Phonological and Grammatical Features of African American Vernacular English (AAVE)

1.1 Introduction

When the Ebonics controversy broke in December 1996, one of the most frequent requests from the media was for lists or descriptions of AAVE features which showed how it differed from Standard English (SE) and other American dialects, and which the general public could understand.¹ For the lexicon (vocabulary) of AAVE, this was not a problem, since in addition to the two substantive scholarly works by Major (1994) and Smitherman (1994a), there were several shorter, popular AAVE phrase books around, like Anderson (1994) and Stavsky et al. (1995).² For the phonology (pronunciation) and grammar of AAVE, however, the aspects which are more systematic and deep-seated, less regionally variable, and more significant from a pedagogical point of view, it was much harder to recommend anything, and that remains true today.

One of the most complete and accessible (if somewhat technical) descriptions of AAVE phonology and grammar is Fasold and Wolfram's often-cited (1970) article. But besides being outdated both in terminology (it refers to AAVE as “Negro dialect”) and coverage (it excludes features like steady, preterite had, and modal come which were not discovered or discussed until more recently), it is simply out of print. This is also true of more general introductions to AAVE like Dillard (1972), Burling (1973), and Baugh (1983), each of which includes a chapter or two on AAVE phonology and grammar. And it is true too of the classic book-length studies of Harlem, Detroit, and Washington DC conducted respectively by Labov et al. (1968), Wolfram (1969) and Fasold (1972), which report on AAVE structure as well as on variation by its users according to social class, age, gender, and style. While there are more recent works on AAVE phonology and grammar, they tend to be either less complete in their coverage (e.g. Dandy 1991), or highly specialized and technical, intended for an audience of linguists or speech pathologists (e.g. Martin 1992, Wolfram 1993, Wolfram 1994, Wolfram and Adger 1993, Dayton 1996, Bailey
1.2 The Features of AAVE

Table 1.1 identifies the main distinctive phonological features of AAVE, and table 1.2 the main distinctive grammatical features of AAVE. Although it is impossible in a chapter of this length to add all the qualifying details about each

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Table 1.1 Continued

| 7 | Deletion or vocalization (pronunciation as a weak neutral vowel) of / after a vowel, as in \( he'p \) for SE “help,” and \( toah \) for SE “tol.” May have the grammatical effect of deleting the “Ill” of contracted \( s \), as in “He be here tomorrow” for SE “He’ll be here tomorrow,” especially when the following word begins with \( b, m \) or \( w \) (Fasold and Wolfram 1970: 51–3). |
| 8 | Deletion or vocalization of \( r \) after a vowel, as in \( situk \) for SE “sister” or \( foh \) for SE “four.” This rule applies more often when the \( r \) comes at the end of a word and is followed by a word beginning with a consonant (\( four \) posts) rather than a word beginning with a vowel (\( four \) apples), but it can also apply when a vowel follows within the same word, as in \( Ca'ol \) for SE “Carol” or \( sto'y \) for SE “story.” Grammatical effects may include the use of \( they \) for the SE possessive “their” (Labov et al. 1968: 99–119, Fasold and Wolfram 1970: 51–3). |
| 9 | Deletion of initial \( d \) and \( g \) in certain tense-aspect auxiliaries, as in “ah ‘on know” for SE “I don’t know” and “ah’m ‘a do it” for SE “I’m gonna do it” (see Labov et al. 1968: 252); the distinctive AAVE use of \( ain’t \) for “didn’t” (ibid.: 255) probably derives historically from this rule too. Note parallels in Gullah/Caribbean Creole English tense-aspect markers: \( da' ~ a, doe' ~ oes, ben' ~ men' ~ en, mos'ki' ~ mosi, \) and \( go' ~ o \) (Rickford 1974: 108). |
| 10 | Deletion of unstressed initial and medial syllables, as in \( 'fraid \) for SE “afraid” and \( see'try \) for SE “secretary.” Strongly age-graded. According to Vaughn-Cooke (1987: 22), the unstressed syllable deletion rate for speakers over 60 years old in her Mississippi sample was 85 percent, for speakers aged 40–59 it was 70 percent, and for speakers 8–20 years old, it was 52 percent. |
| 11 | Metathesis or transposition of adjacent consonants, as in \( als \) for SE “ask” (one of the biggest shibboleths of AAVE, often referred to by teachers, personnel officers, and other gatekeepers in the course of putting down the variety), and \( waps \) for SE “wasp.” |
| 12 | Realization of SE \( v \) and \( z \) (voiced fricatives) as \( d \) and \( z \) respectively (voiced stops), especially in word-medial position before a nasal, as in \( seben \) for SE “seven” and \( idn' \) for SE “isn’t” (phonetically, \( [iznt] \)). (See Wolfram 1993: 9, Bailey and Thomas 1998: 89). |
| 13 | Realization of syllable-initial \( str \) as \( skr \), especially before high front vowels like “ee” [\( i \)], as in \( street \) for SE “street” and \( deskroy \) for “destroy” (see Dandy 1991: 44). |
| 14 | Monophthongal pronunciations of \( ay \) and \( oy \), as in \( ah \) for SE “I” and \( bayn \) for SE “boy.” |
| 15 | Neutralization/merger of \( [t] \) and \( [c] \) before nasals, as in \( [pən] \) for SE “pin” and \( "pen." \) (See Labov et al. 1968: 119–20.) |
| 16 | Realization of “ing” as “ing” and “ink” as “ank” in some words, as in \( thang \) for SE “thing,” \( sang \) for SE “sing,” and \( drunk \) for SE “drink.” (See Smitherman 1986: 18, Dandy 1991: 46). |
| 17 | Stress on first rather than second syllable, as in \( pólice \) instead of SE \( police \), and \( hótel \) instead of SE \( hótel \). |
| 18 | More varied intonation, with “higher pitch range and more rising and level final contours” than other American English varieties (Wolfram et al. 1993: 12; see also Rickford 1977: 205). |
Table 1.2  Distinctive grammatical (morphological and syntactic) features of AAVE

