

1 Introduction

Definitions of “Black English” are in need of serious re-thinking and refinement. Scholars have obviously erred in defining Black English as a nonstandard variety of English exclusively, and in implying that vernacular forms of language are spoken primarily, if not exclusively, by lower-class, nonstandard speakers.

—Orlando Taylor (1983)

African American English (AAE)¹ is a systematic, rule-governed variety deeply rooted in the history and culture of its speakers. While its origins may date back to the earliest days of language contact brought about by the Atlantic slave trade, it remains today a vibrant symbol of African American kinship, creativity, and survival. It also remains one of the most disparaged varieties spoken in the United States – a linguistic testament to the racial discrimination and stereotyping that African Americans² have endured. Linguists first began studying AAE in an effort to improve the success of

¹ “African American English” has been called by many different names in the linguistic literature, including (but not limited to) “Negro Dialect,” “Negro English,” “Black English,” “African American English,” and “African American Language,” as well as more creative, but less commonly used labels such as “Black Street Speech” (Baugh 1983) and “Spoken Soul” (Rickford and Rickford 2000; originally coined by Claude Brown 1968). The term “Ebonics” was first introduced in the 1970s by psychologist Robert Williams, as a label to describe “the linguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represent the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and United States slave descendent of African origin” (Williams 1975: vi). “Ebonics” was introduced to the general public in 1996–97 when the Oakland School Board made a resolution to recognize the variety in their public schools. It was during this time that the label came to be used in reference to a US language variety, similar to the other terms listed above (Baugh 2000a). Unless citing literature that uses other labels, I will use “African American English” as the default label for the variety described in this book, as this remains one of the most commonly used terms among linguists today, although “African American Language” has also gained currency (see, e.g., Lanehart 2015). Further discussion regarding my use of “African American English,” particularly vis-à-vis “African American Vernacular English,” will be reserved for later in this chapter.

² I will use the term “African American” for most contemporary references, although “African American” and “Black” will sometimes be used interchangeably, as they are among members of the general public. Where relevant, I will take a similar approach with the labels “European American” and “White.”

2 Introduction

vernacular speakers in schools (see, e.g., Labov et al. 1968; Wolfram 1969). For more than half a century now, sociolinguists have scrutinized its origins, development, structure, usage, relationship to other varieties, and role in education, yielding a larger body of research on AAE than on any other variety of American English (Schneider 1996: 3). However, the bulk of this research has been drawn from working-class speech communities, while the use of AAE by middle-class speakers has remained relatively unexamined. This bias in the linguistic literature has been guided by a tendency for researchers to define AAE in terms of a fairly narrow set of vernacular (i.e., nonstandard) structural features, coupled by the assumption that such features are used primarily, if not exclusively, by working-class speakers.

In his seminal book *Language in the Inner City*, William Labov directed attention to the “Black English Vernacular” (BEV) as “that relatively uniform grammar found in its most consistent form in the speech of black youth from 8 to 19 years old who participate fully in the street culture of the inner cities” (1972a: xiii).³ Those who fell outside the limits of this “street” (or “vernacular”) culture were subsequently dismissed as “lames” (1972: 285ff.). As a result, little consideration was given to the linguistic dexterity of middle-class speakers and the extent to which they might also employ the vernacular. And little consideration was given to the ways in which more standard varieties might also be used to index African American identity and culture (cf. Irvine’s 2001 concept of “erasure”). As observed by Marcyliena Morgan,

because vernacular AAE has been defined as hip, male, adolescent, street, or gang-related speech, nonvernacular speech is described as weak, lame, or white (Labov 1972a). Those who do not fit the model of the vernacular-idealized speaker . . . are therefore, according to this sociolinguistic paradigm, not African American or, to put it in modern terms, not the “authentic Other.” (Morgan 1994: 135)

Mary Bucholtz (2003) described such tendencies in terms of a type of “sociolinguistic nostalgia,” by which researchers deemed the most “exotic” linguistic practices to be the most authentic. (See also Wolfram 2001b.) However, she also described this practice as one of “strategic essentialism,” by which linguists focused on the most marginalized and stigmatized members of the African American speech community in an effort to highlight the systematic, rule-governed nature of the variety and to debunk circulating myths about the vernacular.

