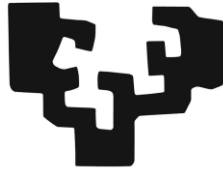# Varieties of English around the World II

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Universidad del País Vasco — Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea

African American English:

A historical and linguistic overview

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English Studies 2021-2022

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Abstract

One of the most researched English varieties around the globe is African American English, also referred to as AAE. It is an interesting variety to study not only because of the amount of research it has had since the previous century but also because of how it is treated today by society. AAE has also received many names and labels throughout the years, but I will use AAE since it is a more general term. In this paper, I will attempt to give a historical and linguistic overview of African Americans and AAE, while comparing this variety to Standard American English (SAE) and other white English varieties. To achieve this, the paper is divided into two main sections, a historical section arranged into three subsections, and a linguistic section also arranged into three subsections. As mentioned, the first section deals with the history of African Americans and the emergence of AAE in the US, from the moment slaves first arrived in the continent in the 16th century to the issue of cultural appropriation in the 21st century, including the migration movements of the 20th century and early 21st century. To illustrate the mystery around the origins of AAE, this dissertation also features five theories on the emergence of AAE, some more widespread than others among linguists, and others more influential in the way AAE is perceived in society today. The second section deals with the distinctive linguistic features of AAE compared to SAE and other English varieties, and it is subdivided into sections concerning the phonetic, prosodic and morphosyntactic features. The phonetic section focuses both on consonants and vowels as well as their realizations, while the prosody section focuses on stress, pitch, and intonation. The morphosyntactic section is divided into verbal and preverbal markers, questions, negation, and nouns and pronouns.

Keywords: varieties of English, African American English, AAE, emergence, migration, cultural appropriation, linguistic features.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, African American English (AAE) has been gaining more and more attention. What makes AAE an interesting variety to analyze is the number of studies done on its history and features, the media attention it receives compared to other US varieties, but also the prejudice it still receives nowadays. It is a variety that has five times more studies than any other English variety, but is also a variety surrounded with controversies, mostly related to the theories on its emergence and how it has been referred to (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016).

Defining a language is not an easy task, and it is even harder when we talk about varieties. AAE is no exception. Simply put, AAE is the English variety the African American community in the US speak, and not "bad" or "broken" English as it has been described in early history (Lanehart, 2017). For a more linguistic definition, AAE is a "system with specific rules for combining sounds to form words and words to form phrases and sentences" (Green, 2004, p. 76). However, the cultural significance of this variety is also important, because it is a variety that is not only related to a country, but also to a specific ethnic group. Through the years, the variety spoken by African Americans has received many labels, such as Negro Dialect, American Negro speech, Black communications, Black dialect, Black Street speech, Black English, Black Vernacular English, Ebonics, African American (Vernacular) English, African American Language (Green, 2004; Wolfram & Schilling, 2016) or even Spoken Soul (Rickford & Rickford, 2000). Green (2004, p. 7) observed that the labels for the varieties coincide with the perception of African Americans of the time, and that these labels sometimes "indicate something about the features used to characterize the variety", for example, "vernacular" or "street". I will use AAE because it is a general umbrella term that encapsules every variation inside this variety, and because it is the name used in more recent studies. I would also have used African American Language (AAL) to describe it, but in this case, it is still difficult to claim if African American speech is a full-fledged language, or a variety or dialect of English (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016).

The structure of this dissertation is separated into two main sections, which are later divided into more sections. The first section is about the historical background of African Americans and AAE and it is divided into three subsections: the history and

emergence of AAE from the 17th century to the 20th century, the different theories on the emergence and evolution of AAE, and the evolution and attitudes towards AAE nowadays and at the beginning of the 21st century. The second section is concerned with the linguistic features of AAE compared to Standard American English (SAE), and it is arranged into three subsections. The first section is about the phonetics and phonology of AAE, focusing on vowels and consonants and their realizations in AAE, the next section is about the distinctive prosodic features of AAE, and finally there is a section on the morphosyntactic features of AAE, with emphasis on verbal markers, pre-verbal markers, questions, negation, and nouns and pronouns.

2. Historical background and origins of AAE

2.1 Historical and demographic overview of slavery and the emergence of AAE

The first Africans brought to the American continent were taken in 1526 by Spanish expeditioners trying to settle in Viriginia; however, the first successful English colony only came in 1607 when the English settled in Jamestown, Virginia (Rickford & Rickford, 2000). In 1619 the first 23 Africans were purchased by settlers in Virginia as servants, but by 1675 African Americans became slaves in the industrial cultivation of tobacco (Mufwene, 2015). This caused an increase on slave population, especially between the years 1680-1690, when the population went from 6,832 slaves to 16,394. By the end of the century, 27,806 slaves were estimated to live in the colonies (Hacker, 2020). Although these numbers might seem high, they were still a minority in each colony, especially if we look at the numbers in each colony, for example, in 1650, 3 percent of the population in Virginia were Africans (Winford, 2015).

As for the language, the low density of enslaved population led scholars to assume that Africans were most likely to acquire the vernacular English varieties of the colonies they were exposed to as a second language instead of giving rise to a *creole* or *pidgin[1]*. Some words and features of their native languages might have been transferred, but these were not enough to restructure the language and create a pidgin or creole. Nevertheless, creoles might have made their way into the mainland from the arrival of

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[1] *Pidgins* and *creoles* are varieties of language that arise from the contact of different languages, their difference being that creoles are pidgins acquired as a first language (Rickford, 1998).

other slaves from the Caribbean, where creoles were more likely to emerge because of the number of Africans (Rickford & Rickford, 2000).

During the 18th century, the number of black slaves increased, both from the ones brought from Africa and the ones born in the colonies. Most of the black population of the mainland, nearly 90 percent of all slaves, was concentrated in the plantations of the South. As the century went by, the population of the blacks outnumbered that of the whites, mostly in states like South Carolina and Georgia (Rickford & Rickford, 2000).