19 Pre-verbal markers of tense, mood, and aspect

19a Absence of copula/auxiliary is and are for present tense states and actions, as in “He’s tall” for SE “He’s tall” or “They’re running” for SE “They are running.” (See Labov 1969 and Rickford et al. 1988, reprinted in this volume.)

19b Use of invariant be (sometimes been) for habitual aspect, as in “He be walkin’” (usually, regularly, versus “He’s walkin’” right now) for SE “He is usually walkin’/usually walks.” Used with auxiliary do in questions, negatives, and tag questions, as in “Do he be walking every day?” or “She don’t be sick, do she?” (Fasold 1972: 150–84, Dayton 1996, Green 1998).

19c Use of invariant be for future will be,” as in “He be here tomorrow.” This is essentially a result of the phonological rule deleting the contracted ‘l of will (see #7 above).

19d Use of steady as an intensified continuous marker, usually after invariant habitual be, but before a progressive verb, for actions that occur consistently or persistently, as in “Ricky Bell be steady steppin’ in them number nines.” (Baugh 1983: 86).

19e Use of unstressed been or bin for SE “has/ have been” (present perfect), as in “He been sick” for “He has been sick.” Unlike stressed BIN (see 19e), unstressed been can co-occur with time adverbials (e.g. “since last week”), and does not denote remoteness (Rickford 1975).

19f Use of stressed BIN to mark remote phase (that the action happened or the state came into being long ago) as in “She BIN married” for SE “She has been married for a long time (and still is),” or “He BIN ate it” for SE “He ate it a long time ago” (Rickford 1975, Baugh 1983: 80–2).

19g Use of done to emphasize the completed nature of an action, as in “He done did it” for SE “He’s already done it.” Done can co-occur with been, as in “By the time I got there, he been done gone” or, in the reverse order, “They done been sitting there an hour.” (See Labov 1972c: 53–7, Baugh 1983: 74–7, Smitherman 1986: 24, Dayton 1996, Green 1998).

19h Use of be done for resultatives or the future/conditional perfect, as in “She be done had her baby” for SE “She will have had her baby.” (Baugh 1983: 77–80, Dayton 1996, Green 1998).

19i Use of finna (sometimes fitma, derived from “fixin’ to”) to mark the immediate future, as in “He finna go” for SE “He’s about to go.”

