i>isn't</i> , <i>aren't</i>	<i>I ain't lyin.</i>	<i>I am not lying.</i>
<i>Ain't</i> for <i>hasn't</i> and <i>haven't</i>	<i>He ain't seen her.</i>	<i>He hasn't seen her.</i>
<i>Ain't</i> for <i>doesn't</i> and <i>don't</i>	<i>She ain't got it.</i>	<i>She doesn't have it.</i>
Multiple negatives	<i>I don't owe nobody nothing.</i>	<i>I don't owe anybody anything.</i>
Inverted word order	<i>Can't nobody beat us.</i>	<i>Nobody can beat us.</i>

**Double Subjects and Verbs.** Take, for instance, the so-called double subject. AAE speakers seem to repeat the subject in a sentence such as *That teacher, she mean*. Smith argues, however, that they are merely commenting on the topic (*that teacher*). Thus, as in some African languages, their sentence divides into a **topic** (everything before the verb) and **comment** (everything pertaining to the topic):

Topic	Comment
That teacher	she [is] mean.

... as opposed to the usual subject and predicate (57):

Subject	Predicate
That teacher	[is] mean.

This topic-comment structure may give rise not only to "double subjects" within one sentence but to fused sentences as well. Charles Coleman, for example, analyzes an example from a college student's paper, *There was this guy that came into the bank he was the banks mail man*, as follows:

Topic	Comment
There was this guy that came into the bank	he was the bank[s] mail man.

Says Coleman, "[T]he traditional explanation that these result from running two or more independent clauses together assumes

TABLE 2.9. There/Here Statements in AAE

Feature	AAE	Standard English
It instead of <i>there</i>	<i>It's a school across the street.</i>	<i>There's a school across the street.</i>
<i>They got</i> instead of <i>there are</i>	<i>They got some hungry women inside.</i>	<i>There are some hungry women inside.</i>
<i>There go</i> instead of <i>there is</i> or <i>there are</i>	<i>There go my monnma in the front row.</i>	<i>There is my monnma in the front row.</i>
<i>Here go</i> instead of <i>here is</i> or <i>here are</i>	<i>Here go my picture.</i>	<i>Here is my picture.</i>

that students are working from a subject/predicate orientation" (492). His analysis suggests otherwise.

In addition to so-called double subjects, Stefan Martin and Walt Wolfram have noticed what teachers might consider a "double verb," *tell say: They tell him say, "You better not go there"* (15). An observation by Van Sertima may apply here, however. He points out that in the African American Gullah dialect of the Georgia Sea Islands, when the sound *se* (pronounced almost like "say") occurs "after a verb of saying, thinking or wishing," it "always means 'that.' This use of *se* is common in some West African languages" (143). Thus, we might interpret the preceding sentence as "They told him that he better not go there."

**Object Complements.** Martin and Wolfram have also observed an unusual sentence pattern involving the verb *call*. In Standard English, a sentence beginning with *They call themselves* . . . could be completed only with a noun phrase (e.g., "*The Wildcats*") or an adjectival one (e.g., *poor*). But in AAE, in a pejorative statement a verb form can follow *call*, as in *They call themselves dancing*, which implies that they do not dance well (17).

**Subordinating Conjunctions.** Other linguists have noted the absence of certain subordinating conjunctions in AAE speakers' speech and writing. Rickford points out the missing relative pronoun subject *who* or *that* in a sentence such as *That's the man was here* (AAVE 8). Although Standard English often omits the relative pronouns *who* and *that*, it preserves them when the pronouns are subjects of relative clauses (e.g., *That's the man who that more often than AAE does when that introduces noun clauses*. Thus, the following sentence is more typical of AAE: *His reply was he thought the test was racist first of all* (330). Table 2.10 presents some of these distinctive sentence patterns.

