

## African-American Vernacular English: Features, Evolution, and Cultural Implications.

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### Abstract

*L'objet de cette étude porte sur l'Anglais Vernaculaire Afro-Américain (A. V. A. A.) ou Anglais Afro-Américain, aussi connu sous l'appellation d'ebonics (fusion entre les mots "ebony"=ébène, et "phonics"= phonétique). L'A. V. A. A. est une variété de l'Anglais qui se distingue des autres dialectes de cette même langue par ses particularités lexicales, syntactiques, et phonétiques.*

*La description de l'A. V. A. A. présente des enjeux historiques, linguistiques, et culturels. A cet égard, la présente étude démontre l'évolution de l'A. V. A. A. non seulement comme un outil de communication inintelligible à la classe dominatrice blanche, mais aussi comme marque d'identité pour les blacks. Elle cerne aussi les caractéristiques linguistiques de cette variété et ses implications culturelles sur l'anglais Américain.*

The African-American vernacular English (A. A. V. E.) is formerly known as Black English Vernacular or Vernacular Black English among socio-linguists and often referred to as Ebonics (a blend of ebony and phonics) outside academic circles. The A. A. V. E. is a variant of English. It is a regular systematic language variety that contrasts with other dialects in terms of its grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary.

Controversial ideas over the origins of the black language in America arose among many anthropologists and socio-linguists. There were those who were in favor of the so-called "dialect hypothesis". They formerly contended that no substantial elements of Africa could affect any aspect of the blacks in the Americas. They believed that the African slaves, upon arrival to the United States, picked up English very slowly and learned it incorrectly, and that their mistakes have been passed down through generations. They, in fact, refer to the A. A. V. E as a bad form of English. According to this group of sociolinguists, the African slaves learnt their English from a very small number of British native speakers, namely the indentured servants, with whom they used to live during the colonial era. However, another group of anthropologists strongly defended the "Creole hypothesis". They believed that African-Americans' languages and other aspects of their lives in the New World had been, to a certain extent, influenced by the African heritage.

Historians and Africanists like Melville Herskovits and Carter. G. Woodson insisted on demonstrating the way African survivals could shape the life of the blacks in many aspects. African languages, kinship groups, folk tales, musical and dance forms had been preserved and adjusted according to African-Americans' needs



in slavery. Words like yam, goober, canoe, and banjo, they stated, are derived from an African background.

These Africanists further alleged that black American English was born of slavery between the late sixteenth century and the mid- nineteenth century and followed black emigration from southern states to racially isolated ghettos throughout the United States of America. It was created among the blacks not only as a communicative tool unintelligible to the speakers of the dominant master class, but also served as a mark of social identity and a linguistic bond between enslaved Africans or disparate ethnicities and in later years between African-Americans of unequal socio-educational classes. Today, African-American language is spoken all over the American nation and throughout the globe.

According to Historian J. H. Franklin, the transplantation and the preservation of African survivals in America are probably due to the blacks' exclusion from the white community. The Negro was compelled to live in a world apart from the dominant class. These conditions encouraged him to shape a culture and a language of his own. In fact, the Negro in the New World was exposed to two environments: the blacks came to America from different African backgrounds with different languages, cultures, religions, and traditions. They melt with other blacks on the plantation. The interaction between people created different set of customs. Simultaneously the blacks interacted with whites Americans which led, automatically, to a change in linguistic and cultural patterns.

The earliest African-derived words that were used on the American soil had been introduced by the Wolof people between 1670 and 1700. These people who used to serve as house slaves in northern America may have been the earliest Africans whose cultural and linguistic elements were assimilated into the developing culture of America. Among the most common words they had introduced was for instance the term "*masa*" to refer to their mater. Originally, the term was pronounced as "*mansa*" and was used among the Wolof tribes to address the West African kings to mean "chief" or "leader". As the American slaveholders were persons of authority, the Wolof slaves employed their indigenous word "*ma[n]sa*" standing for the term leader. Among the many other African words that were adopted by the Wolof slaves throughout the plantations and later assimilated into the American culture are the following: "okay" or "o.k." (originally used as "*waw kay*": all correct), sambo, and Honkie. Furthermore, many Wolof words became part of the American English because Wolof people used to be employed as interpreters for the European slave traders on the West African coasts during the early years of the Atlantic slave trade. They used Wolof names to name African food stuffs given to slaves transported across the Atlantic along their way to the Americas. These words included: yams and bananas, words that later became part of Standard English in North America. Other



Wolof words commonly used in present-day American English are illustrated in table one:

**Table one:**

Wolof word	American English	meaning
Gay	guy	person/fellow
Dega	dig	to understand
Jey	jive	misleading talk
Fuzz	fuzz	police

The linguistic influence of the other West African groups, namely Twi, Hausa, Yuruba, Akan, Kim Bundu, Bambara, and many other languages, is not to be overlooked. Indeed, since the early years of their arrival on the American soil, and despite the heterogeneity in many aspects of African life, there were sufficient common experiences for blacks in the New World to cooperate in the fashioning of new customs and speech forms. As Africans of different experiences lived together, there was the interaction of various cultures and vernaculars which produced somewhat different set of practices that would correspond to the new environment. Table two below illustrates some African words that have become part of the American language.