19j Use of come to express the speaker’s indignation about an action or event, as in “He come walkin’ in here like he owned the damn place” (Spear 1982: 852).

19k Use of had to mark the simple past (primarily among preadolescents) as in “then we had went outside” for SE “then we went outside” (Rickford and Théberge-Rafał 1989).

19l Use of double modals, as in may can, might can, and might could (common in Southern White vernaculars) for SE “might be able to” or must don’t (more unique to AAVE) for SE “must not.” (See Labov et al. 1968: 260–3, Labov 1972c: 57–9).

Table 1.2 Continued

19m Use of quasi modals liketa and poseta, as in “I liketa drowned” for SE “I nearly drowned” and “You don’t poseta do it that way?” for SE “You’re not supposed to do it that way.” (Labov 1972: 56, 59, Wolfram 1993: 13).

20 Other aspects of verbal tense marking

20a Absence of third person singular present tense -s, as in “He walketh” for SE “He walks.” The use of don’t instead of “doesn’t” as in “He don’t sing” or have instead of ‘has,” as in “She have it” is related, since “doesn’t and hasn’t” include 3rd singular -s (Fasold 1972: 121–49).

20b Generalization of is and was to use with plural and second person subjects (i.e., instead of are and were) as in “They is some crazy folk” for SE “They are crazy folk” or “We was there” for SE “We were there” (Wolfram 1993: 14).

20c Use of past tense or preterite form (V-ed) as past participle (V-en), as in “He had bit” for SE “He had bitten,” or “She has ran” for SE “She has run.” (See Fasold and Wolfram 1970: 62, Rickford and Théberge: 1996: 232–3, reprinted in this volume).

20d Use of past participle form (V-en) as past tense or preterite form (V-ed), as in “She seen him yesterday” for SE “She saw him yesterday” (Wolfram 1993: 12).

20e Use of verb stem (V) as past tense or preterite form (V-ed), as in “He come down here yesterday” for SE “He came down here yesterday.” (Wolfram 1993: 12).

20f Reduplication of a past tense or past participle suffix (also referred to sometimes as “double tense marking”), as in liked [laktid] for SE “liked” and light-skinned for SE “light skinned.” Only applies to a small set of verbs (including liked, looked, skinned), and more common in adolescent speech (see Wolfram 1993: 14).

21 Nouns and pronouns

21a Absence of possessive -s, as in “John’s house” for SE “John’s house.”

21b Absence of plural -s (much less frequent than 20a or 21a), as in “two boy’s” for SE “two boys.”

21c Use of and (them) or norn, usually after a proper name, to mark associative plurals, as in Felicia an’ (them) or Felician norn for “Felician and her friends or family or associates.” (See Mufwene 1998: 73, who finds this more similar to English creoles than to other varieties of English, although southern white varieties use it too).

21d Appositive or pleonastic pronouns, as in “That teacher, she yell at the kids” for SE “That teacher yells at the kids.” (Fasold and Wolfram 1970: 81).

21e Use of y’all and they to mark second person plural and third plural possessive, respectively, as in “It’s y’all ball” for SE “It’s your ball” and “It’s they house” for SE “It’s their house” (Wolfram et al. 1993: 16).
22 Negation

22a Use of ain’t as a general preverbal negator, for SE “am not,” “isn’t,” “aren’t,” “hasn’t,” “haven’t” and “didn’t,” as in “He ain’ here” for SE “He isn’t here,” or “He ain’ do it” for SE “He didn’t do it.”

22b Multiple negation or negative concord (that is, negating the auxiliary verb and all indefinite pronouns in the sentence), as in “He don’ do nothin” for SE “He doesn’t do anything” (Labov 1972a, 1972c: 130–96).

22c Negative inversion (inversion of the auxiliary and indefinite pronoun subject), as in “Can’t nobody say nothin” (inverted from “Nobody can’t say nothin”) for SE “Nobody can say anything” or “Ain’t nobody home” (from “Nobody ain’t home” for SE “Nobody is home” (Sells, Rickford and Wasow 1996a, b).