A strategic use of essentialized and hence authentic identity is similarly evident in sociolinguists’ validation of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a legitimate linguistic variety, a revolutionary viewpoint that challenged generations of racism, linguistic and otherwise. Indeed, what made this challenge so powerful was

³ In this same text, Labov later described the age range as that of nine to eighteen (1972a: 257).

Table 1.1 *Language levels grid (adapted from Hoover 1978: 72, table 3)*

	Phonology	Grammar	Vocabulary	Tone, intonation
VBE [Vernacular Black English]	+	+	+	+
SBE [Standard Black English]	=	–	=	=
SE [Standard English]	–	–	–	–

Notes: + Contains vernacular features; – Contains very few vernacular features;
 = Contains vernacular features in varying degrees according to the situation

precisely the sociolinguistic commitment to describing the speech of inner-city youth, who had been – and continue to be – maligned and misrepresented in public discourse. In such a context, a demonstration of, say, the linguistic flexibility of bidialectal middle-class African Americans would have failed to persuade skeptical teachers, policy-makers, and researchers in other disciplines of the value of AAVE. (Bucholtz 2003: 402)

Despite these fairly myopic sociolinguistic tendencies, broader definitions of AAE have actually been in circulation since the earliest days of research on the variety. While Labov's early attention to the vernacular set the agenda for decades of research to follow, he proposed from the outset that a distinction be made between the terms "Black English Vernacular" and "Black English" (BE), with the latter being used as a more general cover term for "the whole range of language forms used by black people in the United States: a very large range indeed, extending from the Creole grammar of Gullah spoken in the Sea Islands of South Carolina to the most formal and accomplished literary style" (Labov 1972a: xiii).⁴ In an essay entitled "Black English: An agenda for the 1980's," Orlando Taylor (1983) urged researchers to look beyond working-class communities for vernacular usage and to broaden definitions of the variety to allow for consideration of more standard uses (see also Taylor 1975). Taylor used the label "Standard Black English" (SBE) to describe the speech of African Americans who use primarily standard grammatical constructions in combination with "Black rhetorical style, prosodic features, and idioms" (1983: 135). Relatedly, Hoover (1978: 72) offered the grid shown in Table 1.1 as an illustration of the distinction between Standard English, as traditionally defined, and standard and vernacular varieties of Black English.

Arthur Spears proposed that AAE be used as a cover term for "Standard African American English" (SAAE) and "African American Vernacular English" (AAVE), both of which would serve as cover terms for collections

⁴ As discussed later in this chapter, the question of whether Gullah exists on a continuum with other African American language varieties has been a topic of debate among linguists (see Mufwene 2001 and Weldon and Moody 2015 for fuller discussion).

4 Introduction

of varieties themselves (Spears 1998). It is from this perspective that Spears (1988) estimated that roughly 85 percent of African Americans speak some form of AAE (cf. Dillard 1972). As observed by Salikoko Mufwene, broader definitions such as these are not only more inclusive, but more consistent with community notions of “talking Black.”

There are very large proportions of African Americans whose day-to-day speech does not include the kinds of styles used in ritual insults or Hip-Hop lyrics. There are many who are often constrained by their professions from using some of the non-standard features associated with AAVE, even in their more relaxed modes of communication such as in the privacy of their homes or in the intimate settings of their friends’ company. Yet all such individuals would be recognized as “talking Black” among African Americans. (Mufwene 2001: 35)

Given these acknowledgments of the breadth and diversity of the African American speech community, it is perhaps surprising that there have been so few sociolinguistic examinations of middle-class AAE. Indeed, the only early study to provide a thorough quantitative analysis of the use of AAE by middle-class speakers was Wolfram (1969), which looked at the social stratification of phonological and grammatical variables among African American speakers in Detroit, Michigan. In his 2001 article, “Reconsidering the sociolinguistic agenda for African American English: The next generation of research and application” Wolfram essentially reissued the call made decades earlier by Orlando Taylor:

As one who must bear partial responsibility for the current structural biases (Wolfram 1969; Fasold and Wolfram 1970; Wolfram and Fasold 1974), I can only say that we need to reconsider the basis of definition [of AAE] from a broader, more inclusive perspective; we also need to arrive at a definition that is sensitive to the identification and labeling of speakers by the speech community itself. (Wolfram 2001b: 334)

In recent years, researchers have begun to address some of these gaps in the sociolinguistic literature, with studies of *social stratification* (Nguyen 2006; Jones and Preston 2011), *intraspeaker variation* (Debose 1992; Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994; Linnes 1998; Hay et al. 1999; Kendall and Wolfram 2009; Scanlon and Wassink 2010; Rickford and Price 2013; Grieser 2014; Holliday 2016; Wolfram et al. 2016), *performative language practices* (Weldon 2004; Kendall and Wolfram 2009; Britt 2011a, 2011b; Alim and Smitherman 2012; Wolfram et al. 2016), and *attitudes and perceptions* (Garner and Rubin 1986; Koch et al. 2001; Rahman 2008). Some of these studies are discussed in more detail in the next chapter and, where relevant, in the chapters to follow.⁵ The goal of this book, however, is to offer a broader look at the use and perception of African American English by

⁵ See Britt and Weldon (2015) for an overview of this burgeoning line of research.

middle-class speakers, and, in so doing, to extend our understanding of the range of varieties and perspectives that comprise the AAE continuum. As a first step in this effort, I discuss below the emergence of the African American Middle Class and linguistic debate over the origins of African American English. I also offer working definitions for these concepts as they apply to the goals and interests of this book.

The Emergence of the African American Middle Class

Scholars studying the emergence of the African American middle class have identified three key phases in its development. The first phase (roughly 1865 to 1915), described by Landry (1987) as the period of the “old mulatto elite,” was ushered in by practices that began during the plantation era when mixed-race individuals (aka “mulattos”), who were primarily the offspring of Black enslaved women who had been raped by their White masters, were afforded certain “privileges” by virtue of their kinship to their owners.⁶ Many were freed prior to emancipation and allowed to learn to read, develop a trade, and in some instances even receive a formal education, all of which led to greater wage-earning opportunities during the post-Civil War Reconstruction era. It was during this period, when federal laws were put in place to protect the civil rights of Black Americans, that this group began to reap the benefits of economic and political power. Serving the needs of wealthy White clients as skilled artisans, entrepreneurs, and domestic servants, this group of mixed-race elites established a separate community unto themselves (Landry 1987).

Feeling superior to the unmixed Negroes around them, they held themselves apart and developed their own social and community life – often patterned after the life style of whites whom they were able to observe closely because of their frequent contacts in service capacities. The clearly defined status group of mulattoes that had appeared by the time of the Civil War rose to the top of the social pyramid in black communities and continued to grow during the fifty years after emancipation. (Landry 1987: 25)

The status of this group, however, was grounded more in subjective evaluation and behavioral patterns than in material capital (cf. Bourdieu’s 1986 theory of symbolic capital). It was for this reason that Landry, drawing on the work of German sociologist Max Weber ([1920] 1968),

⁶ Vestiges of the color discrimination (or “colorism”) that grew out of this color hierarchy still exist today, both within and outside the African American community (see, e.g., Russell et al. 1993; Hunter 2007; Norwood 2014). Circulating labels such as “light-skinned,” “redbone,” or “high-yellow” vs. “dark-skinned” or “chocolate” illustrate the continued salience of these distinctions within the African American speech community.