**Table two:**

Word	Origin	Meaning
<i>Daadi</i> (daddy)	Fante	Affectionate term for father
adobe	Twi	Palm tree leaves/grass used for roof covering
goober	Kimbundu	peanut
tote	Hausa	To carry
booboo	Bantu	Stupid/ blunder

The A. A. V. E's words are said to be composed of a form (a sound symbol) and a meaning. With some words, both the form and the meaning are derived from a West African background as it is the case for the following examples:

- Bogus "fake/ fraudulent" from Hausa *boko* or *boko-boko* "deceit/fraud".
- Hep, hip "well informed or up-to-date" from Wolof *hepi*, *hipi* "to open one's eyes, to be aware of what is going on".

In some other cases, however, the form is from English and the meaning seems to have its roots in West African languages, as it is shown throughout the following examples:

- Cool "calm, controlled" from Mandingo *suma* "slow" (literary "cool").
- Dig "to understand, appreciate, to pay attention" from Wolof *deg* or *dega* "to understand, appreciate".



-Bad-eye "hateful glance" from Mandingo *nyejugu* "hateful glance" (literally giving one the "bad eye").

The A. A. V. E is in many aspects similar to, and in some other aspects different from English. In terms of its phonology, for instance, the A. A. V. E shares some features that are similar to the other English varieties (mainly American). Other phonological features, however, are unique to the A. A. V. E.

An important phonological feature related to the A. A. V. E. and also found in many other English varieties is the consonant reduction which occurs mainly in word final. The "st" cluster as in the word "best" is reduced to "s" so that "best" becomes "bes". The reduction of sounds depends largely on the context in which the sound is used. If the following word starts with a consonant, reduction is more likely to take place than if the next word begins with a vowel. Therefore, a phrase like "best player" is pronounced as "bes player".

Another instance of reduction is related to the regular past form of verbs (grammatically called the "ed" form). Verbs in their past form like "worked, played, and looked" are sometimes respectively pronounced as work, play, and look so that there is no difference between the present and the past tense. In fact, the past tense is conveyed through adverbials like "last night" and "yesterday" or conjunctions like "then". In the same way, words used in their present participle form have the last sound deleted so that gerunds like talking and taking are respectively pronounced as "talkin" and "takin".

Among the many other systematic features that are unique to the A. A. V. E. is the pronunciation of the "th" combination which is pronounced as / t /, / d /, / f /, or / v / depending on the position of the word. Indeed, the voiced fricative / ð / is pronounced as / d / when it is used in word initial position as in the word "this" pronounced as "dis". In medial and final positions, however, the / ð / is pronounced as / v / and a word like "brother" is pronounced as "brover". On the other hand, when used in initial position, the voiceless fricative / θ / may be pronounced as / θ / or / t / and a word like thing may be pronounced both as "thing" / θɪŋ / or "ting" / tɪŋ /. In medial and final positions, / θ / is pronounced as "t" or "f" as in the word "mouth" / maʊθ / which is pronounced both as "mout" / maʊt / and "mouf" / maʊf /.

Another feature which is also unique to the A. A. V. E. is the use of the /str/ cluster in syllable initial position which is replaced by the /skr/ cluster with a certain set of words. Hence, words like "street", "stretch" and "strawberry" are rather pronounced as "skreet", "skrech" and "skrawberry" respectively.

At syntactic and morpho- syntactic levels, the A. A. V. E. is characterised by the absence of the "s" of the third person singular in the present simple tense. Thus, the sentence: he sings and dances, is pronounced as he sing and dance. Another peculiarity of the A. A. V. E. is related to the use of "ain't" instead of



“not” to express the negation. “Ain’t” is very often used to stand for “hasn’t/ haven’t”, “isn’t/ aren’t”, and “didn’t” as it is shown in these examples:

- I ain’t been eating in there since December.
- Ain’t nobody got to tell me notin’. You know what I’m sayin’?

Another peculiarity of the A. A. V. E. is related to the use of "gonna" to express the future simple, as it is shown throughout the following example:

I 'm gonna sing and dance all night (I will sing and dance all night).

More recent researchers like Labov and Harris advocated the "Divergence Issue". They have, in fact, given life to the "Dialect Hypothesis" arguing that the A. A. V. E. is, indeed, closely linked to British dialects but has diverged through time. Nonetheless, regardless of the controversies over its genesis, the A. A. V. E. is being regarded as a fully developed vernacular despite prejudiced opinions over its origins as being an inferior variety of English.

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