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African American English
a linguistic introduction

This authoritative introduction to African American English (AAE) is the first textbook to look at the grammar as a whole. Clearly organized, it describes patterns in the sentence structure, sound system, word formation and word use in AAE. The book uses linguistic description and data from conversation to explain that AAE is not a compilation of random deviations from mainstream English but that it is a rule-governed system. The textbook examines topics such as education, speech events in the secular and religious world, and the use of language in literature and the media to create black images. This much-needed book includes exercises to accompany each chapter and will be essential reading for students in linguistics, education, anthropology, African American studies and literature.

LISA J. GREEN is Assistant Professor in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Texas, Austin.

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Foreword

It is difficult for me to contain my excitement at seeing this book in print! Lisa Green is one of the newest, freshest voices to contribute to the linguistic study of African American English (AAE), and this is the first theoretically informed, book-length discussion by a native speaker of what it means to know and use this beloved, belittled language. (The author is from Louisiana, a state rarely cited in previous studies of AAE.)

Although linguists have done more work on AAE than any other variety of American English, at least since the 1960s, much of this focuses on the quantitative analysis of *sociolinguistic* variation (by internal, linguistic factors as well as by external ones like social class, age, and style), the *historical* development of AAE (including its African, Creole, and English origins), and its *educational* implications (as raised, for instance, by the 1996 Oakland “Ebonics” controversy). All of this is valuable, but without a detailed understanding of the structure and patternedness of this variety in the sense that has been fundamental to modern linguistics since De Saussure and Sapir, our efforts to pursue these larger questions are limited.

Lisa Green is fully aware of the sociolinguistic issues, more so than the average theoretical linguist. (Her graduate training was at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, but she has done postgraduate work at Stanford and regularly participates in sociolinguistic and variationist conferences.) But she wisely sets them aside in this book and provides only a brief overview of relevant historical issues. What she treats us to, instead, is a detailed, insightful exploration of the synchronic “character” or nature of AAE (its lexicon, morphosyntax and phonology) covered in the first four chapters, and a stimulating discussion of some of the “contexts” in which it is used and represented (in speech events, literature, and the media, as well as in linguistics, public attitudes, and education), the subject of the second half of the book.

Throughout, Lisa Green is insistent that AAE is systematic and rule-governed. In this respect she is similar to virtually every linguist who has previously studied this variety. But what is new is her consistent emphasis on revealing the character of AAE as a system, rather than a list of isolated features; note the extensive verbal paradigms of chapter 2, for instance, or the way that preterite *had* in chapter 3 is compared with

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alternative means of marking the past in AAE. Lisa Green’s book also includes features (like the intrusive *d* in *light-skinded*, and AAE’s distinctive intonation contours) and issues (e.g. child language acquisition and the assessment of speech disorders) that are rarely if ever treated in other texts. She often leads us to a richer, deeper understanding of the semantic subtleties and syntactic possibilities than we were aware of before this, undoubtedly related to her ability to draw on her native speaker intuitions. And her attested data is especially extensive and up-to-date, culled from natural conversations by speakers of all ages, classes, and genders, and from a wide range of sources in literature, popular culture, and the media, including the latest rap music and movies (e.g. *Bamboozled*, 2000).

Finally, I cannot close without praising Lisa Green as a teacher and pedagogue. I have had the privilege of co-teaching a course on AAE with her once (at Stanford), marveling at the skill with which she introduced students who were new to linguistics to the technical aspects of the field and the regularities and complexities of this variety. I was similarly impressed as I read this book, which will be appreciated by students and instructors alike for its clear exposition, its reference to more complex literature (by the author herself and others) for those who want to dig deeper, and for its very helpful summaries and exercises at the end of each chapter. This book will be invaluable to those of us who struggle to find an appropriate middle line between keeping students interested, and exposing them to the linguistic subtleties of AAE. It will definitely help me to teach a deeper, sweeter introduction to AAE than I have before, and it will enable my students to produce better term papers. This is one of the many reasons that I am excited to see this book in print, and to recommend my colleagues and students to this bright new scholar. She will undoubtedly continue to enrich our understanding of AAE, syntax and language in the future.

John R. Rickford

Preface

The aim of this book is to provide an introduction to the study of topics related to African American English (AAE). The focus is on presenting a description of AAE and explaining the types of rules that speakers follow when they speak it. This book evolved from plans to collaborate on a similar project with John R. Rickford, who is a leading scholar in the field and a great teacher. I gratefully acknowledge his foresight and the key role he played during the early stages of this work.

In this book and my overall research on AAE, I try to show that speakers know more than just a few unique words and phrases when they know AAE and that the variety is not a version of bad English. The book is divided into eight chapters, whose themes center on linguistic and social issues in the study of AAE. Each chapter begins with a focal point, which highlights the major thrust of the discussion, and a quote that makes a relevant point or includes an example of a linguistic construction that is addressed in the chapter. Each chapter ends with a summary and exercises that can be used in applying the material discussed in separate sections.

This book is intended for students who are taking general courses that address AAE as well as for those who want to learn about the ways in which the variety is systematic. The book may be of interest to educators and those in education-related fields. The final chapter explains how the information presented in the course of this book may be useful in developing classroom lessons and strategies for teaching mainstream English proficiency. In addition, the book may also be of interest to those who are engaged in discussions about the representation of AAE in literature and the media.

It is my good fortune to have been helped along the way by so many people. I gratefully acknowledge support from the faculty in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Massachusetts, especially during my leave there from 1997 to 1998. I am especially thankful for the feedback provided by John Baugh and Tom Wasow during the early stages of this project. I received helpful comments from students in courses I taught at The University of Texas at Austin and at the University of Massachusetts. Wali Rahman helped me with sources on the expressive language used by African Americans in the adolescent to young adult age groups. Walter Sistrunk,

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This book would certainly have not been possible without the many AAE speakers from different parts of the United States. I would also like to thank my Lake Arthur community, Pastor Melton Alfred and the ABC Reading Program for allowing me to continue to be a part of them and for continuing to keep me in their prayers. I acknowledge Pastor N. D. Lee III, for giving me permission to use his sermon. Special thanks go to my parents, Charles and Ramona Green, who have always believed in and supported me.

This book is dedicated to my husband, Vincent Jackson, who continues to hold me up on every side. Vincent’s constant love, encouragement, patience and support helped me get through this project and many other day-to-day challenges.