6 Introduction

referred to these early elites as a “status group,” rather than a social class.⁷ Citing seminal studies of Black social structure at the turn of the twentieth century in Philadelphia (Du Bois 1967) and Boston (Daniels 1914), Bowser (2007) also acknowledged the strong “social psychological” component of the Black status hierarchy, including the importance of language as a symbol of social status.⁸ In a comparison of Du Bois’s middle and lower classes in late nineteenth-century Philadelphia, for example, Bowser noted that the Black middle class “dressed, *talked*, and acted (in public) like the white middle class” in contrast to the “bright and gaudy dress of common blacks, *black dialectic speech*, unladylike and ungentlemanly behavior, and the dirty chaotic households of commoners” (Bowser 2007: 56–57; emphasis added). Unlike the emerging White middle class, however, which was largely comprised of European immigrants who came to the United States to take part in the growing industrial economy, members of the Black elite, regardless of their mixed-race status, still had to endure the brunt of racial oppression and discrimination.

The ascending black middle class could not become white; only European immigrants were granted that privilege . . . For many blacks the presumption of white superiority and black inferiority became a psychological mark of inferiority that was internalized. They may have felt superior to other blacks because of their higher class standing, and if they were mulatto, they may have felt superior because of their lighter skin color. But whites considered them all to be inferior. Whereas aspiring Europeans were accepted into the middle class, claims of Anglo conformity, bourgeois morality, and occupational and educational status by blacks were not just roundly rejected; they were mocked. (Bowser 2007: 40–41)

In 1877, federal troops that had been sent to the South to enforce the Civil Rights Act of 1866 were withdrawn, bringing an end to Reconstruction and to the rise of this early elite group. In 1896, the US Supreme Court handed down the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, legalizing racial segregation and allowing states to enforce “separate but equal” policies in public facilities. In the South, the “Black Codes” – a set of post–Civil War policies aimed at maintaining White supremacy and suppressing the upward mobility of Blacks who had benefited from the federal protections and opportunities of the Reconstruction

⁷ While there is no consensus among sociologists about how to define class, two German theorists – Karl Marx and Max Weber – have been particularly influential in shaping the way that Western scholars approach it. Marxian approaches to class emphasize the conflict between capitalists (or the “bourgeoisie”), who control the “means of production,” and members of the working class (or “proletariat”), who are paid for their labor. Weberian approaches, on the other hand, emphasize the importance of status, culture, and lifestyle as representative of economic power.

⁸ Unlike Landry, however, Bowser (2007) contended that the “mulatto elite” did, in fact, constitute a social class (58).

era – became the law of the land. And thus began a new period of violence, oppression, and discrimination, known as the Jim Crow era.⁹

Ironically, it was in the context of these systematic efforts to disenfranchise Black Americans and restrict their upward mobility that the Black middle class ultimately crystallized. According to Landry (1987), the period from 1915 to 1960 marked the second phase in the development of the Black middle class. The strict segregationist policies and brutal violence of the Jim Crow era forced Blacks to retreat to their own communities for survival. Members of the “old mulatto elite” who had depended on White patronage for employment found themselves losing access to jobs that had once been their mainstay, often being passed over in favor of White immigrants. Then, in 1924, an immigration bill restricting the number of European immigrants to the United States opened up opportunities in the factories and steel mills of the industrial North for jobs that Blacks had previously been denied. Millions of Blacks fled the South in search of employment, forming isolated communities in the urban North, where they often faced discrimination by Whites who refused to provide them personal and professional services (Landry 1987). It was in these segregated communities that the potential for a diverse Black workforce was realized. “The burgeoning black urban communities provided an opportunity for the emergence of a black middle class of teachers, doctors, dentists, undertakers, realtors, insurance agents, ministers, newspaper editors, and small businessmen who attempted to meet the needs of a black community that whites were often unwilling to serve” (Landry 1987: 21). College education was, of course, a key component to accessing these middle-class jobs. According to Bowser (2007), “more than ninety black colleges, universities, and technical schools were started to supplement the dozen black colleges started after the Civil War and during Black Reconstruction” (55). Black illiteracy rates dropped significantly. And the number of Blacks receiving four or more years of college rose from 1 percent to 3 percent in the period from 1940 to 1960 (Landry 1987: 64).