22d Use of ain’t but and don’t but for “only,” as in “He ain’t but fourteen years old” for SE “He’s only fourteen years old” or “They didn’t take but three dollars” for “They only took three dollars” (Wolfram et al. 1993: 14).

23 Questions

23a Formation of direct questions without inversion of the subject and auxiliary verb, usually with rising intonation, as in “Why I can’t play?” for SE “Why can’t I play?” and “They didn’t take it?” for SE “Didn’t they take it?” (Labov et al. 1968: 291–6, Martin and Wolfram 1998: 29).

23b Auxiliary verb inversion in embedded questions (if or whether), as in “I asked him could he go with me” for SE “I asked him if he could go with me” (Labov et al. 1968: 296–300).

24 Existential and locative constructions

24a Use of existential it is, is, was, ain’t) instead of there (is, is, was, isn’t) as in “It’s a school up there” for SE “There’s a school up there” (Labov et al. 1968: 301–3).

25 Complementizer/quotative say

25a Use of say to introduce a quotation or a verb complement, as in “They told me say they couldn’t go.” Although superficially similar to the SE use of “say” to introduce quotations, note its use with verbs like believe and know (which have nothing to do with speaking) in Gullah and Caribbean creoles, and its parallels with and possible origins in the Akan complementizer se (Rickford 1977: 212).

24b Use of existential they got as a plural equivalent of singular it is, instead of there are, as in “They got some hungry women here” (line from a Nina Simone song) for “There are some hungry women here” (Labov et al. 1968: 303).

24c Use of here go as a static locative or presentational form, as in “Here go my own” (said by a 12-year-old girl from East Palo Alto, California as she showed me her artwork) for SE “Here is my own.” (See Labov et al. 1968: 303.)

1.3 Variation in AAVE Feature Use by Social Class, Age, Gender, and Style

Not every African American speaks AAVE, and no one uses all of the features in tables 1.1 and 1.2 100 percent of the time. Although it is often said that 80 percent of African Americans speak AAVE (Dillard 1972: 229), this is a guess-timate rather than a systematic empirical finding. In general, the phonological and grammatical features depicted in tables 1.1 and 1.2 are used most often by younger lower- and working-class speakers in urban areas and in informal styles, but the extent to which this is true, and how often the features are used varies from one feature to another.

Wolfram’s (1969) study of Detroit – although now 30 years old – remains one of our most comprehensive sources of information on class stratification in AAVE, and table 1.3 summarizes some of the systematic class effects it revealed for several features. Note that the lower working-class (LWC) speakers’ usage of these features ranged from a high of 84 percent for consonant cluster reduction to a low of 6 percent for plural -s absence. Note also that while
Finally, males are generally reported as using AAVE features more often than females, but this may be partly because the interviewers in most studies are male. For instance, Wolfram (1969: 136) reports that the lower working-class males in Detroit deleted third present -s 74 percent of the time compared to 69 percent for lower working-class females. But Foxy Boston and Tinky Gates, in interviews conducted in East Palo Alto by a female fieldworker (Faye McNair Knox), showed even higher rates of third present -s absence – 97 percent and 96 percent respectively (Rickford 1992).

1.4 The Distinctiveness of AAVE, vis-à-vis Other American Varieties

The features of AAVE that appear to be distinctive to this variety (or nearly so) are primarily grammatical. Wolfram (1991: 108) lists eight such features, and six of them (including stressed BIN, invariant be, and is absence) are grammatical. Many of the phonological features of AAVE (e.g., sonorant cluster reduction and the deletion or vocalization of l and r), and some of its grammatical features too (e.g., multiple negation and absence of third person singular present tense -s) also occur in the colloquial English of Americans from other ethnic groups, especially those from the working class. Others (like the monophthongal pronunciations of ay and ey, the merger of "pin" and "pen," or the use of done and double mods) are characteristic of southern white vernacular speech in general (see Feagin 1979, Bailey and Thomas 1998, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998). But most of the time, the features which AAVE shares with southern and other American vernaculars occur more frequently in AAVE and/or in a wider range of linguistic environments. For instance, consonant cluster simplification appears to be more common in the AAVE of working-class African Americans than in white working-class speech, and it occurs in AAVE even when the next word begins with a vowel (e.g., pos’ office), a position in which many other dialects retain the final consonant (Wolfram 1991: 109). For some AAVE speakers, words like des’ do not have an underlying final k, and the plural form is desses according to the same rule that applies to words ending in a final sibilant (e.g., rose-roses, boss-bosses, church-churches).