This growth in population affected the language spoken in the plantations. The language spoken by blacks and whites started to diverge for two main reasons. The first one is that the slaves started to learn English from other slaves instead of their white masters unlike in the previous century. This affected the way they obtained the language because it is likely that the slaves in the plantations already spoke a vernacular dialect, so the newborns and newly brought Africans would also learn this vernacular (Rickford & Rickford, 2000). The second reason for the linguistic changes is racial segregation. It was institutionalized in the 1720s, and it showed how whites started separating themselves from blacks in order to show social and economic dominance. This brought a clear separation not only in the way slaves were treated, but also in the language and culture. These conditions and the immense population gave rise to creoles like Gullah[2], a creole that is still maintained today (Mufwene, 2015; Rickford & Rickford, 2000).

Around this time, attestations of slave speech also started to come out in literature, showing the differences in certain features between white speech and black speech. One place where these differences were recorded was in newspapers about runaway slaves, where they were described by the degree of correctness when speaking English. Read (1939 as mentioned in Winford, 2015, p. 91) says that slaves could be put into five categories based on the description of their proficiency of English:

> newly arrived African slaves who knew no English; slaves described as speaking "broken," "bad," or "indifferent" English; slaves who spoke "tolerable" or "pretty good" English within two to three years after landing; slaves from the Caribbean who are described as speaking good to very good English; and finally slaves born in the American colonies, who are uniformly described as speaking good English.

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[2] "The creole still spoken by some African Americans in the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia" (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016, p. 227).

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This shows that, not only were there differences between the English spoken by whites and blacks, but also differences in the English dialect spoken by different slaves. These differences were whether the vernacular was the slaves' native language or a second language, the age at what slaves acquired the vernacular and the variety (the plantation vernacular dialect, creole, or the white dialect) they were exposed to (Winford, 2015).

At the end of the 18th century, the cotton production in the South rose, which caused an increase in slave population again. However, this time the increase was not only in the Old South, but it also happened in the Midwest and Southwest of the US. The main reasons for the growth of population were the births in plantations and the internal slave trade. The slave trade was mostly internal because at the beginning of the century the international slave trade began to decrease (Rickford & Rickford, 2000), and this can be seen in the numbers. In the 19th century, a little over 6,000 slaves were imported into the US, but the trade only fully stopped in 1861 (Hacker, 2020). The reason for the decrease in slave importation is the "act to prohibit the importation of slaves into any port or place within the jurisdiction of the United States" that was approved in 1810, which stated that it was illegal to bring in any slaves from other countries (U.S. Laws, 1810, p. 1). Another historical event that marked the 19th century was the American Civil War between the North and the South of the country. The 1863 Emancipation Proclamation and 1865 Thirteenth Amendment proclaimed that slavery was abolished across the country and that every slave was to be free. Nevertheless, the situation for African Americans did not improve, they still had economic and social disadvantages, and this made them immigrate from the plantations to the more urban cities of the South (Rickford & Rickford, 2000).

The effect the internal slave trade had on the language was the spread of the black vernacular into the West. The abusive experiences slaves had in the plantations, for example being forcibly separated from their families, made them want to separate themselves more from the white masters, which promoted the use and spread of the black vernacular. The migration from the plantations to the cities in the South was also a big factor for the convergence of plantation vernacular and urban vernacular of African Americans. Around this time, more literary evidence of black speech started to come out, especially in works written by African Americans themselves (Rickford & Rickford, 2000).

Even though there were migratory movements in the previous centuries, they were not comparable to the Great Migration that took place in the 20th century. Around six million African Americans migrated from the South to the North, and these population movements can be divided into two Great Migrations. The first Great Migration happened between 1910 and 1940 (see Figure 1) because of the Jim Crow laws[3] in the South and the need of workforce in the North due to World War I. Still, African Americans suffered from prejudice and discrimination in the North. The Second Great Migration happened in between 1940 and 1970 (see Figure 1), which was triggered by World War II (NARA, 2021).
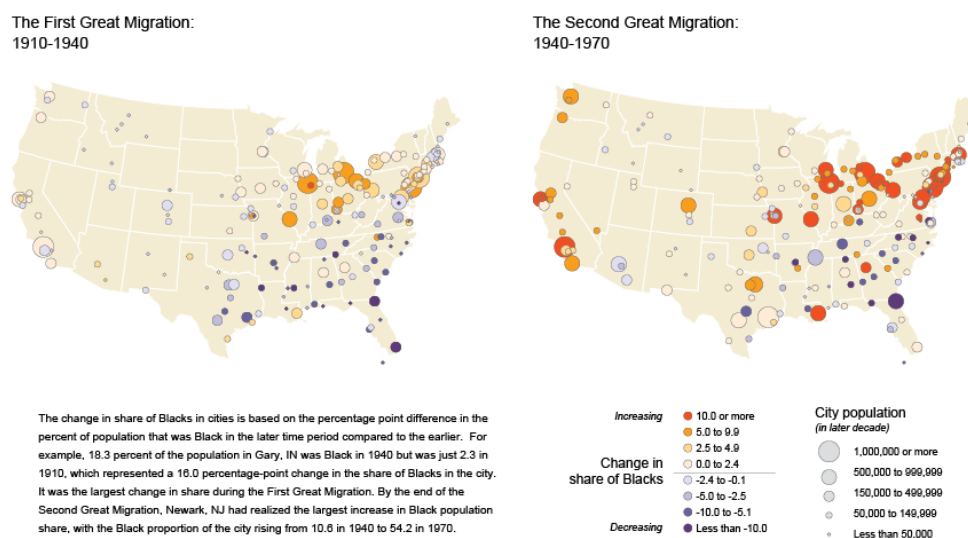
Figure 1: This map shows the population density and the direction of the migration, from South to North, and from East to West (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

The Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s attempted to get African Americans the same rights as white Americans and to overcome the segregation and economic disparities of the time. In 1964, the Civil Rights Act put an end to segregation and discrimination of African Americans, and with time, they started to gain more rights, for example voting and more education opportunities (Rickford & Rickford, 2000).