Regardless of talent or ambition, however, the status and earning potential of the Black middle class was confined to Black communities. Bowser (2007) compared the findings of two seminal studies on social class structure during this period – Warner and Lunt’s 1941 study of White residents in 1930s Newberryport, Massachusetts (aka “Yankee City”) and Drake and Cayton’s 1945 description of Black residents in the 1930s Bronzeville District of

⁹ Many attribute the name “Jim Crow” to a stereotypical Black character performed by actor Thomas D. Rice in minstrel shows in the early nineteenth century. The song “Jump Jim Crow” was first performed by “Daddy Rice” in 1828 (Lewis and Lewis 2009).

8 Introduction

Chicago. Noteworthy in this comparison was the absence of a Black upper class and a White underclass, highlighting the lack of class comparability across races during this time. As observed by Bowser (2007), the commitment to a Protestant work ethic failed to translate into mainstream economic success for members of the Black middle class.

In the absence of opportunities to compete in the mainstream economy, where the “means of production” were controlled by Whites, members of the Black middle class made their status known through various forms of “conspicuous consumption” (Veblen 1899 [1994]). They purchased homes, formed exclusive clubs, and participated in lavish social events that symbolized their status (Drake and Cayton 1945; Frazier 1957). It was in this segregated context that Arthur Spears (2015) identified the social locus for African American Standard English (AASE), which he defined as a variety of AAE that is devoid of vernacular features, but contains “Distinctively Black Grammatical Features” (DBGFs), such as remote stressed *BIN*¹⁰ (shown in example 1), whose distinctiveness vis-à-vis Mainstream Standard English (MSE) is linguistically camouflaged.¹¹

1. *They’ve BIN living in Chicago* (Spears 2015: 794)

“They’ve been living in Chicago a long time and still are living there”

Similar to the various forms of conspicuous consumption described above, Spears identified AASE as a form of “cultural capital” (cf. Bourdieu 1986, 1991) used as a status symbol by members of the Black elite.

In the absence of wealth or affluence, which was usually the case with individuals and families in the Black community, AASE and what it indexed became all the more important in securing social status . . . AASE was a form of cultural capital unhinged from financial capital and thus almost served as a substitute for it, in a zone where capital accumulation was systematically repressed by community-external forces. (Spears 2015: 796–97)

During World War II, employment opportunities for Blacks peaked again, as European immigration was curtailed and young White men were drafted into

¹⁰ Remote stressed BIN is often spelled with an “i” rather than “ee” in the linguistic literature as a means of orthographically representing the [i]/[e] merger characteristic of the African American speech community. The capitalization represents the primary stress that it receives when used as a remote past marker. (For more on this feature, see Rickford and Rickford 1976 [1999]).

¹¹ Spears (2015) makes a distinction between SAAE, which is more or less indistinguishable from mainstream varieties in terms of its grammatical features (cf. Hoover 1978), and AASE, which is defined by the presence of significantly more DBGFs, which “are found in the lexicon, phonology, and other parts of grammar” (792). The latter, he argues, is an endangered variety spoken primarily by those aged sixty and above who were raised in all-Black communities under segregation. For the purposes of this book, all such varieties will be referred to under the label SAAE.

the military. These changes led to another mass migration in the 1940s, when Blacks moved out of the Jim Crow South and into the industrial North for jobs. The growth of Black working-class communities in the urban North subsequently fed the growth of the Black middle class, which provided professional services to these communities. As African Americans enlisted in the military and entered the war, parallels between Jim Crow and the fascism that the United States and its allies were fighting against abroad became increasingly apparent, giving traction to the Black Civil Rights movement, under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil right activists. Following the end of WWII, several key pieces of legislation were passed that ultimately brought an end to the Jim Crow era. The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision ending the “separate but equal” doctrine, the 1964 Civil Rights Act outlawing segregation and discrimination, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act helped to usher in a new era of opportunity and prosperity for African Americans. Affirmative Action and Equal Employment Opportunity policies, coupled by growth in the number of African American college graduates, provided access to the mainstream economy that African Americans had not experienced before. Thus, by 1970 a new African American middle class had emerged in the United States (Landry 1987).

