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African American Vernacular English: language, attitudes and education

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Abstract

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is an English variety widely spoken by African Americans in the United States. It is one of the most studied ethnic varieties of English, especially since the second half of the 20th century. However, some controversial aspects remain unresolved. The main aim of this paper is to give a general overview of AAVE by studying the variety from a linguistic and sociolinguistic perspective and linking diverse topics to one another for a full understanding of the language. In particular, it focuses on the role of AAVE in U.S. education. Therefore, the paper is divided into four principal sections. After the introduction, section 2 discusses the history and origins of AAVE, which is still a matter of debate, by analysing two main hypotheses proposed by linguists. In the third section, the most important linguistic features of the variety are described: phonological and morphosyntactic characteristics as well as the lexicon. Section 4 analyses the attitudes towards AAVE: on the one hand, the beliefs of non-African American citizens about AAVE, and, on the other hand, the attitudes of AAVE speakers towards their own variety. The fifth section addresses the use of the variety in the American education system. For this purpose, it first explains when and how AAVE speakers were introduced into schooling. Then, different attempts to improve the conditions of African American children and their language are presented. In addition, the section describes the current situation of African American students. Finally, this last part examines the advantages and obstacles to using AAVE in schools as a tool for learning Standard American English (SAE). There are many benefits of using children's mother tongue to acquire the standard language. Nevertheless, barriers like pejorative attitudes towards the variety have a negative effect on its users and its reputation. Consequently, in order to use AAVE in education, the ideology of American society needs to change first.

Key words: AAVE, linguistic features, language attitudes, achievement gap, Standard English Proficiency.

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1. Introduction

AAVE is a variety of English mainly spoken by middle and working-class African Americans. Since it is spoken by a large number of people in the United States, it has been widely studied throughout the years. “For over four decades now, research publications on AAVE have more than doubled the combined total of publications on all other ethnic varieties of English” (Wolfram et al., 2000, p.1). Nonetheless, the origins and the historical development of AAVE are still a matter of debate among linguists. Not only that, the status of AAVE as a language is controversial because there are many people who believe that AAVE is a badly spoken or corrupted form of English although linguists maintain that it is a proper variety like any other.

For many years, this variety has been named by different labels, many of which are the result of the racial and ethnic ideology of American society. These are some of the best-known names to refer to this variety: Black speech, Black English, Black English Vernacular, Ebonics, African American Language, African American English or African American Vernacular English (Wolfram, 2006).

In this paper, I use the label African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to refer to this variety because it is the most widely used term by linguists nowadays and it describes the language of African Americans most adequately. In fact, there are many controversial labels, like Ebonics. This term was first introduced by Robert Williams, an African American socio psychologist, in 1973, and it derives from “ebony” and “phonics”, that is, black sound. Over the years, this name has been used to ridicule and undervalue the variety, which is why such terms are avoided today (Messier, 2012).

The main objective of this paper is to analyse this variety, giving special attention to education, that is, the history of AAVE speakers in education and the presence of the variety in the education system. In order to do so, I begin my paper with a section about the history of AAVE. I explain the two principal hypotheses about how it originated. Next, I describe the main phonological and morphosyntactic features of the variety as well as its characteristic lexicon. In section 4, I study the attitudes of both African Americans and non-African Americans towards AAVE, since these have had an influence on the use of the variety in other fields in society. Then, in section 5, I analyse the role of AAVE in the U.S. education system. First, I describe the history of AAVE speakers in education and, afterwards, I examine the use of the variety in schools for the purpose of

learning SAE. The history and characteristics of this variety show that it is neither slang nor incorrect language, but a valid language system. Nevertheless, the negative attitudes towards it prevent its use in all areas, e.g. education. If AAVE is to be valued and used as a tool for learning SAE, society's attitudes towards it must change.

2. The origins of AAVE

Before analysing a language variety and its significance in education, it is helpful to examine its origins as well as its development throughout the years. There is much debate about how AAVE emerged since there are several hypotheses about it (Wolfram, 2003). Nonetheless, it is generally agreed that the emergence of this variety is linked to slavery. All different theories coincide that AAVE originated when African slaves were brought to America.

The first British colony settled in Jamestown, Virginia in the year 1607. The main reasons why British people settled in the New World were gaining wealth and escaping from religious persecution. In 1620, for the same objectives, some English settlers called "The Pilgrims" created a colony in Plymouth, Massachusetts, and in 1634, other English colonizers settled in Maryland. In the following centuries, there had been considerable settlements throughout the whole of America (Winford, 2015).