The situation of AAE in the 20th century was influenced by the migrations. Not only was there a spread of vernacular features from the North/East to the South/West, but

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[3] The "Jim Crow laws were a collection of state and local statutes that legalized racial segregation" that were enforced for 100 years in the US (History.com Editors, 2018, para. 1).

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there was also a spread from rural areas to urban areas. Because of the contact between different dialects, these merged giving rise to new dialects and the spread of new variants in the language, for example the use of the glottal stop /ʔ/ in word final instead of the voiced dental stop /d/ in Washington DC. At first, only working class southern African Americans who migrated north during the Great Migration used this variant, but after the Baby Boom, Washington DC born African Americans started using it. (Farrington, 2020).

2.2 Theories on the emergence of AAE

Over the years, many theories and approaches have been proposed on how AAE was created, but to this day, linguists and historians cannot come to a consensus on which is the most accurate theory. The most widespread theories are the creolist, Anglicist, and substrate approaches, but there are more theories of how AAE developed.

2.2.1 Creolist hypothesis

This idea appeared for the first time in 1914 with Schuchart, but it was developed in more depth in the 1960s. It is based on the idea that current AAE developed from a pidgin or creole which emerged from the contact between Europeans and African in the south of what is the current US (Rickford, 1998).

The creole was widespread in the south, but it was not unique to the mainland, as other similar creoles appeared in the Caribbean or even west of Africa. Supporters of this theory claim that traces of the creole which AAE is based on can still be witnessed in Gullah, but the reason why both varieties are so different today is because of contact. Mainland African Americans had a closer linguistic contact with other English varieties and dialects, which brought AAE closer to SAE. This process is known as *decreolization*, and it was a gradual process which is not complete since there are still some features in AAE that are associated with creoles such as the absence of copula *be*. Other evidence of the creole origins of AAE are the social-historical conditions in which it arose, the literary texts and ex-slave recordings, the similarities with other African languages, the differences with White English dialects, and the differences in speech across AAE speakers of different generations (Rickford, 1998; Wolfram & Schilling, 2016).

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2.2.2 Anglicist or dialectologist hypothesis and Neo-Anglicist hypothesis

The Anglicist or dialectologist theory also came into play in the 20th century. It started in 1924 with Krapp, but it was further developed in the second half of the century. The Anglicist approach proposes that African slaves in America learned the dialects of the British settlers, hence the dialectologist name, and that their native language or culture did not influence their English enough to create a creole. Anglicists claim that, even though the native tongue of the African slaves might have influenced the language in the beginning, as generations passed, there were only a few traces that could be tracked back to African languages, which means the slaves would have just learned the white varieties around them. Some evidence for this theory is the fact that European American varieties and AAE have some features in common, such as the absence of 3rd person *-s* (Rickford, 1998; Wolfram & Schilling, 2016).

At the end of the 20th century, Neo-Anglicists found evidence to disprove the Creolist approach, mostly questioning the data retrieved by creolists of ex-slave narratives, for example, ex-slave narratives from the 19th century. In these narratives it was observed that "earlier AAE was not nearly as distinct from postcolonial European American English varieties as would have been predicted under the creolist hypothesis", which only proves the Anglicist theory and goes directly against the creolist hypothesis. Looking at the population and sociohistorical context of the South during slavery, it was seen that the situation was not ideal for the emergence of a creole, since most slaves were spread throughout smaller farms instead of big plantations. Neo-Anglicists also defend that the AAE spoken in those plantations has diverged from the white European English (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016, p. 229).

2.2.3 Substratist hypothesis

This theory is somewhat of a middle ground between creolists and Anglicists. Substratists claim that AAE has similar sounds and sentence structures to those of West African languages, the substrate[4] languages, and only has superficial similarities with

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[4] West African languages are referred to as substrate because of "the subordinate social or cultural status of its speakers vis-à-vis those of the reference language [i.e., English]" (Goddman, 1993, as cited in Lanehart, 2017, p. 89).

SAE. This position differs from the one of the Neo-Anglicists in the sense that Anglicists defend the idea that early American English vernaculars were no different to early AAE, while substratists defend that the differences where bigger than the similitudes. It also differs from the Creolist theory in the sense that Substratists still acknowledge that European English speakers had an influence on the language, even if the influence is not as strong as Anglicists claim (Lanehart, 2017; Wolfram & Schilling, 2016).

2.2.4 Deficit position

This approach started appearing in the 19th century, but it gained more traction in the second half of the 20th century. It is based on the primitive belief that whites (those of European descent) are genetically superior to blacks (African descendants), which means that Africans were not able to learn English correctly since their native languages were also seen as "inferior and uncivilized". In other words, Africans were seen as deficient and unable to learn proper English. This is an old-fashioned approach; however, it still has a lot of influence on the attitudes towards young AAE speakers nowadays, especially in educational contexts (Lanehart, 2017, p. 82).

2.2.5 Restructuralist and ecological theories

This approach is similar to the approach proposed by the Neo-Creolist theorists, and it proposes that Early AAE was unlikely to "originate from or as a creole" because of the settlement and migration patterns but the absence of a creole does not minimize the "influence of native African languages in the subsequent emerging language of Africans in America". Moreover, the environment in which AAE evolved had the same influence on the language as the linguistic contact with other varieties (Lanehart, 2017, p. 90).

2.3 AAE and African Americans in the last 50 years

In recent years, especially from the 1970s onwards, a reverse Great Migration has been happening in the US, which is referred to as a "return migration" (Falk et al., 2004, p. 490). This means that more African Americans are migrating to the south. Falk et al. (2004) analyzed census between the 1970s and the early 2000s, and they found out that in the last quarter of the 20th century, the African Americans migrating from north to

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south overtook the number of migrants going from the south to the north. They also saw that these numbers were increasing as the decades went by.