While this third phase in the development of the African American middle class has yielded greater comparability between the races, researchers have acknowledged its unique challenges and vulnerabilities. As illustrated in Figures 1.1 and 1.2, over the course of the last century the number of African Americans receiving a college education and securing white-collar employment – two traditional indicators of middle-class status – has followed a trajectory similar to that of European Americans. And Black-White ratios have narrowed in the process.

Median household incomes among African Americans and European Americans have also followed comparable trajectories in recent years, though a persistent gap remains, as shown in Figure 1.3. However, when it comes to the accumulation of wealth, as defined by net worth (i.e., household assets minus debts), there remains a staggering gap between African American and European American households, as illustrated in Figure 1.4.

Furthermore, African Americans across the spectrum have been disproportionately affected by periods of economic turmoil. According to Mishel et al. (2012), the Great Recession that began in 2007–8 “wreaked havoc” on African American households. African American median wealth fell 49.7% compared to 35.8% for European American households. Median household income among African Americans fell 10.1%, compared to 5.4% for European American households. And the annual unemployment rate for African Americans peaked at 15.9% in 2010–11, compared to 8% for European

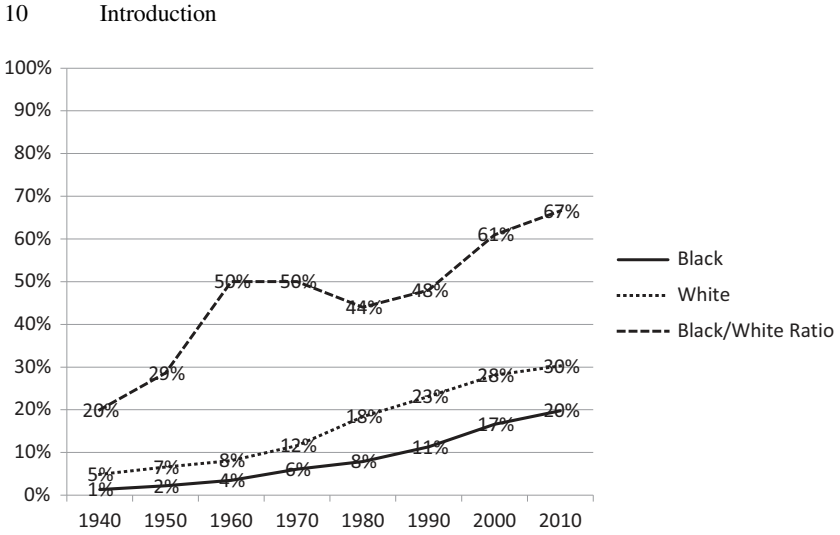


Figure 1.1 Percentage of Blacks and Whites who completed four or more years of college (1940–2010)
 Note: Years prior to 1980 include persons of Hispanic origin. Data for 1993 and later years are for persons with a bachelor's degree or higher.
 Source: Information Please® Database www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0774057.html¹²

Americans. Even African American college graduates saw their unemployment rates rise from 3.5% in 2007 to 8.2% in 2011.¹³

Thus, while there are many high-profile African American celebrities, politicians, athletes, business executives, etc. who have accumulated significant wealth in today's society, Bowser (2007) contends that there is still no African American upper class, from the perspective of intergenerational wealth, power, and influence, to drive significant social and political change. Furthermore, many middle-class African Americans continue to endure the challenges of racial profiling, discriminatory practices in housing and employment, de facto segregation, and economic and educational disparities, all of

¹² Original Sources: US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, US Census of Population, 1960, Vol. 1, part 1; *Current Population Reports*, Series P-20 and unpublished data; and *1960 Census Monograph*, "Education of the American Population," by John K. Folger and Charles B. Nam. From US Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics 2007*, US Census Bureau, *Current Population Survey*, March 2007, US Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2011*.

¹³ Source: <http://stateofworkingamerica.org/fact-sheets/african-americans/>.