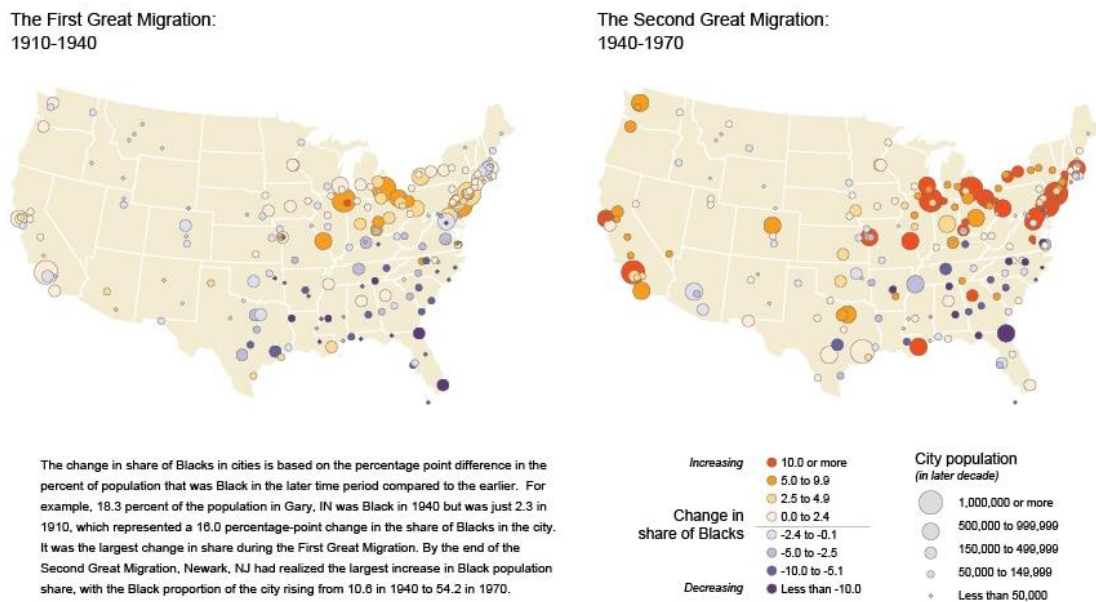
The first Africans arrived in America in 1619, especially, in Jamestown, Virginia. They were about 20-30 people who were brought on the ship "The White Lion" from Africa to America as slaves (History, 2022). From this year on, more and more enslaved Africans arrived in America. At first, around 200 black slaves reached the New World, mainly, from the Caribbean and Barbados. Nevertheless, from the year 1670 on, more and more African slaves were shipped to America due to the tobacco trade, principally. By the years 1730-1740, most of the black slaves were already born in America, the descendants of the first enslaved Africans (Winford, 2015).

In America, African slaves worked in tobacco, rice and indigo plantations, mostly on the southern coast, since it was the territory where they were first taken and contained massive fields. During the 19th century, many citizens moved to the north owing to the Industrial Revolution, and, therefore, slavery spread throughout the whole country. However, slavery in the north has never been as concentrated in proportion to the number

of inhabitants as in the south. In fact, it was the northern states that first demanded to abolish slavery. In 1808, the US Congress illegalised slave trade, hence domestic trade multiplied. It was not until the year 1865 that the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution abolished slavery (History, 2022): "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction" (U.S. Const. amend. XIII).

In the mid-20th century, the Great Migration took place. This was a relocation of millions of African Americans from the rural south to the northern states of America for better economic and living conditions (Tolnay, 2003). It was divided into two waves: the First Great Migration (1910-1940), in which African Americans moved primarily from south to north, and the Second Great Migration (1940-1970), when African Americans moved westwards to California in addition to northwards. African American communities settled in urban centres. There, racial segregation increased, which at the same time helped to better preserve their variety (Edwards, 2004).

Figure 1. *The Great Migration, 1910 to 1970*



Note. From *The Great Migration, 1910 to 1970* by United States Census Bureau, 2021, (<https://www.census.gov/dataviz/visualizations/020/>).

The African people who were brought as slaves had been in contact with the languages of the New World from the beginning. As it has been mentioned before, it is generally accepted that the origination of AAVE is highly linked to slavery and that it emerged in the southern area of America. What is not very clear even these days is the linguistic background of the variety, more specifically, how it originated. Two of the most widespread hypotheses about the beginning of AAVE are clarified in the following subsections.

2.1. The Anglicist Hypothesis

According to the Anglicist hypothesis, first proposed by the dialectologists Hand Kurath and Raven McDavid, the origins of the earlier forms of AAVE reside in British English dialects. At the time when African slaves arrived in America, the languages spoken by white British settlers and indentured servants in Virginia, Maryland, and the surrounding areas were British English dialects, especially those from the southern territories of Britain. Hence, African slaves learned the British dialects of the settlers promptly as soon as they reached the New World. Two of the major reasons for learning a new language were the need for communication and acculturation as a minority group, that is, the need to integrate and adapt to a new culture. In addition, the children of black slaves learned English in the streets and spread it throughout their families. That is the reason why the earlier forms of AAVE have linguistic features of southern British dialects (Winford, 2015).

Nonetheless, this hypothesis affirms that the initial AAVE also preserved several characteristics of some creole languages of Africa (Winford, 2015).

2.2. The Creolist Hypothesis

The Creolist hypothesis, which was first proposed by Bill Stewart and Beryl Bailey, and became popular in the 1960s and 1970s, proposes that AAVE emerged from a pidgin which combines English and African languages. A pidgin is a simplified speech-form of a fusion of one or more languages which is “used as a means of communication among people who do not share a common language” (Muysken & Smith, 1994, p. 3). It has no

native speakers and the grammar is not profoundly elaborated. The languages that form a pidgin are referred to as superstrate and substrate. The superstrate is the base language from which the vocabulary is borrowed, usually the language of the European colonisers. The substrate, contrarily, is the dependent language from which grammar is derived. Occasionally, pidgin languages go through a creolization process, a phase in which a pidgin develops linguistically and acquires native speakers, and, therefore, becomes a creole language (Muysken & Smith, 1994).