What makes this migration different from the Great Migrations is the migrant profile and reasons behind the migration. During the Great Migration, African Americans went north for economic and social reasons: they were low class people who went from the rural side to urban in search of new opportunities. The African Americans who are now migrating south are going back to reclaim the south as their "land of promise". Moreover, the migrants are most likely to be young men with some sort of higher education degree. What is more interesting is the fact that most of the migrants are not people born in the south returning to their previous homes, they are people born in the north moving to urban areas (Falk et al. 2004, p. 491).

As for the situation of AAE today, it can be said that AAE is diverging from other vernaculars, it is developing on its own towards its own direction. This goes hand in hand with the divergence hypothesis, which suggests that AAE has been diverging from SAE and other dialects (Lanehart, 2017). Labov (2010) claims that the reason for this divergence is mostly residential segregation. If African Americans are only in contact with other African Americans in different contexts, then it is only natural for AAE to evolve differently from SAE or other dialects. This divergence is making some AAE features more salient and general, for example, the use of habitual *be*. These features stopped being regional, in other words, features related to a certain location, and they started being more related to the ethnic group they belong to, giving the group of AAE speakers a sense of community. At the end of the 20th century, the community identity related to AAE also grew, especially in the younger generations that wanted to separate themselves from the mainstream white speech. This brings out the generational differences as well: older generation still speak their regional vernaculars while younger generations are inclined to change their own speech towards a more generalized AAE (Lanehart, 2017; Wolfram, 2006). Labov (2010, p. 15) also assumes that, if residential segregation lowers in future years, then AAE would become more like other dialects around it, which could make AAE an "endangered dialect".

The biggest issue regarding AAE in the last 50 years is one that is closely influenced by the deficit hypothesis that appeared in the 19th century. Nowadays, African American children are still seen as having linguistic and cultural deficits, making them unable to

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achieve the same level of education as white children, even if these ideas have been disproved for years (Lanehart, 2017). This also shows the general attitude non-black people in the US have towards AAE. Pullum (1999) claims that for speakers of Standard English AAE, more specifically AAVE, is "just a badly spoken version of their language, marred by a lot of ignorant mistakes in grammar and pronunciation" and "an unimportant and mostly abusive repertoire of street slang used by an ignorant urban underclass" (p. 40). The author shows that, while there are linguistic differences between SAE and AAE, the biggest difference is prestige and the historical treatment AAE speakers received.

Another issue that has come up in recent years regarding AAE is the issue of "cultural appropriation", which is interesting given the fact that AAE is badly perceived by society in the US. Lexico (n.d.) defines cultural appropriation as the "unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society". In the case of AAE, it happens when non-black people use AAE lexicon[5] or features such as slang without knowing their origin or true meaning (Laing, 2021). But first, it is necessary to point out the difference of non-black people who use AAE. There are non-black people who use AAE authentically because they grew up in an African American community (Sweetland, 2002, as mentioned in Laing, 2021, p. 14), and those who use it unauthentically as a way to associate to black, hip-hop and rap culture (Laing, 2021) or even mock the language in social media (Smokoski, 2016).

Regarding the non-black people who use AAE unauthentically, the use of AAE as a mock language is the one which affects the black community the most because it reinforces negative stereotypes towards African Americans. While non-blacks use AAE lexicon and features to seem "cool", African Americans are still seen as uneducated for using the same vocabulary or features. Moreover, most of the time these words and features are used incorrectly and without knowing the cultural significance behind them, which makes them lose the cultural significance due to the mocking tone that is added (Smokoski, 2016).

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[5] Although this dissertation does not focus on AAE vocabulary, it is still important to mention it in the case of cultural appropriation.

Queer culture also suffers from cultural appropriation, and it is more closely related to AAE than we might initially think. Laing (2021) gives the example of the show *Ru Paul's Drag Race*, where queer culture is strongly related to black culture. Because of the program's growing popularity, many AAE words and features have been popularized by African American drag queens, which made the queer and non-queer community start using those words and features as well. Instead of being the speech of a marginalized minority group as African American queer people, it became the speech of the mainstream non-queer non-white people. However, Turner (2015, as mentioned in Laing, 2021, p. 19) says that, since the origin of the words is recognized because of the program, then this use could be considered cultural appreciation, and not appropriation. Still, it is an unauthentic use of AAE.

3. Linguistic features[6]

3.1 Phonetics and phonology

In this section, I will present the sound system of AAE, as well as different realizations and combinations of those sounds. Later, prosodic features will be described.

3.1.1 Vowel and consonant charts

Before starting to look at any features or realizations, we need to take a look at the phonology of AAE. Just like any other English vernacular variety, AAE has some phonological characteristics that differentiate it from SAE. Edwards (2008) follows a "bottom-up" description to characterize AAE, considering how its distinctive phonemic inventory and features can influence the morphology of this vernacular.

Table 1 shows the vowel system of AAE depending on their place of articulation, while Table 2 shows the consonants of AAE according to their articulatory features.

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[6] This section will have examples for each feature or realization, and it will be a mixture of examples from other authors and examples I came up with. Examples from other authors will be cited with the page number or paragraph.

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	front	central	back
close	i	ɨ	u
	ɪ	ʊ	
		ɪɵ	
close mid	e	aʊ	o
		ə ɔ	
open mid	ɛ	ʌ	
	aɪ		
	æ		
open		a ɑ	

Table 1. Vowels of AAE (Edwards, 2008, p. 385)

	labial/labiodental	dental/alveolar	palatal	velar/glottal
stops	p b	t d		k g
fricatives	f v θ ð	s z		h
affricates		tʃ dʒ		
nasals	m	n		ŋ
liquids		l	r	
semivowels	w		j	

Table 2. Consonants of AAE (Edwards, 2008, p. 385)

Most of the phonemes shown in the tables above show allophones that are either unique to AAE or appear in other non-standard American English varieties. This will be considered when describing the phonetic realizations of AAE.