In addition to constructions such as those listed in Table 2.10, Charles Coleman speculates that the frequency of what he calls "by strings" in his students' essays may be related to AAE. Citing linguistic studies by Elizabeth Sommers and Francisca Sanchez, he suggests that AAE speakers use the preposition *by* in a more causative way than speakers of Standard English do. For instance,

Sommers recorded *Then she had a telephone call by one of her friends*, and Sanchez, *I got a black eye by this boy* (491). This usage, Coleman proposes, may account for sentences such as the following, quoted from a student's paper: *By making English the official language would take away one's constitutional rights* (490). The *by* phrase essentially becomes the cause of the action and therefore attempts to assume the subject position in the sentence.

Such constructions turn up from time to time in students' writings, but how often do students incorporate other features of AAE grammar in their academic essays? Not as often as you might think. After analyzing 2,764 essays written by African American seventeen-year-olds for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) between 1969 and 1989, Smitherman and a team of independent raters found a "generally low" frequency of AAE grammatical features (*Talkin That Talk* 167). "Further," Smitherman reports, "certain prevalent [AAE] speech patterns occur very infrequently in writing, for example, the classic BE aspect, as in *They be tired*" (168). More recently, Elaine Richardson also reported a "low frequency and distribution of AAVE syntax" in the pretest and posttest essays of fifty-two African American first-year college students who had an AAE background (*African* 104-5).

TABLE 2.10. Distinctive AAE Sentence Patterns

Feature	AAE	Standard English
Double subjects	<i>My mother, she told me to go.</i>	<i>My mother told me to go.</i>
Double verbs <i>tell</i> and <i>say</i>	<i>They tell him say, "You better not go there."</i>	<i>They told him that he better not go there.</i>
Verb as object complement after <i>call</i>	<i>They call themselves dancing.</i>	<i>They don't dance well.</i>
Absence of subject relative pronoun <i>who</i> , <i>which</i> , <i>what</i> , or <i>that</i>	<i>That's the man was here.</i>	<i>That's the man who was here.</i>
Absence of <i>that</i> before noun clauses	<i>His reply was he thought the test was racist.</i>	<i>His reply was that he thought the test was racist.</i>

It is worth noting that Smitherman and her team concluded that the number of AAE grammatical features in essays from the NAEP had declined between 1969 and 1989 (*Talkin That Talk* 175). Nevertheless, given the popularity of Hip-Hop among today's African American youth, you might wonder whether Hip-Hop will reverse that trend. Certainly, we see a lot of AAE grammar at work in the Hip-Hop Nation. Smitherman explains why:

Because many rap artists are college educated, and most are adept at code switching, they obviously could employ "standard English" in their rap lyrics. However, in their quest to "disturb the peace," they deliberately and consciously employ the "antilingualage" of the Black speech community. . . . [T]he use of the Black speech community's syntax covertly reinforces Black America's 400-year rejection of Euro-American cultural, racial—and linguistic—domination. (*Talkin That Talk* 274)

H. Samy Alim's research suggests that some African Americans flaunt AAE grammar not only to reject but also to connect. In other words, they consciously increase their use of AAE features whenever they want to "stay street"—i.e., to construct an identity that connects them to the young African American community (55).

Whether the frequency of AAE grammar is increasing or decreasing in school writings, one trend is clear: the incidence has remained high enough to generate public debate, a host of "minority remediation" programs, and a flood of new books about AAE.

## Rhetoric

Compared to AAE grammar, African American English rhetoric is far more likely to surface in students' academic essays, especially in classrooms where most students are facile code-switchers, shifting as needed from AAE to Standard English. AAE rhetoric is the set of discourse strategies that represent how many African Americans *use* language. In most African American communities, the use of language is a high art; in other words, *how* and *why* you say something is as important as *what* you say.



betting, the speaker and the listeners collaborate to create the discourse. According to Smitherman, call-response reflects the African worldview of the cosmos as "an interacting, interdependent, balanced force field" (108). It is, therefore, a **field-dependent** view that encourages writers to become involved with their readers by asking them questions, telling them to do something, or acknowledging them with the pronouns *you* or *we*.<sup>2</sup> "Field dependency is the hallmark of the Black style, a signature feature," declare composition specialists Gilyard and Richardson (46).