Regarding AAVE, Rickford (2015) suggests that when African slaves arrived in America and made contact with white settlers in southern plantations, a pidgin flourished due to the need for communication. Eventually, this pidgin language developed into a creole language, the mother tongue of its speakers. Nonetheless, over the course of time and due to the contact with other native forms of English, the creole language underwent a process of decreolization, becoming more similar to the standard language of the region.

3. Linguistic features of AAVE

Whatever its origins and development may have been, in the present day, AAVE is a systematic variety that has its own rules, like all other varieties of English. It shares sundry phonological as well as grammatical characteristics with the southern dialects of American English, although it differs in several features from English varieties. In order to gather information about the linguistic characteristics of this variety in its earlier and present forms, linguists have resorted to varied sources such as ex-slave recordings, isolated African American communities and letters written in the 18th and 19th centuries (Kautzsch, 2004).

In this section, a brief description of the most prominent linguistic features of AAVE is given based mainly on Edwards (2004) and Wolfram (2004).

The phonological features of AAVE are connected and, somehow, influence its morphological characteristics (Edwards, 2004). Therefore, the most salient phonological elements will be described, followed by the description of morphosyntactic principles.

3.1. Phonological features

The phonological system of AAVE slightly differs from that of SAE. Some dissimilarities can be perceived in vowels and consonants. Figure 2 displays the vowels of AAVE according to their place of articulation (Edwards, 2004).

Figure 2. *Vowels of AAVE*

Table 1. Vowels of AAVE

	front	central	back
close	i	i	u
			ɯ
close mid	e	oi	o
		au	
open mid	ɛ	ə	ɔ
			ʌ
		ai	
open	æ		a
			ɑ

Note. Reprinted from *A Handbook of Varieties of English* (p. 385) by Edwards, W. F., 2004, Mouton de Gruyter. Copyright 2004 by Walter de Gruyter.

These are the most salient phonetic realizations of AAVE vowels:

1. /æ/ is raised and fronted towards /ɛ/, especially when followed by nasals. For instance, *Ann* and *bang* are pronounced as [ɛn] and [bɛŋ], respectively.
2. /ɪ/ and /e/ are merged in to /ɪ/ before nasals. *Pen* and *pin* are pronounced as [pɪn].
3. /ɪ/ and /e/ suffer raising and diphthongizing to [iɪ] in some words. *Kids* is pronounced as [kiɪdz] and *head* as [hiɪd].
4. Diphthong /aɪ/ is pronounced as monophthong /a:/ mainly before pauses, nasals and voiced obstruents. *Hi*, *mine* and *slide* are pronounced as [ha:], [ma:n] and [sla:d], respectively.

AAVE has distinctive consonantal features compared to SAE. These are the most renowned ones:

1. Word-final cluster reduction is the deletion of the second consonant in a cluster. The reduction occurs when the two consonants share the same voicing and the

second consonant is a plosive. For instance, *and* is pronounced as [æ̃n] and *left* is pronounced as [lɛ̃f]. This feature is shared by other varieties of English such as the southern white vernacular dialect although it is most common in AAVE.

2. When /t/ and /d/ occur in syllable codas, they are frequently pronounced as glottal stops, also known as T-glottalisation. In addition, /d/ is sometimes realised as /t/ or deleted. For example, *not* is pronounced as [nɔ̃ʔ] and *bid* is pronounced as [bit] or [bi].
3. When /θ/ and /ð/ are found in word-initial or word-final positions, they are occasionally realized as /t/ and /d/, respectively, like in the word *thing* pronounced as [tɪŋ]. This is known as Th-stopping. However, word-finally and internally, /θ/ is often realized as /f/, and /ð/ as /v/, as in *bath* pronounced as [bæf]. This is known as Th-fronting.
4. Deletion of the liquids /r/ and /l/ occurs when the sounds are in pre-consonantal or word-final positions. For instance, *help* is pronounced like [hɛp], and *floor* is pronounced as [floə] or [flo].
5. Metathesis¹ of /s/+ stop happens in particular words when the sequence /s/+ stop is in word final position. For instance, *ask* is pronounced as [æks] and *grasp* is pronounced as [græps].
6. Nasal deletion takes place when a nasal sound, usually /n/, happens in word-final position like in *man* which is pronounced as [mæ̃] and *bang* as [bæ̃], with nasalization of the preceding vowel.
7. In /str/ clusters, the /t/ sound is backed and, therefore, realized as /k/ like in the word *street*, which is pronounced as [skrit].

Prosody in AAVE has not been analysed as deeply as other aspects of the language. Nevertheless, many linguists have recognised a particular characteristic regarding word stress. Many AAVE speakers shift the stress to the first syllable in words that carry stress on other syllables in SAE. For example, the word *police*, which is stressed on the second syllable in SAE [pə'lis], carries stress on the first syllable in AAVE ['polis] (Edwards, 2004).

¹ Metathesis is a linguistic phenomenon in which two features of the phonological string of a word are transposed (Blevins & Garrett, 2004).