3.1.2 Phonetic realizations

This section will be divided into vowel phonetic realizations and consonant phonetic realizations, keeping in mind how these realizations may differ from SAE or how similar they may be to other non-standard varieties. It is important to mention that not every African American uses all these features in their speech, and that regional variation also plays a role in which realizations are more noticeable.

3.1.2.1 Phonetic Realization of AAE vowels

These are some of the more frequent vowel variations in AAE.

● **The PRICE vowel**

The diphthong /aɪ/ becomes the monophthong [a:] or [a] when followed by a voiced consonant or before a pause, which happens at the end of a syllable or word (Edwards, 2002, p. 386; Wells, 1982).

> *(1) mine:* SAE [maɪn]   AAE [ma:n]
>   *hi*:   SAE [haɪ]   AAE [ha:]

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- **/ɪ/ and /ɛ/ merging and diphthongization**

Before nasal sounds, the vowels /ɪ/ and /ɛ/ merge into the vowel [ɪ], making words like *pin* and *pen* homophones as seen in example (2). This realization is common in the Southern white variety (Edwards, 2008, p. 386).

(2) *pin-pen*: SAE [pɪn] - [pɛn]   AAE [pɪn] - [pɪn]

In some words, the lower high lax vowels /ɪ/ and /ɛ/ become tense and raised, making them get diphthongized to [iɪ], as seen in examples (3) for /ɪ/ and (4) for /ɛ/. This feature is also common in the Southern white variety (Edwards, 2008, p. 386).

(3) *did*: SAE [dɪd]   AAE [diɪd]

(4) *head*: SAE [hɛd]   AAE [hiɪd]

- **/ɪ/ and /æ/ merging**

Before the voiced velar nasal sound /ŋ/, /ɪ/ and /æ/ merge to [ɪ], making words like *drink* and *drank* homophones (Wells, 1982, p. 557).

(5) *drink-drank*: SAE [drɪŋk] -[dræŋk]   AAE [drɪŋk]

3.1.2.2 Phonetic realizations of AAE consonants

These are some of the more frequent consonant variations in AAE.

- **/s/ + stop metathesis**

In certain words, the cluster /s/ + stop /p, t, k, b, d, g/ metathesizes, which happens when the sounds exchange place in the word. This phenomenon is not exclusive to AAE since it also appears in the Southern white variety (Edwards, 2008, p. 389).

(6) *ask*: SAE [æsk]   AAE [æks]

- **Realization of /v/ and /z/**

The voiced fricatives /v/ and /z/ are usually fronted and realized as voiced stops such as [b] or [d], which happens mostly before nasals and in word-medial position as shown in examples (7) for /z/ before a nasal and (8) for /v/ in word-medial position (Edwards, 2008, p. 388).

(7) *business:* SAE [ˈbɪznəs]   AAE [ˈbɪdnɪs]

(8) *seven:* SAE [ˈsɛvən]   AAE [ˈsɛbn]

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- **TH Fronting and Stopping**

Word initially, the dental fricatives /ð/ and /θ/ are usually realized as the dental stops [t] and [d] as seen in examples (9) and (10); word internally, they are usually fronted as [f] and [v] as seen in (11) and (12); and word finally, the fricatives can be subject to both *fronting* and *stopping*, in other words, they can be realized as the dental stop or be fronted to labial consonants as in (13) and (14). All of these realizations also happen in other non-standard varieties, but they are most frequent in AAE (Edwards, 2008, p. 388; Wells, 1982, pp. 557-558).

> *(9) then*: SAE [ðɛn]   AAE [dɛn]
>
> *(10) thing*: SAE [θɪŋ]   AAE [tɪŋ]
>
> *(11) nothing*: SAE [ˈnʌθɪŋ]   AAE [ˈnəfɪŋ]
>
> *(12) mother*: SAE [ˈmʌðər]   AAE [ˈmʌvə] or [ˈmʌvr̩]
>
> *(13) with*: SAE [wɪθ]   AAE [wɪt]
>
> *(14) mouth*: SAE [maʊθ]   AAE [maʊf]

- **Final Cluster Reduction**

In word-final consonant clusters, the second consonant is almost always dropped if both consonants are either voiced or voiceless; however, the deletion of the second consonant is not as frequent when the following word begins with a vowel sound. This feature also appears in other English varieties, but compared to other American English varieties, it is more frequent in AAE (Edwards, 2008; Wells, 1982, p. 558).

> *(15) act*: SAE [ækt]   AAE [æk]

- **Reduction of -ng**

The final -*ng* in gerunds is realized as the nasal alveolar [n] (Rickford, 1999, p. 4).

> *(16)* SAE *walking* [ˈwɔkɪŋ]   AAE *walkin'* [ˈwɔkɪn]

- **Word initial and final deletion**

In some cases, the final consonant of a word can be deleted when preceded by a vowel as in example (17). This deletion is most common when the final consonant is a nasal (Rickford, 1999, p.4) as in example (18).

> *(17) bad*: SAE [bæd]   AAE [bæ]

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(18) man: SAE [mæ̃n] AAE [mæ̃]

The consonants /d/ and /g/ tend to be deleted in word initial position in tense-aspect auxiliaries such as *don't* in example (19) or *gonna* in example (20). This rule may be the reason why *ain't* is used in the place of *didn't* in AAE (Rickford, 1999, p. 5).