Smitherman's description reveals how dramatically the call-response strategy of AAE contrasts with the "objective" stance so often required in academic essays, where teachers normally expect writers to keep their distance by referring to readers via the third person (*one*, *he* or *she*, *they*). Not surprisingly, when Miriam Chaplin analyzed students' essays for the 1984 NAEF, she found that more black than white writers exhibited a field-dependent style, marked by a conversational tone and AAE culture-specific vocabulary (18). In a more recent study of college essays, however, Gilyard and Richardson discovered that essays with a field-dependent style tended to earn higher holistic scores from independent raters (45). Thus, in spite of the traditional exhortation to distance oneself from the reader, a field-dependent style may contribute to academic success by increasing readers' sense of involvement and thus heightening their interest in a text.

#### SIGNIFYIN AND OTHER FORMS OF INDIRECTION

Another defining characteristic of AAE rhetoric is known as signifyin. *Signifyin* (or *siggin*) is "the verbal art of insult in which a speaker humorously puts down, talks about, needles . . . the listener. . . . It is a culturally approved method of talking about somebody—usually through verbal indirection" (Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* 118–19). Sometimes signifyin can be competitive and ritualistic, as in the notorious **Dozens**, a game in which one insults the listener's relative (typically "yo momma") instead of the listener (Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk* 276). At other times, it is more subtle, as in female "smart talk," when, for instance, a young man tells a stranger, "Mama, you sho is

Therefore, speaking is a verbal performance that can make or break your reputation (Dandy 74). According to Africanologists such as Molefi Asante, Kimani Nehusi, and Jeffrey Woodyard, the African American preoccupation with verbal artistry is supremely African—the use of tone and pitch to convey varied meanings of the same word, the love of rhyme and wordplay, the storytelling theatrics of the griots, the rituals, the work songs.

Despite the recent publication of books such as Ronald Jackson and Elaine Richardson's *Understanding African American Rhetoric* and Richardson's *African American Literacies*, the classic source of information about AAE rhetoric for writing teachers remains Geneva Smitherman's *Talkin and Testifyin*; therefore, most of our categories and examples come from it. Smitherman's predecessors and successors, however, have also contributed significantly to our understanding of AAE discourse, so we add their insights as we present the strategies that give AAE so much "flava."

#### Discourse Strategies

Within AAE rhetoric, Smitherman identifies four primary discourse strategies: **call-response**, **signifyin**, **tonal semantics**, and **narrative sequencing**, to which we have added Spears's mode of **directness**. As you will see, these strategies unite the sacred and the secular experiences of African Americans—i.e., "church" and "street." At the same time, they synthesize opposites, such as ritual and improvisation (*Talkin and Testifyin* 103). Many also influence students' writing.

#### CALL-RESPONSE AND OTHER FIELD-DEPENDENT STRATEGIES

Smitherman defines *call-response* as "spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker's statements ('calls') are punctuated by expressions ('responses') from the listener" (*Talkin and Testifyin* 104). A deep-rooted African practice, call-response has been best preserved in the traditional African American church, where the congregation punctuates the sermon with "Amen," "Say so," "Tell it," and the like (104). Whether engaged in a sermon or barbershop

fine," but the woman replies, "That ain't no way to talk to your mother" (Troutman, "African" 222).

Signifyin does occur in school writing, though not as often as it might. Composition specialist Kermit Campbell suggests that AAE speakers' "signifying voices are muted, limited as they are by what they have been taught or perceive as appropriate for academic writing tasks" ("The Signifying"). Gilyard and Richardson, however, offer a skillful example of signifyin from a colleague writer who urges progressive African Americans to educate other Americans about false racial stereotypes: "By *enlightening the darkened* we will be threatening the 'secure' establishments America has created to prolong oppression" (46). Gilyard and Richardson explain that the student is signifyin because "the quality of light has been traditionally associated with 'knowledge,' 'goodness,' and hence White folks. Darkness has traditionally been associated with a 'state of ignorance,' or 'evil,' and consequently, Black folks. But here, the Blacks possess or will possess the qualities of knowledge and light" (46).