3.2. Morphological and syntactic features

As I have explained above, the Great Migration caused many African Americans to move from the southern states to the northern urban areas. Partly as a result of this, the grammatical features of AAVE have slightly changed over time. In this subsection, I will describe and illustrate the most salient morphosyntactic features of urban AAVE, according to Wolfram (2004), including a SAE equivalent where needed:

1. Verb-phrase

- a. Absence of copula/auxiliary: the absence of the auxiliary forms *is* and *are*.

(1) *She nice*

(2) *They acting silly*

- b. Invariant *be*: the use of *be* referring to a recurring and habitual event.

(3) *She **be** walking*

“She is usually walking” or “She usually walks”

- c. Remote *been*: the use of *been* with a verb in the past tense form so as to refer to an activity that has been going on for a long time.

(4) *I **been** had it for about three years*

“I have had it for about three years”

- d. Completive *done*: the use of *done* to refer to an activity that has been completed in the present or the recent past.

(5) *They **done** go*

“They have already gone”

- e. Subject-verb agreement: AAVE does not use the third person singular present simple verbal suffix, as we can see in example (6):

(6) *She **walk***

The present tense forms of *be* - *am*, *are* and *is* - are levelled to *is* (7), and the past tense forms *was* and *were* are levelled to *was* (8).

(7) *The folks **is** home*

(8) *Y'all **was** here*

2. Nominals

- a. Absence of inflectional –s: in sentences that contain possessives or plurals, AAVE omits the inflectional –s.

(9) *The **man** hat was old*

(10) *I got 50 **cent***

- b. Irregular plurals: AAVE regularizes irregular plurals such as *oxes* and *sheeps*.

- c. Pronouns: *y'all* is used as the second person plural pronoun (11), *they* as a possessive instead of *their* (12), and regularised *hisself* instead of *himself* (13).

(11) ***Y'all** done now*

(12) *It's **they** book*

(13) *He washed **hisself***

3. Negation: AAVE shares many particular features with other vernacular varieties of English regarding negative constructions:

- a. Multiple negation: the use of two or more negation forms in a sentence that expresses single negation.

(14) *They **didn't do nothing***

- b. Negative inversion: the auxiliary and the indefinite subject are inverted.

(15) ***Don't nobody** like him*

- c. *Ain't*: like other vernacular varieties of English, AAVE uses the contraction *ain't* as a general negation term to refer to the present forms *am not*, *isn't*, *aren't*, *doesn't* and *don't* and the perfect auxiliary *hasn't* and *haven't*. However, AAVE is distinctive in the use of *ain't* for the past form *didn't*. *Ain't* is also found in double negation structures.

(16) *She **ain't** do it*

4. Question formation: There are two distinguishing features in AAVE concerning question formation. On the one hand, *wh-* questions are sometimes formed without inverting the subject and the auxiliary, as in example (17). On the other hand, unlike in SAE, AAVE applies subject-auxiliary inversion in embedded or indirect questions (18):

(17) *Where **that is**?*

(18) *I asked her **could I** go with her*

3.3. Lexicon

There is quite a lot of vocabulary that is unique to AAVE. Even though some words or phrases are common to other varieties of English, they differ in meaning and the linguistic environment in which they are used. “This unique vocabulary brings groups of people together, while it serves as a stratification device between other groups” (Green, 2002, p. 13).

Most of AAVE vocabulary is used by all ages, like *saditty* meaning conceited and *ashy* meaning the whitish colour of black skin caused by the wind and the cold. On the one hand, there is lexicon related to church and religion, a factor that has helped in the preservation of the variety. For example, *funeralize*, meaning to provide funeral services. On the other hand, there is specific vocabulary related to relationships and drugs, amongst many other things. For instance, *cuz* and *play sister* to refer to close friends, and *the man* meaning the police. Another factor that has enriched AAVE lexicon is street culture and music, especially hip-hop, a music genre highly linked to African Americans and other minority groups in the U.S. The word *def* is used to refer to something that is excellent (Green, 2002).

However, there is a current slang mainly used by teenagers and young adults to label people, money and actions. There are slang terms to refer to females like *bopper* and *dime*, and slang terms to refer to males such as *balla* and *fool*. *Benjis* and *cabbage* are some of the words to label money. Furthermore, there are abundant lexical items to describe actions: *bounce* and *push off* for leaving, *playa hatin/hatin on* to show envy, and *push up on* and *holler at that* to refer to the action of moving towards somebody of the opposite sex (Green, 2002).

According to Green (2002), in AAVE, there are many words that are common to SAE, but vary in meaning. For instance, the word *kitchen* is used to refer to the hair at the nape of the neck in AAVE, apart from referring to the room where food is cooked. *Mannish* and *womanish*, which are used to refer to the features and qualities associated with men and women, respectively, have other meanings in AAVE. They can be used to describe the boys and girls who behave inadequately, and *mannish* can also be used to refer to “a baby or young boy who is particularly advanced or independent for his age” (Green, 2002, p. 20).

4. Ideology and attitudes towards AAVE

In the previous sections, it has been shown that AAVE is a valid language system like all the other languages in the world. It has its own history and its own linguistic characteristics and rules. However, many people have had and still have prejudices and negative attitudes towards this variety. According to Kock et al. (2001), AAVE has always been considered an inferior language, and it is known as "lazy", "slang" or "broken English", among other labels. These prejudices are related to racism since it is mostly white American people who have the biggest misconceptions about AAVE speakers. Since the origins of this variety are linked to slavery in the United States, and slaves were not regarded as human beings, anything related to them was underestimated. Consequently, AAVE has always been associated to people of the lowest and less prestigious social classes (Kock et al., 2001).