1.5 Concluding Remarks

While lists of vernacular, non-standard, or non-mainstream features like those in tables 1.1 and 1.2 are useful, they can also give the impression that their standard or mainstream equivalents are not characteristic of AAVE usage at all,
so that if an African American speaker pronounced past without reducing the final st or used existential there instead of it (“There's a hole in the bucket”) that speaker might have to be classified as speaking or switching to SE. But in practice, as Labov (1972: 189) pointed out, a speaker might alternate between vernacular and mainstream variants many times in the course of even a brief conversation, and we have to recognize that AAVE, like most language varieties, includes a certain amount of inherent variability. That variability in turn can be adjusted in one direction or another to mark the kinds of social and stylistic distinctions discussed above, and the dynamic, shifting relationships among the interlocutors.

Finally, AAVE use, even at its most vernacular, does not consist simply of stringing together features like those in tables 1.1 and 1.2. What these lists fail to convey is the way skilled AAVE speakers use those features, together with distinctive AAVE words, prosodies and rhetorical/expressive styles, to inform, persuade, attract, praise, celebrate, chastise, entertain, educate, get over, set apart, mark identity, reflect, refute, brag, and do all the varied things for which human beings use language. It is because AAVE serves those purposes and serves them well that it continues to exist despite all the condemnations it receives from the larger society. For the preachers, novelists, storytellers, poets, playwrights, actors and actresses, street corner hustlers, church-going grandparents, working mothers and fathers and schoolyard children, rappers, singers, barber-shop and beauty-salon clients who draw on it daily, AAVE is not simply a compendium of features, but the integral whole which Claude Brown evocatively called “Spoken Soul.”

Notes

1 This is a considerably revised and expanded excerpt from Rickford 1996a, including a new introduction and conclusion, numerous additional references, and more than twice as many AAVE features.

2 One problem with the popular phrase books or glossaries is that they focus almost entirely on slang, the newest and most transient part of the AAVE lexicon, and the part most familiar to adolescents and teenagers. This reinforces the mistaken impression that AAVE is nothing more than slang, and that it is not known and used by adult African Americans.

3 It is difficult to provide a truly complete description in the space available, however, and difficult to avoid technical terms altogether, especially in the description of the phonology. My hope is that my description will remain relatively accessible to the educated layperson while remaining accurate and useful for the linguist or speech pathologist.

4 The systematic nature of AAVE is shown by the fact that this rule operates only when both members of the consonant cluster are either voiceless, involving no vibration of the vocal cords (as in “post,” “ask” and “apt”), or voiced, with the vocal cords vibrating (as in “posed” [posed], “hand” and “old”). When one member of the cluster is voiceless and the other voiced (as in “jump” or “thank”) the cluster cannot be simplified, except in negative forms like am' and don'. See Fasold and Wolfram (1970: 43–6) and Labov et al. (1968: 123–57) for further discussion.

5 This is popularly known as “dropping your g's,” but it doesn't actually involve any g-dropping at all. What actually happens, in phonetic terms, is that one kind of nasal (an alveolar nasal — with the tongue touching the alveolar ridge right behind the top teeth) is substituted for another one (a velar nasal — with the tongue touching the velar or upper back region of the roof of the mouth). See Labov et al. (1968: 120–3).

6 As Fasold and Wolfram (1970: 49–51) point out, voiceless th is more often realized as z at the beginnings of words, and as f in the middle or at the ends of words. Similarly, d realizations of voiced th are more common word-initally and v realizations are more common word- medially and word-finally. See also Labov et al. (1968: 92–9).

7 As Fasold and Wolfram (1970: 56) point out, this feature is common among both Blacks and Whites in the South, and occurs much more frequently before voiced sounds or pause (as in "side," "T") than before voiceless sounds (as in "site").