Such indirection plays a role in many types of African American discourse, not just signifyin. Morgan concludes that it is an essential tool for saving face, or "being cool," which is an important goal of discourse in both African and African American culture ("More" 252-53). Indirection, Rickford and Rickford note, was also a necessity for survival when enslaved Africans needed to communicate secretly right under the slavemaster's watchful eye. Thus, in the spiritual "Steal Away," they were not just yearning to escape to their heavenly home but anticipating a more earthly escape as well. This "language of double entendre" continues to serve African Americans who need a code that racist whites cannot understand (79).

Unfortunately, sometimes in academic writing indirection may lead to miscommunication. Consider the case of the first-year college student who wrote, "The cop that was driving yelled though the window and said, 'Yall don't have no business out here.' I thought who is he our father" (Troutman, "Whose" 31). A teacher might chide a student for indirection (as well as SWE errors), insisting, "Say what you mean" or "Get to the point." Yet most AAE speakers would appreciate the sly way that the student challenges the officer's right to tell her "crew" what to do (32).

## DIRECTNESS

Sometimes AAE is not so subtle; sometimes even signifyin can be confrontational, or "in yo face." Because of their negative criticism and candor, such AAE speech acts represent the verbally aggressive discourse strategy that Spears calls "directness." According to Spears, directness embraces the following:

cussin out (cursing directed to a particular addressee), playing the dozens (a game of ritual insults), snapping [brief insults], reading people (theatrically delivered negative criticism), verbally abusing people, . . . going off on someone (a sudden, often unexpected burst of negatively critical, vituperative speech), getting real (a fully candid appraisal of a person, situation, event, etc.), and trash talk (talk in competitive settings, notably athletic games, that is boastful and puts down opponents). ("Directness" 240)

Most writing teachers would find such directness inappropriate in academic writing. For instance, when teaching argumentation, they usually caution students against engaging in name-calling or other ad hominem attacks. Familiarity with AAE directness, however, is a starting point for helping students revise their strategies for academic audiences.

## TONAL SEMANTICS

Whether they are uttering an insult or a compliment, AAE speakers may endow the statement with a lyrical quality that is unmistakably African American. As Smitherman remarks, in AAE "the sound of what is being said is just as important as 'sense'" (*Talkin and Testifyin* 135). The role of rhythm and inflection in AAE may have evolved from West African tone languages, in which tone conveys meaning (136). To convey meaning, AAE speakers employ a variety of musical strategies:

- ◆ *Talk-singing*: a combination of singing and talking (e.g., "Faaaa—ther, I-I-I-I-I stretch my hand, aha, to to—to—toooooo—to Thee")
- ◆ *Repetition and alliterative wordplay*: the repetition of key sounds, words, and sentence structures (e.g., "I am nobody talk-

ing to Somebody Who can help anybody" or "You don't catch hell because you're a Baptist, and you don't catch hell because you're a Methodist. You don't catch hell because you're a Democrat or Republican. . . . You catch hell because you're a black man")

- ◆ **Intonational contouring:** the manipulation of stress and pitch to pronounce certain syllables in a more meaningful way (e.g., "There is a PUR-son here who is PO-sessed")
- ◆ **Rhyme:** rhyme in everyday speech, not just poetry and lyrics (e.g., "In a revolution, you swinging, not singing"). (*Talkin and Testifyin* 137-47)

Some African American students employ these musical devices, especially in informal writing (Ball, "Text" 279) or academic writing that targets an African American audience (Redd, "Untapped" 236). For instance, in one experiment a student who wrote "The Black family, knowledge, and values are the keys to gain financial freedom" in an essay for a white audience wrote "Education is the key, family is the key, values are the key to economic stability in the black community" when addressing a black audience (Redd, "Untapped" 236).