Many of the people who have inappropriate and negative attitudes and ideas about AAVE speakers are non-African Americans. However, Lippi-Green (2012) states that within the African American community there are contrasting opinions about their own language.

On the one hand, part of the African American community views their language positively and with pride. For many, AAVE is part of their identity and culture. Indeed, Bashir-Ali (2006) states the following:

AAVE is also the linguistic and cultural identity marker for African American students who use language as a way to define their common histories and establish a social, cultural, and linguistic allegiance to their group in and outside the school context. (pp. 628)

On the other hand, many African Americans have prejudices about their own language and feel ashamed of it. The main reasons why they feel linguistic shame about their language is the stigma of inferiority attached to the variety and the attitudes of the population that cause the language to be discredited (Kock et al., 2001). For these reasons, many African Americans speak SAE and do not accept people who speak AAVE all the time. Hoover (1978) conducted a study in which African American parents were interviewed about the use of AAVE and SAE. The study showed that most parents preferred their children to speak SAE in all settings than AAVE. However, they also revealed that AAVE was allowable in some informal settings. Moreover, the results

showed that SAE was regarded as a more appealing and adequate language than AAVE. Another study conducted by Bashir-Ali (2006) revealed that “linguistic minority students may go to great lengths to hide their true identity, so as to become part of what they perceive to be the crucial center of power” (pp. 637).

In the following section, I will explain how all these attitudes influence the education of African Americans and the use of their language in schools.

5. AAVE and education

African American people who were brought to America as slaves by the colonisers were not considered citizens of the United States for centuries. They had no right to education since the owners believed that if slaves were educated their intelligence would develop and, therefore, they would rebel against their masters (History, 2022). In 1868, the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution stated the following (U.S. Const. amend. XIV):

All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

Therefore, from that moment on, African Americans were citizens of the United States even though they still did not have equal rights to white American residents. Yet, it was before this constitutional amendment that segregated schools were legalised, in 1849, by the Massachusetts Supreme Court. During the Reconstruction Era² and thereafter, there were many segregated schools, especially in the south. Jim Crow laws³, which were in force for almost 100 years (1876-1965), enforced racial segregation, especially in the southern United States (Kousser, 1986). In 1896, the Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy*

² The Reconstruction Era was the period from 1865 to 1877 in American history after the American Civil War in which many laws were regulated to improve the economic, political and social situation of the country (Foner, 2021).

³ Jim Crow laws, in force between 1876 and 1965, were the statutes that reinforced racial segregation in the Southern U.S. Almost all aspects of daily life were affected by this law like schools, public transport and restaurants by separating white and black coloured people (Urofsky, 2021).

v. Ferguson declared that the separation of black and white people in education was legal as long as the facilities were equal for all. Nonetheless, the legislation in force at that time was far from reality. African Americans and other non-white people had different educational advantages compared to white Americans, since they had fewer resources and less funding.

In the year 1954, the Supreme Court made the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which illegalised “racial school segregation in American public schools” (Reardon & Owens, 2014, p. 200). The decision had little immediate effect, and until 1968, public schools remained entirely segregated. That year, the Supreme Court took the *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* decision, which demanded new methods to accomplish school integration. As a result, segregation in public schools started to decrease (Reardon & Owens, 2014).

Even so, not all pupils were treated equally, either because they were not considered as competent as white American citizens or because their language and culture were undervalued (Reardon & Owens, 2014). In the 20th century, there were some attempts to accomplish educational justice and to equalise all pupils, white and non-white. Two crucial attempts that would mark a turning point in education in the United States were the Ann Arbor Decision and the Oakland Ebonics Resolution.

5.1. The Ann Arbor case

In the year 1979, the U.S. district court took the so-called “Ann Arbor Decision” in favour of African American children of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School in the state of Michigan. This case was brought to court because teachers at this school had unconscious negative attitudes towards students who spoke AAVE. Consequently, these attitudes negatively influenced the pupils’ learning, making their educational opportunities different from those of non-African Americans (Ball & Lardner, 1999).

Initially, the case had been taken to court to sue the school for inappropriately placing students in special classes for people with learning disabilities (Smitherman, 1998). These special classes were in principle for students who had a learning disability and could not keep up with the pace of other students. Nevertheless, “much of the public, including educators and journalists, viewed students’ stigmatized speech patterns and educational

difficulties as signs of personal deficits instead of barriers caused by linguistic or cultural difference” (Ball & Lardner, 1999, p. 120). Due to the teachers’ lack of consideration for African American children’s home language, many of these students had difficulties when learning how to write, read and speak in SAE, which is one of the major goals of the education system (Ball & Lardner, 1999).

Consequently, Judge Charles W. Joiner ordered that the school teachers needed to be educated to teach in multicultural settings by taking into account the home language of the pupils. This would enhance their learning process and foster language growth (Freeman, 1982). The Court’s Memorandum Opinion and Order (1979) states the following:

The problem posed by this case is one which the evidence indicates has been compounded by efforts on the part of society to fully integrate blacks into the mainstream of society by relying solely on simplistic devices such as scatter housing and busing of students. Full integration and equal opportunity require much more and one of the matters requiring more attention is the teaching of the young blacks to read Standard English. (1381)

The “Ann Arbor Decision” had some effect at first. However, a study conducted by Bowie and Bond (1994) revealed that teachers’ attitudes towards African American students were still very negative and unfair.