(19) I don't know: SAE [aɪ doʊnt noʊ]

AAE [ah oʊn noʊ]

(20) SAE: *I'm gonna do it* [aɪm ɡɑnə dʊ ɪt]

AAE: *Imma do it* [ahma dʊ ɪt]

- **Initial consonant cluster *str-***

The consonant cluster *str-* is sometimes realized as [skr], making words like *scream* and *stream* homophones. This pattern is associated with AAE, especially among younger speakers, since it does not seem to appear in other English varieties (Green, 2002; Wells, 1982, p. 558).

(21) stream-scream: SAE [stri:m] - [skri:m] AAE [skri:m] - [skri:m]

- **Devoicing of world final stops**

After vowels, voiced consonants such as /b, d, g/ become their voiceless counterparts [p, t, k], which makes minimal pairs indistinguishable. In many cases, the devoiced consonant can be followed by or replaced by the glottal stop [ʔ] (Rickford, 1999).

(22) cab-cap: SAE [kæb] - [kæp] AAE [kæp] or [kæpʔ] or [kæʔ]

(23) pad-pat: SAE [pæd] - [pæt] AAE [pæt] or [pætʔ] or [pæʔ]

(24) bag-back: SAE [bæɡ] - [bæk] AAE [bæk] or [bækʔ] or [kæʔ]

- **Liquid vocalization and deletion**

The consonant /l/ can be deleted or vocalized after vowels and before consonants as in (25) or in word-final positions as in (26) (Green, 2002, p. 120); moreover, liquid deletion might be the reason why the contraction *'ll* [l] is often deleted when the next word starts with a bilabial consonant such as /b, m, w/. The consonant /r/ may be deleted or vocalized after vowels as in (27), but this phenomenon is more likely to happen when /r/ is followed by a word starting with a consonant as in (28) (Rickford, 1999, p.5). This pattern also appears in other English varieties (Edwards, 2008).

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(25) help: SAE [hɛlp]   AAE [hɛp]

(26) bell: SAE [bɛl]   AAE [bɛw] or [bɛə]

(27) tore: SAE [tɔr]   AAE [to]

(28) four posts: SAE [fɔr poʊsts]   AAE [foə poʊsts] or

                                             [fo poʊsts]

3.2 Prosodic features: stress, intonation and pitch

Prosodic features such as pitch (high or low), stress (the emphasis or strength placed on certain syllables or words) and intonation (tonal inflexion) are often what listeners first fixate on when hearing someone talk. The way people talk and how they use their voice are important aspects to consider because they can help us understand how speech is perceived. According to Rickford (1972 as cited in Green, 2002, p. 124), these prosodic features are often seen as indicators of a person's ethnicity or economic background, although Labov et al. (1968, as cited in Green, 2002, p. 124) claimed that listeners were able to identify dialectal features, not the ethnicity of the speaker. Either way, AAE is often perceived as a dialect and only spoken by a specific race, so it is useful to try to identify the prosodic features of this variety. Other reasons Green (2002) lists as important for the study of these features are how the difference in intonation and stress can cause misunderstandings between speakers of different English varieties, and how intonation and stress can help with the interpretation of sentences and phrases of speakers of the same variety.

Focusing solely on suprasegmental features of AAE, Edwards (2008) says that AAE speakers, in informal speech, tend to stress the first syllable, even if the word carries stress in other syllables in SAE. This has been labeled as "front shifting" by Smitherman (1977, as cited in Green, 2002, p. 131); however, this phenomenon seems to mostly occur in bisyllabic words (Edwards, 2008; Green, 2002). As for intonation, the scope of the studies published is narrow, mostly focusing on *yes-no* and *wh*-questions. The most significant findings in the study conducted by Green (1990, as cited in Green, 2002, pp. 127-130) were the flat tone in place of rising intonation in *yes-no* questions, while the intonation pattern of the *wh*-questions is the same as general English. Green (2002) points out throughout her chapter on phonology that there is still a lack of research in the intonation area since these data are not enough to assume that

AAE does have a unique intonational pattern. As for pitch, there has not been enough research, but according to Tarone, "AAE speakers frequently employ a wide pitch range, often using the falsetto register to signal various modalities, including anger, humor, or skepticism" (1972, 1973 as quoted in Edwards, 2008, p. 390).

3.3 Morphosyntax

The following section is divided into five subsections dealing with verbal markers, pre-verbal markers, questions, negation, and nouns and pronouns that are distinctive of AAE. As mentioned in point 3.1.2, not every African American will use these features.

3.3.1 Tense-aspect verbal markers

- **Zero copula[7] and auxiliary *be***

In AAE, concordance between subject and verb does not usually occur, except in 1st person singular *I* and 3rd person neuter *it*. Because of this, *are*, *is* and their respective contractions can be omitted when they function as auxiliaries or copula (Horway, 2014).

> *(29)* AAE: He ø an artist.　　 SAE: He*'s / is* an artist.
> *(30)* AAE: They ø eating.　　 SAE: They*'re / are* eating.

However, there are some exceptions to these cases apart from the 1st person singular and 3rd person neuter. The absence of copula *be* only happens in the present tense; the past tense and negator *ain't* cannot be omitted. Moreover, the copula cannot be omitted if it is at the end of the sentence (Horway, 2014).

- **Habitual *be***

Aspectual *be* is used as a mark for habitual activities, in other words, it conveys an action that is done multiple times with regularity. Since it marks a specific meaning, habitual *be* is obligatory in the sentence. *Be* always appears in its bare form, and it can occur before other verbs, adjectives, nouns, prepositions, adverbs and at the end of the sentence (Green, 2002, pp. 47-48).

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[7] "A copula is a connection between the subject and the predicate of a phrase or sentence" (Horway, 2014, para. 3).

(31) AAE: Bruce *be* running.

SAE: Bruce <u>usually </u>runs.

(32) AAE: Your phone bill *be* high, don't it.

SAE: Your phone bill is <u>usually </u>high, isn't it?

- **Stressed *BIN* and unstressed *bin***

Confusion between both forms is common because BIN is not always stressed as the name implies (Spears, 2017), and to clear up some confusion, the two forms will be discussed.