8 According to Fasold and Wolfram (1970: 57), this affects only a small subset of words, such as police, hotel, and July.

9 In the grammatical examples, Θ is used to mark the point at which a grammatical form or inflection would occur in equivalent SE examples. This is comparable to the use of an apostrophe in phonological examples (e.g. he's) to mark the point at which a consonant or vowel occurs in equivalent SE forms.

10 There is no published discussion of the use of fonna in AAVE, but see Ching (1987) for a discussion of its probable source — fin to — in the South.

11 Modals are auxiliary verbs like can, might, must which express the speaker’s mood, or attitude towards what he/she is saying, e.g. whether it is possible, likely, obligatory, and so on.

12 In general, the past tense category is well established in AAVE, as is shown by the past that most irregular or strong verbs (which undergo a stem change to mark the past) are past-marked most of the time; Fasold (1972: 39) reports that 98 percent of the 833 past tense strong verbs he examined in his Washington DC corpus were past marked. Unmarked pasts tend to come either from regular or weak verbs (like walked) in which the final consonant is deleted by phonological rule, or from the small set of irregular verbs (including come, say, run, give, and eat, among others) which sometimes occur without past inflection (see Wolfram et al. 1993: 12).

13 Wolfram’s sample included 12 representatives of each socioeconomic class. The classes themselves were differentiated using an adapted version of Hollingshead and Redlich’s (1958) scale, combining scales of education, occupation, and residence (Wolfram 1969: 32ff.). Since most African Americans in Detroit at that time were working class, Wolfram suggested (p. 36) that the speech patterns described for the LWC and UWC in his study would be characteristic of the “vast majority” of African Americans in Detroit.

14 Although illustrative occupations are given for each class to give readers a rough idea of who they designate, it should be emphasized that Wolfram’s social class membership was determined in Wolfram’s study (and in the parent study by Shuy,
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Wolfram and Riley 1967 from which it evolved) by a combination of occupational status (weighted most heavily), education, and residency type. See Wolfram (1969: 32–41) for more details.

15 In other words, speakers of such dialects will say *pos*‘five letters*, deleting final *t* before a consonant, but *post office*, retaining the final *r* before a vowel. Similarly, some AAVE speakers delete or vocalize post-vocalic *r* before a vowel, even within the same word (so that “Carol” sounds like *Ca’rol*), but speakers of white vernaculars do not (Labov 1972c: 40).

16 In a book with this very title, Rickford and Rickford (to appear) will document the expressive use of AAVE by individuals, representing many of the categories listed in this closing sentence (writers, singers, preachers, ordinary people), in an effort to refute the widespread misimpression left by the Ebonics controversy that AAVE is not appreciated or used within the African American community.

2 Carrying the New Wave into Syntax: The Case of Black English BÍN

2.1 Introduction

Ever since the first conference on New Ways of Analyzing Variation in English was held in 1972, the abbreviated title – NWARE – has become something of a rallying cry (“The New Wave”) to those interested in the study of linguistic variation. The enthusiasm is doubtless justified. Uneasiness with categorical frameworks has been growing for some time, and the remarks made by G. N. Bailey in the introduction to the papers from NWARE I (Bailey and Shuy 1973) would probably be endorsed by a great many (though by no means all) linguists today:

I am happy to be rid of static homogeneous models and to be rid of the fudges represented by 'my dialect', 'performance component', 'optional', and the rest.

(xiv)

However, as we move beyond initial revolutionary fervour, and begin a more sober stock-taking, certain weaknesses in our line of attack become increasingly clear. One salient limitation is the extent to which we have become preoccupied with morphophonemic and phonological variation to the exclusion of everything else. Syntax and semantics, for instance, have come to represent lone islands far out at sea, increasingly untouched by any waves – old or new.

The problem is particularly acute for those “variationists” whose data consists of large samples of tape-recorded speech, covering as wide a range of stylistic contexts as possible (cf. Labov 1966, Bickerton 1973a). While the advantages of this method in terms of “accountability” etc. should be clear to most of us by now, it has a built-in limitation in providing large masses of data only on those phenomena which show up with high frequency in natural speech. In most cases, these are phonological variables; hence the disproportionate number of variation studies in phonology.