5.2. The Oakland School Board resolution on Ebonics

In 1996, the Oakland School Board, in California, passed a resolution acknowledging AAVE (“Ebonics” as the resolution states) as a language of its own. The resolution states that the mother tongue of African American students is Ebonics, rather than English. Therefore, educational and academic programs should respect and value each student’s first language. In fact, the resolution declares that schools should use a methodology in which the students’ home language is used as a tool to learn SAE, also known as the Standard English Proficiency (SEP) program (Messier, 2012).

The resolution did not have a very good popular response. Because of the way it was written, there were numerous misunderstandings. People understood that Ebonics was street slang and that the Oakland school would use this language to teach lessons when,

in fact, the resolution intended to express that Ebonics would be used only as a tool to study SAE. Moreover, many citizens believed that the resolution suggested that black people were genetically predisposed to speak AAVE, when it meant that the language itself partly originated in Africa (Messier, 2012).

Due to these misinterpretations, a month later, the Oakland School Board passed an amended version of the resolution. Various words and phrases were modified so that the public could understand properly the resolution's objectives, but it was still a very controversial debate (Deák, 2007).

The Linguistic Society of America supported the resolution confirming that AAVE is a language, a valid linguistic system with its history and culture, and not lazy or broken English as many people unfortunately think. Linguists stress the importance and benefits of respecting and valuing all students' home language (Rickford, 1999).

Wolfram (1998) claims that the Oakland controversy has taught us two important lessons. On the one hand, it is a mirror of the American society, that is, it displays the prejudices and misconceptions that people have about language diversity, and, especially about AAVE. On the other hand, it shows the misinformation of American society on issues related to language variation and education.

5.3. African Americans in today's education

The evolution of education in the United States with regard to AAVE has not been uniform and there have been many ups and downs. After a period of strong segregation in public schools, desegregation increased from 1968 to 1980. However, from 1980 onwards desegregation started to slowly decline since government plans to stop segregation had not been very successful (Reardon & Owens, 2014). How segregation has evolved to the present day is a matter of debate, though. On the one hand, many scholars claim that there has been a progressive tendency of resegregation of black students especially in the southern and border states of the U.S. On the other hand, some academics argue that segregation has not had a major increase. "The resegregation debate stems from these two perspectives of segregation: one emphasizes schools' racial composition and employs measures of exposure; the other emphasizes the distribution of race/ethnic groups across schools and employs measures of imbalance" (Fiel, 2013, pp.

830). While the former measure only takes into account the percentage of minority groups and whites in schools, the latter measure establishes a relationship by taking into account the population of the city where the school is located. For instance, in a school where three quarters of the pupils are African Americans and one quarter is white American, there may be segregation or not, depending on the type of population of the city. If the citizens of that city are %30 African American and %70 white, then the school is racially unbalanced. However, if the population of the city is %70 African American and %30 white, then the school is racially balanced (Fiel, 2013).

In general, there has not been much improvement in desegregation in the U.S. over the last few years. In fact, attitudes towards AAVE students in the educational system remain negative overall. Not only that, in the United States there is disparity in the academic performance of different ethnic groups, which is also known as the racial achievement gap. There is “a very strong link between racial school segregation and academic achievement gaps” (Reardon et al., 2019, pp. 33). Minority group pupils such as African American and Hispanic children tend to achieve lower grades and academic achievement compared to white Americans. They are also more likely to drop out of school and not complete their studies.

Rothstein (2004) states that according to the *Equality of Educational Opportunity* report published in 1966 by the U.S Department of Education, the main causes of the racial achievement gap were school factors and home and family factors.

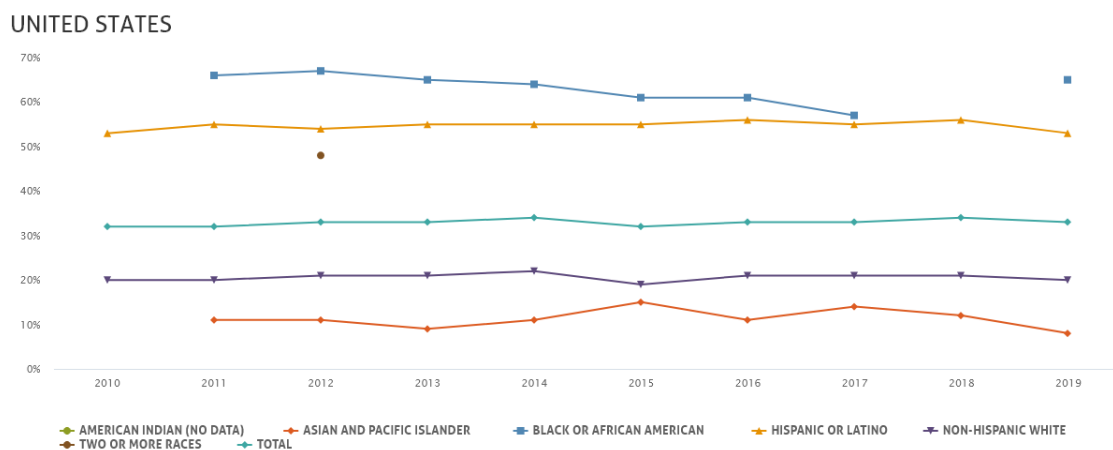
Generally, African American children tend to attend low-achieving and high-segregated schools because they live in poorer areas and in lower-income families than the average white American children. In these highly segregated schools, there is little support for African Americans’ language and, indeed, AAVE is often undervalued. This directly affects students’ learning, as it will be explained in the following subsection of this paper (Rothstein, 2004).