#### NARRATIVE SEQUENCING

In addition to their musical tradition, African Americans possess a long and strong narrative tradition. Just as they may "make music" in everyday speech, they may tell stories to explain, persuade, or impress. "This meandering away from the 'point,'" Smitherman observes, "takes the listener on episodic journeys and over tributary rhetorical routes, but like the flow of nature's rivers and streams, it all eventually leads back to the source" (*Talkin and Testifyin* 148). According to Smitherman, such narration normally takes one of the following forms:

- ◆ **Preaching and Testifying:** When traditional black ministers preach, they normally dramatize the theme of their sermon using "gestures, movement, plot, real-life characterization, and circumlocutory rhetorical flourishes" (150). Members of the congregation who testify (i.e., tell the truth) about God's goodness also dramatize their experiences and visions (150).

#### What Are the Distinctive Features of AAE?

- ◆ **Folk Stories:** Through the generations, African Americans have passed down countless stories, especially those about "underdog animals who outsmart their larger-sized enemies" (e.g., Brer Rabbit) and tricksters who duped their slavemasters (e.g., High John de Conquer). Says Smitherman, "all of these folk narrative forms have as their overriding theme the coping ability, strength, endurance, trickster capacity, and power of black people" (156).
- ◆ **Tall Tales:** "Meant to be taken semiseriously," the tall tale, or lie, "is a contrived story about some unusual event or outstanding feat that usually has an element of truth in it—somewhere" (156).
- ◆ **Toasts:** Told in verse, the toast is a tribute to a "superbad, omnipotent black hustler, pimp, player, killer who is meant to the max" (e.g., Stagolee, Shine, Dolemite, and the Signifying Monkey) (157). For instance, "Stagolee was so bad that the flies wouldn't even fly around his head in the summertime." (160).
- ◆ **Reporting:** Smitherman remarks that in AAE "the reporting of events is never simply objectively reported, but dramatically acted out and narrated," whether it is a rundown of the latest boxing match or a courtroom testimony (161).

Although AAE storytelling is vivid and concrete, it is not always appreciated. "Though highly applauded by blacks," Smitherman observes, "this narrative linguistic style is exasperating to whites who wish you'd be direct and hurry up and get to the point" (*Talkin and Testifyin* 148). Educational linguist Arnetta Ball has documented a preference for this circumlocutory narrative style among African American high school students, regardless of whether they were speaking or writing ("Cultural" 524). Dorothy Perry Thompson found similar evidence while investigating AAE speakers' performance on her university's writing proficiency test. For many of the students, the story they wanted to tell was most important; the abstract idea (the thesis) stated in the test prompt was not (235). Like the students in Ball's study, they meandered from one topic to another, weaving a web of loosely associated anecdotes.

Such a loosely structured narrative style runs counter to the thesis-driven, hierarchical method of organizing essays that is taught in most writing courses (Farr and Nardini 108; Heilker

- ◆ **Spontaneity.** While AAE speakers often draw on formulaic structures (e.g., in toasts and the Dozens), they have to fill in the details. To do so, they must know how to seize the moment, as Malcolm X did when his audience expressed surprise at his admission that he had spent time in prison. Without missing a beat, he declared that *all* African Americans were imprisoned: “That’s what America means: prison” (qtd. in Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* 96).
- ◆ **Imagery.** Many AAE speakers are masters of metaphor and other types of visual language, especially down-to-earth imagery. For instance, an African American who disliked “wig-wearing females” exclaimed, “They look like nine miles of bad road with a detour at the end” (97).
- ◆ **Braggadocio.** While most whites consider braggarts show-offs, within the AAE community boasting is an acceptable way for speakers to exercise control and dazzle an audience. Thus, boxer Muhammad Ali, who dubbed himself “The Greatest,” intimidated his opponent Sonny Liston and entertained his fans with boasts such as “Yes, the crowd did not dream when they laid down their money, that they would see a total eclipse of the Sonny” (147).
- ◆ **Style Shifting.** To Smitherman’s list, we would add *style shifting*. As Richardson explains, “African Americans may consciously perform Whiteness or Blackness (by varying their speech patterns) to meet their needs. The function of these performances could be to create ethos, pathos, authenticity, distance, familiarity, irony, or for purposes of critique, to name a few” (“To Prohibit” 692). Sometimes, for example, AAE speakers exploit the differences between AAE and Standard English to make a point: an AAE speaker might boast, “It’s not simply that I am cool. I be cool. In fact, I been cool” (Morgan “More” 265).