Stressed *been* [bi:n]*,* also known as *BIN,* marks a state or activity in the remote past tense but which has not ended at the time of the utterance. *BIN* can only occur in main clauses, which is one way it differs from *bin* (Green, 2002; Spears, 2017).

(33) AAE: I *been* ['bi:n] known him a long time.

SAE: I've known him for a long time.

Unstressed *been* [bɪn]*,* or just *bin*, has a completive function, which means it refers to an action that has ended already. It is a feature of contemporary AAE, it occurs in more contexts than stressed *BIN*, and it can also work as an auxiliary (Lanehart, 2017; Spears, 2017, p. 152).

(34) AAE: He *been* [bɪn] paid that bill.

SAE: He paid that bill.

- **Verbal *-s***

The distinction between the singular and plural verb forms in AAE is not marked, in other words, the same verbal form is used for every person and number. This occurrence has two outcomes: the absence of the verbal *-s* in the 3rd person singular forms, or the adding of the verbal *-s* with 1st and 2nd person and plurals. The verbal *-s* is omitted with the 3rd person singular in the present tense, and the bare form of the verb is used (Green, 2002; Wolfram, 2006, p.330) as in example (35).

(35) AAE: She walk ø.   SAE: She walk<u>s</u>.

When the verbal -*s* is used as a marker, then it can function as an agreement marker, a narrative present marker, or a habitual marker (Green, 2002, p. 100).

(36) AAE: I can show you some of the stuff we *tesses* them on.

SAE: I can show you some of the stuff we <u>test </u>them on.

(37) AAE: The devil *haves* us in a state of sin.

SAE: The devil <u>has </u>us in a state of sin.

● **Perfective** *done*

The marker *done*, which is also considered a preverbal marker, is used to reflect an event or state that has an endpoint, an event in the recent past or a bad experience. It also seems to show the attitude of surprise or shock. It precedes verbs in the participle form. It is pronounced with an unstressed vowel [dən], which is what differentiates it from the past participle form of the verb *do*. The marker *done* is a very distinguishable feature of AAE, but it is also common in Southern speakers of the US with different characteristics (Green, 2002, p. 60; Martin, 2018).

(38) AAE: I told him you *dən* changed.

SAE: I told him that you have changed.

3.3.2 Pre-verbal markers *finna*, *steady* and *come*

● *Finna, fixina, fixna and fitna*

The marker *finna* has other three variants, *fixina*, *fixna* and *fitna*, and they are used to indicate an event that will happen in the near imminent future (Green, 2002). It is followed by the bare form of the verb as in (39) (Lanehart, 2017, p. 84); however, the auxiliary and habitual *be* precedes the marker *finna* as in (40) (Green, 2002, p. 71).

(39) AAE: He *finna* go.   SAE: He is <u>about to</u> go.

(40) AAE: They *be finna* go to bed when I call there.

SAE: They <u>are usually getting ready/about</u> to go to bed when I call there

● *Steady*

This marker indicates that an activity is carried out intensely and consistently. It precedes activity verbs in the progressive form as in (41), and, just as with *finna*, the auxiliary and habitual *be* precedes *steady* as in (42) (Green, 2002, p. 72).

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(41) AAE: Now that you got the new life, Satan *steady bothering* you.

SAE: Now that you have a new life, Satan is <u>consistently </u>bothering you.

(42) AAE: Them students *be steady trying* to make a buck.

SAE: Those students <u>are always</u> working <u>diligently </u>to make money.

● ***Come***

Come is an attitude marker, more specifically, it is used to express the speaker's indignation and disapproval. It precedes verbs in the progressive form, and it is different from the main verb, which makes it be considered a semi-auxiliary by some authors (Green, 2002, p. 73).

(43) AAE: You the one *come* telling me it's hot.

SAE: You're the one<u> who had the nerve</u> to tell me that it's hot.

3.3.3 Questions

● **Direct question formation**

In AAE, direct questions are formed without inverting the subject and the auxiliary verb. A rising intonation pattern shows that the sentence is a question (Rickford, 1999, p. 8).

(44) AAE: Why *I can't* play?   SAE: Why <u>can't I </u>play?

In *Yes-No* questions, the auxiliary is sometimes omitted from the initial position it belongs to, and rising intonation is what makes them identifiable as questions (Green, 2002, p. 84).

(45) AAE: ø He sleeping in the car?   SAE: <u>Is </u>he sleeping in the car?

As for *wh*-questions in AAE, there are three different patterns depending on the position or absence of the auxiliary verb. The auxiliary can be located between the *wh*-word and the subject as in (46), at the end of the question but before the main verb as in (47), or it can be omitted from the question as in (48) (Green, 2002, pp. 85-86).

(46) AAE: What <u>*did* </u>you eat? (the same as in SAE)

(47) AAE: What they *was doing*?   SAE: What <u>were </u>they <u>doing</u>?

(48) AAE: Who ø you be talking to like that?

SAE: Who <u>are</u> you usually <u>talking</u> to like that?

- **Indirect question formation**

Auxiliary verb inversion happens in embedded questions without *if* or *whether* (Rickford, 1999, p.8) as in (49), because in AAE the use of *if* or *whether* in indirect questions is considered ungrammatical (Green, 2002, p. 88) as seen in (50).

> *(49)* AAE: I asked him ø *could he* go with me.
>
>   SAE: I asked him <u>if he could</u> go with me.
>
> *(50)* AAE: *I asked him [if could he go with me]

3.3.4 Negation

- **Ain't**

The form *ain't* is used as a general preverbal negator in present and past tenses, substituting the auxiliaries *do*, *be* and *have* in negative sentences as seen in examples (51) and (52) (Green, 2002, p. 37) and examples (53) and (54) (Lanehart 2017, p. 85). However, there are still some limitations. While past and present forms of *ain't* are frequent substituting *have + not*, *ain't* does not seem to be used for past tense *be + not* or present *do + not* in contemporary AAE unless present *do + not* is followed by *got*. The use of *ain't* is widespread in other non-standard English varieties, however, *ain't* in the place of *didn't* seems to be exclusively used in AAE (Howe, 2005).