In the case of African American students, the culture and environment in which they live has a strong influence on their academic achievement. On the one hand, some African American parents do not place as much importance on having good academic skills at a young age. Therefore, children often begin school with less academic knowledge, for example, vocabulary. In addition, many African American young people often feel pressure from their peers, who judge them for wanting to study hard and get good grades

(Steele & Aronson, 1998). On the other hand, the socio-economic situation of African American families in the United States is also an important factor. There are many families who are generally poorer than white Americans, and according to Paschall et al. (2018), family income is closely related to the academic achievement of the student, as it happens in all countries around the world, especially if the education system does not do enough to compensate for the gap.

According to KIDS COUNT Data Center (2022), 67% of African American children live in single-parent families (see Figure 2), the highest percentage of all ethnic groups. In these cases, parents tend to have less time to devote to helping their children with schoolwork, which is a help that greatly enhances children’s academic progress.

Figure 2. *Children in single-parent families by race (percent) – 2010-2019*



Note. From *Children in single-parent families by race in the United States* by KIDS COUNT DATA CENTER, 2020, (<https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/line/107-children-in-single-parent-families-by-race?loc=1&loct=2#2/2-8/true/1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867,133/asc/10,11,9,12,1,185,13/431>).

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In addition to school and family aspects, cultural factors also affect the racial achievement gap since minority groups like African Americans often suffer from culture and language barriers. What is more, they often face negative attitudes towards their language and culture (Ogbu, 1992).

Whether AAVE should be used in education as a tool for learning SAE or not is still a matter of debate. In the following subsection, I look at the suggestion that the use of AAVE as a vehicle for learning of SAE has beneficial effects on children's achievement at school.

5.4. Benefits of introducing AAVE in education

As we have seen in section 4, many U.S. citizens have misguided and unfavourable behaviours towards AAVE. Teachers' negative attitudes towards their pupils' mother tongues have a negative impact on their academic development. Many teachers in the United States believe that students who speak AAVE are not as academically proficient as their peers who speak SAE or other non-minority languages, simply because of the way they speak. Unfortunately, these attitudes have a direct effect on African American students. They feel judged and undervalued, and, as a result, their behaviour in class often worsens. They do not take part in class activities, they feel ashamed of their language and speak as little as possible since they feel that their home language is incorrect. They are victims of self-stigma. Moreover, many teachers interrupt students when they say something in AAVE, correcting the "improper" spelling or grammar, when, in fact, they are simply speaking in their own form of speech. Thus, these pupils feel underestimated (Rickford, 2005).

Many academics stress the importance of valuing and respecting the home language of each student. Certainly, all languages are equally valid as a means of communication, and there are no languages that are better than others. If teachers take into account the languages of their pupils and value them, the effect on their pupils will be positive. Many studies have shown that the academic performance and grades of African American students have improved significantly, without affecting the learning of other students. Apart from scholastic improvements, positive attitudes towards AAVE also enhance the self-esteem of African American children (Freeman, 1982).

In addition, it has been proven that using the home language, such as AAVE, to learn SAE has many advantages. There is a programme called Standard English Proficiency (SEP), present in various schools in the United States since 1981, which is based on the use of students' home language, in this case AAVE, to learn SAE. In order to do so, both

teachers and African American students understand and learn about their language and culture, and accept the need of using SAE in appropriate situations. They are taught the differences between AAVE and SAE, and a link is created between the two languages so that students learn to use each in its correct setting (Messier, 2012).

Studies have shown that using pupils' home language as a tool has improved the process of reading and writing in the standard variety. For that, it is essential to prepare teachers to instruct in multicultural settings and to emphasize on the naturalness and enrichment of variety and dialect diversity. First of all, it must be clear to them that all languages are valid and must be respected. Therefore, they will acknowledge AAVE as a correct language and not as inadequate or broken English. Moreover, it is crucial that teachers and educators learn the methods to utilize AAVE as an instrument to acquire SAE (Rickford, 2005).

According to Rickford (2005)⁴, there are three effective teaching and learning techniques that have had successful results in bridging the achievement gap.

The first approach, which he also names as the “linguistically informed” approach, consists in the teachers differentiating between a reading mistake and pronunciation differences. In other words, instructors should know whether pupils who speak AAVE have read a word incorrectly, or they have just pronounced the word in their variety. For instance, AAVE children may read “I miss him” when the text says “I missed him”⁵. In this case, the student has not necessarily misread or misunderstood the text, but has simply read it in their variety, which is characterised by the omission of the second consonant in a consonant cluster. Thus, teachers ought to be skilled in the linguistic features of the variety. However, there are still insufficient studies to demonstrate the usefulness of this technique.