While many of these rhetorical devices can enhance writing, some are misunderstood within the Western rhetorical tradition that dominates the teaching of writing in this country. For instance, a teacher may admonish AAE speakers for using clichés, when in fact the students are summoning the wisdom of the community through proverbs or other sayings. Or a teacher may chide students for inserting a colloquialism when they are strategically style shifting to make a point.

A teacher may also censure a student’s attempt to impress readers with a sermon tone, big words, and fancy syntax when

78). Nevertheless, from her analysis of NAEP essays, Smitherman determined not only that the imaginative narrative task was the African American students’ “strong suit,” but also that the “narrativizing, dynamic quality” of African American rhetoric worked to their advantage in the persuasive tasks as well: essays with a “black discourse style” earned higher holistic and primary trait scores than other essays (*Talkin That Talk* 185). So let’s take a closer look at these strategies.

### Rhetorical Devices

To employ discourse strategies such as storytelling, AAE speakers draw on certain rhetorical devices, some of which Smitherman (*Talkin and Testifyin*) classifies as follows:

- ◆ **Exaggerated Language.** Known as High Talk, this exaggerated language features ornate diction and exceedingly formal syntax. Thus, Martin Luther King, Jr. declared a matter to be “incandescently clear,” while a working-class African American man ironically asked, “My dear, would you care to dine with me tonight on some delectable red beans and rice?” (94).
- ◆ **Mimicry.** Occasionally, AAE speakers will imitate someone’s voice, language, and gestures for greater effect. Thus, a woman complaining about her boyfriend remarks, “Like he come telling me this old mess bout [speaker shifts to restatin and imitating] ‘Well, baby, if you just give me a chance, Ima have it together pretty soon.’” (95).
- ◆ **Proverbs.** Like Africans, African Americans are fond of quoting sayings to endow their speech with wisdom and power. These aphorisms include both age-old proverbs and current sayings, some religious (“My name is written on high”), some educational (“A hard head make a soft behind”), some racial (“The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice”) (95, 245).
- ◆ **Puns.** Smitherman notes that “punning in the black” demands an intimate knowledge of the Black Experience. She cites, as an example, a line by singer James Brown: “I don’t know Karate but I know Karazor” (95–96). To understand the joke, she concludes, the audience must know that African Americans are reputed to be skillful wielders of knives and razors (95–96).

the formal language of academic discourse encourages some AAE speakers to model their prose after High Talk and the African American preaching style (Balester 78; Noonan-Wagner 6). On the one hand, this tactic can produce rhythmic wordplay such as "Affirmative Action is not giving handouts, it is giving a hand" and vivid imagery such as "It is a lot easier to focus on our Black youth because it is a lot easier to change the growth of a baby tree. . . . The old tree is set in its growth and will break if pressed upon too much" (Redd, "Untapped" 227, 236). On the other hand, the same tactic can produce grandiose diction such as "Continuing in my childhood growth, I began to want friends who would accompany me in my duty as a kid to communicate with adults" (Balester 88).

The formality of academic discourse may also inspire AAE speakers to use unconventional metaphors that may be misinterpreted. Gilyard and Richardson cite a striking example: a student wrote, ". . . then we will begin dealing with this deep seeded self-destruction and self-hate that has planted its poisons into the hearts and souls of our young adults. . . ." (47). A teacher might assume that the student intended to write *deep-seated* when in fact the student had invented the metaphor *deep seeded* to symbolize how "this garden has been grown through the seeds of 'self-hate' and 'self-destruction' that have been planted in Black communities" (47).