> *(51)* AAE: He *ain't* ate/eat.   SAE: He <u>didn't</u> eat.
>
> *(52)* AAE: I *ain't* eating.   SAE: I'<u>m not</u> eating.
>
> *(53)* AAE: He *ain't* here.   SAE: He <u>isn't</u> here.
>
> *(54)* AAE: He *ain't* do it.   SAE: He <u>hasn't</u> done it.

When the word *but* is added after *ain't* or after *don't* (as in *ain't but* or *don't but*), this combination has the meaning of *only* (Rickford, 1999, p.8).

> *(55)* AAE: They *didn't/ain't* take *but* three dollars.
>
>   SAE: They <u>only</u> took three dollars.

- **Multiple negation**

Double or multiple negations are permitted in the same sentence, and the negation can appear both in the auxiliary and as an external marker such as *no* or *nothing*. In constructions with multiple negators, only the negation in the auxiliaries seems to mark negation, the other elements only appear to add emphasis to the sentence which is

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shown in example (56). This feature is strongly stigmatized since there is a prescriptive 'rule' in SAE that states that 'double' negatives are ungrammatical because they make the sentence positive instead of a negation (Green, 2002, p.77).

> *(56)* AAE: Bruce *don't* want *no* teacher telling him *nothing* about *no* books.
> SAE: Bruce <u>doesn't </u>want any teacher telling him <u>anything </u>about (any) books.

● **Negative inversion**

Negative inversion happens when "a declarative sentence begins with a negated auxiliary or modal, such as *can't*, *ain't*, or *won't*, followed by subjects like *nobody*, *everybody* and *all of you*". It is a phenomenon commonly used in AAE, but it is also used by white speakers in Southern US (Matyiku, 2011, para. 1).

> *(57)* AAE: Can't *nobody* beat 'em.
> SAE: <u>Nobody </u>can beat them.

3.3.5 Nouns and Pronouns

● **Zero possessive -*s***

This phenomenon refers to the absence of the possessive suffix -*s* when followed by another noun (Rickford, 1999, p.7) as in (58). This is a unique AAE feature in the US; however, not every AAE speaker omits the possessive, it depends on the dialectal variant of each speaker (Ezgeta, 2012).

> *(58)* AAE: John ø house.   SAE: John<u>'s</u> house.

● **Plurals**

The absence of plural -*s* is allowed in AAE, although this feature is not as common since it can cause ambiguity between the plural and the singular. When numerals and quantifiers are used to specify the quantity, the absence of the suffix -*s* is common (Ezgeta, 2012, p. 14).

> *(59)* AAE: two dog ø   SAE: two dogs

The biggest difference in plural noun formation lies in the way AAE uses irregular plurals. They are usually regularized, in other words, instead of using the plural

irregular form, AAE speakers add the plural suffix -s to the singular form of the noun (Ezgeta, 2012, p. 14).

(60) AAE: foot-foots   SAE: foot-feet

● **Bare subject relative clause**

The relative pronouns (*who*, *which*, *what* or *that*) can be omitted in AAE. Although in other varieties of English the omission of object relative pronouns is allowed and frequent, the omission of the subjective relative pronoun *who* as in (62) is exclusive to AAE if compared to other US varieties (Rickford, 1999, p.8).

(61) AAE: He is the man ø I married.
SAE: He is the man (that) I married.
(62) AAE: That's the ø man come here.
SAE: That's the man who came here.

● **Possessive *they* and *y'all***

They is used to mark possessiveness in third person plural, and *y'all*[8] is used to mark possessiveness in second person plural (Rickford, 1999, p.7).

(63) AAE: It's *they* house.   SAE: It's their house.
(64) AAE: It's *y'all* ball.   SAE: It's your ball.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, with this dissertation I tried to show that AAE is a variety of English, and not just "incorrect" English. Through its history it can be seen how AAE evolved towards a certain direction and why it evolved that way. There are many theories on AAE's emergence, but the fact that there are so many different, and, sometimes, convincing theories show that there is no certain way to really know how AAE started, mostly due to the lack of evidence from the early days. However, theories with less evidence and more negative bias, such as the deficit theory, are the ones that have the most influence in the attitudes of the general public towards AAE today. The issue of

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[8] *Y'all* is the contraction of *you all*.

"cultural appropriation" is a hot topic nowadays, which seems to both contradict and coincide with the negative attitudes towards AAE, the only difference being who uses the features. The media and social media are the places where most of these attitudes are seen in our age, and more research should be done on how media has affected perception or even the use of AAE.

Different linguistic features that are part of AAE were also described. The phonetic chart is not too different from the SAE one, but the combination of sounds or absence of them is what makes AAE different. AAE also has some different prosodic features, but in general it is not that different from SAE. Finally, the linguistic area where there are the most differences is the morphosyntax of this variety. Some of the features are shared by other English varieties within the US or around the world, but some others are exclusive to AAE, which shows us that AAE indeed is its own variety. Nevertheless, it is still important to stress that not every African American uses the same features of AAE, and that regional variation inside AAE is also possible.

Overall, AAE is not just a variety, it is part of a culture and a community that has suffered from slavery, discrimination, and segregation throughout the years, which is the basis of how African Americans are perceived today. Racial bias in the US have affected the way AAE has evolved and is perceived, but this does not make AAE less of a variety. AAE has its own structure, words, combination of sounds, and most importantly, a community of speakers that is connected to it. The prestige this variety has is not related to any linguistic reasons, which only proves what many researchers like Pullum (1999, p. 58) have said: AAE "is not Standard English with mistakes".

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