“Contrastive Analysis” is the second approach and it aims to emphasize and learn systematically the main linguistic differences between AAVE and the SAE. Teachers provide students with exercises in which they have to spot the differences between the two varieties and translate sentences from AAVE to SAE. This method has proven to be very effective because some studies show that children who were taught with this method

⁴ For references regarding the effectiveness of the teaching methodologies mentioned below, see Rickford (2005) as well.

⁵ This is consonantal feature 1 in section 3.1 above.

had a greater reduction in AAVE features when speaking SAE than those who were taught using standard methodologies of immersion in SAE. .

The third approach consists of teaching AAVE speakers how to read in their variety and then switching to the standard language through the use of so-called 'bridge readers'. Studies have revealed that children learn a second language faster when they have first learned their native language rather than when they learn the second language directly. Therefore, this teaching strategy is proven to be efficient.

5.5. Obstacles to introducing AAVE in education

Even though using AAVE in the process of learning SAE offers many benefits, there are some obstacles that hinder its use.

Gaining the favourable opinion of parents is the first challenge. On the one hand, many white Americans, like the American society in general, have many prejudices and derogatory attitudes towards African Americans, their language and culture. There are many parents who do not want their children to hear AAVE in school, and prefer to put all the focus on SAE (Kock et al., 2001). On the other hand, it is the parents of African American children who do not want AAVE to be used in education. As explained in section 4, the reason for this is that they perceive the prejudices and negative feelings about their language as well as its low prestige. Therefore, they want their children to learn SAE as soon as possible in order to integrate in society and become more similar to white Americans (Bashir-Ali, 2006). The ideology and behaviour of parents have a direct impact on their children. Thus, if parents do not value their native language, it is very likely that their children will not value it either.

Godley et al. (2006) state that the attitudes of some teachers are also a barrier to applying AAVE in education. Many educators believe that AAVE is ungrammatical and inappropriate, and that SAE is superior to the vernacular. Moreover, it is challenging to change teachers' ideas and beliefs that have been permanent throughout many years (Blake & Cutler, 2003). In general, it is difficult to push teachers who view AAVE negatively to appreciate and use it for academic purposes (Godley et al., 2006).

Lastly, in the United States there is a political movement called “English Only Movement”, which aims to establish English as the only official language of the United

States. “The English-only movement gained momentum in the 1990s and, according to some opinion studies, is currently supported by over 80% of the body politic in the United States” (Hartman, 2005, p. 1). However, not only is this movement a plan to set English as the unique official language throughout the whole Northern America, but it is also a covertly racist and anti-immigrant movement. Supporters of the English Only Movement declare that the laws and ideology of “English Only Movement” will bring together all the people of the United States, including people from different ethnic groups and different backgrounds (Hartman, 2005). Furthermore, they claim that it will empower non-English speakers. Nonetheless, many academics believe that this political movement attacks bilingual education (Macedo, 2000). Although it is a movement that has many critics, it still has many followers these days. Their ideals of prioritising SAE as the only official language, and thus discouraging bilingualism in a world where there is much cultural diversity, complicate and impede the use of vernacular languages such as AAVE in education.

6. Conclusion

As seen in the paper, AAVE has its own history, development and linguistic characteristics, just like any other variety of English, and this makes it unique. Even though there is still no definitive hypothesis about the origins of this variety, history proves that it has its roots in the enslavement of Africans in America. AAVE’s linguistic features such as phonology and morphosyntax as well as a distinguishing lexicon demonstrate that it is a system of rules like any other English variety, and that it is not slang or an incorrectly spoken SAE.

Many African Americans speak AAVE with pride since it is the cultural identity marker. Nevertheless, most of the American citizens’ attitudes towards this variety have never been very positive, and that is because of AAVE's slave-related origins and the racism that still lingers in society.

Negative prejudices towards AAVE have had a bad effect on its speakers and on the use of the variety in some aspects of life, like education. Many teachers despise AAVE; therefore, AAVE-speaking students feel ashamed and undervalued. Furthermore, the academic performance of these pupils is usually worsened.

Many academics stress the importance of respecting and valuing students' mother tongues for a proper learning development. Moreover, they also stress that it is beneficial to use the home language to acquire the standard language of the region. After analysing the benefits of using AAVE as an instrument to learn SAE, I believe that the U.S. education system should include this method in the areas where AAVE is widely spoken. Where teachers are prepared to use AAVE as a tool and they use diverse approaches like the “linguistically informed” approach, “contrastive analysis” or “bridge readers”, students learn SAE quicker and better. However, there are many obstacles to applying this technique in education: the pejorative ideology of some teachers towards AAVE, the negative attitudes of the parents of AAVE speakers towards their variety caused by its bad reputation in society, and political movements like the “English only movement”, which promotes English as the only official language in the U.S. and discourages language variation.

Despite these obstacles, I believe it is likely that the U.S. education system will decide to use AAVE as an instrument for learning SAE. For that purpose, it is society that will have to change first. The American society should be educated on language and dialect diversity as well as on the value of all forms of speech. Once citizens value and respect all languages and cultures, teachers, parents and children will all be prepared to use mother tongues, AAVE in this case, to acquire SAE.

It would be appealing for future research lines to study the development of the attitudes towards AAVE in the next years. Moreover, it would be interesting to see more benefits of learning first to read and write in the mother tongue rather than the standard language of the region.

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