Because of academic constraints and teachers' reactions, many AAE speakers are afraid to draw on their native rhetoric in school, even though its musicality, concrete imagery, and vivid storytelling can strengthen academic writing (Ball, "Text" 271; Redd, "Untapped" 236). As Charles Coleman has observed, some students completely lose their "voice," producing bland, vapid essays (495). Worst of all, many lose their childhood interest in playing with language.

## Summary

This chapter shows that AAE possesses numerous features that distinguish it from Standard English and combine to make it a

unique way of communicating. With remarkable inventiveness, AAE speakers have forged their own vocabulary, especially by endowing Standard English words with new pronunciations, new meanings, and sometimes new spellings. Meanwhile, they have created a grammar that is, on the one hand, more streamlined (as it requires fewer word endings) and, on the other hand, more context dependent and more "verbally" complex. In addition, they have developed rhetorical strategies that are interactive and narrative, direct and indirect, musical and visual.

Many of these characteristics, especially AAE rhetoric, emerge in AAE speakers' school writing. Yet AAE rhetoric appears to be "the neglected R." Too often writing teachers are so busy trying to eradicate AAE grammar that they fail to encourage AAE speakers to tap their rhetorical resources. While some aspects of AAE rhetoric conflict with Western academic rhetoric, AAE rhetoric has immortalized the likes of Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, and it has correlated with higher scores on writing tests. Clearly, it is worth nurturing.

## Notes

1. Green identifies three types of BIN (54-60):

- a. BIN<sub>stat</sub> (a constant state)  
He BIN<sub>stat</sub> running. (He's been running for a long time.)
- b. BIN<sub>hab</sub> (habitual)  
That's where I BIN<sub>hab</sub> putting my glasses. (That's where I started putting my glasses some time ago and I still put them there.)
- c. BIN<sub>comp</sub> (ended a long time ago)  
Yeah, I BIN<sub>comp</sub> called her. (Yes, I called her a long time ago.)

2. For some readers, the term *field dependent* may have negative connotations since field independence has been associated with higher achievement on classroom and standardized second language tests (e.g., Chapelle and Roberts; Hansen and Stansfield). The correlation may be an artifact of the tests, however, since they normally focus on control of language forms rather than on the field-dependent student's forte: interpersonal communication skills (H. D. Brown).

## Suggested Readings

- Abrahams, Roger D. *Talking Black*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1976.
- Alexander, Clara Franklin. "Black English Dialect and the Classroom Teacher." *Tapping Potential: English and Language Arts for the Black Learner*. Ed. Charlotte K. Brooks. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1985. 20-29.
- Balester, Valerie M. *Cultural Divide: A Study of African-American College Writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1993.
- Ball, Arneha. "Text Design Patterns in the Writing of Urban African American Students: Teaching to the Cultural Strengths of Students in Multicultural Settings." *Urban Education* 30 (1995): 253-89.
- Dandy, Evelyn Baker. *Black Communications: Breaking Down the Barriers*. Chicago: African American Images, 1991.
- Gilyard, Keith. "One More Time for Professor Nuruddin." *Let's Flip the Script: An African American Discourse on Language, Literature, and Learning*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1996. 63-71.
- Heath, Shirley Brice. *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983.
- Jackson, Ronald L. II, and Elaine B. Richardson, eds. *Understanding African American Rhetoric: Classical Origins to Contemporary Innovations*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Kochman, Thomas, ed. *Rappin' and Stylin' Out: Communication in Urban Black America*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1972.
- Major, Clarence, ed. *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang*. New York: Penguin, 1994.
- Mitchell-Kernan, Claudia. *Language Behavior in a Black Urban Community*. Monograph of the Language-Behavior Laboratory, No. 2. Berkeley: University of California, 1971.
- Richardson, Elaine. *African American Literacies*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Rickford, John Russell, and Russell John Rickford. *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English*. New York: John Wiley, 2000.
- Smitherman, Geneva. *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*. Rev. ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
- . *What Are the Distinctive Features of AAE?*
- . *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*. 1977. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1986.
- Taylor, Hanni U. *Standard English, Black English, and Bidialectalism: A Controversy*. New York: P. Lang, 1989.