

**African American Vernacular English Examination in Mark
Twain's *Huckleberry Finn***

AZZOUZ Amina* ¹, Wassila HAMZA REGUIG MOURO ²

¹ Department of English, Faculty of Letters, University of Tlemcen, Algeria;
mouro.wassila@gmail.com

² Department of English, Faculty of Letters, University of Tlemcen, Algeria;
amina054965@gmail.com

Received: 02/05/2021

Accepted: 08/05/2021

Published: 01/06/2021

Abstract:

Literary dialect is a subject that has always been questioned ranging from support to opposition. Mark Twain is one of dialect employers, mainly in his outstanding novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in which he used seven dialects but mostly the African American Vernacular English (AAVE), which is the centre of concern in this work. The approach used in this paper to deal with AAVE in *Huckleberry Finn* is first of all theoretical to introduce the dialect mentioned and its features, and then, an analytic approach is investigated to study their employment by dialect characters in the novel. This paper aims to highlight the importance of literary dialect and stress on its literary function.

Keywords: literary dialect; AAVE; race; social identity; *Huckleberry Finn*.

**Corresponding Author*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language, with its diversities, and literature are juxtaposed fields which share the function of society portraying and expressing human thoughts. Literature is usually influenced by language as it showcases language in a chunk of the printed page with an artistic style. From here, the notion of literary dialect has commonly been used by writers as they make use of dialect in their standard literary works to both enrich the texts with a linguistic variety and use it as a literary device. In American literature, literary dialect started to take place by the late of 1700s through the representation of the black dialects as in John Leacock's *Fall of British Tyranny* (1776). After the Civil War, dialect use became successful and Mark Twain is one of these writers whose works represent a rich material of language varieties especially in his outstanding novel *Huckleberry Finn*.

Accordingly, the analysis in this paper will be held upon three levels. The first is an overview of the AAVE to introduce the origins of this dialect and its development. The second part will present the linguistic features of the dialect and the last one analyses the employment of these features by dialect characters in *Huckleberry Finn*.

The study is intends to answer the following research questions :

- 1) What is AAVE ? and what are its main linguistic features?
- 2) How did Twain employ the dialect in his main characters' speech?

As a result, the presented study aims to clarify motivation behind using dialect features in standard literary works and how authors use it to shape the characters' social identity.

2. Overview of AAVE

The African American English was introduced to America due to the great migration of Africans to the US in the years from 1500s to 1860s, which was the era of slave trade. After their settlement in the rural Southland by the beginning of the twentieth century, black Americans started migrating to the urban north, mid, and west, this movement was called the great migration as Lemann (1991) assumes : "The Great Migration was one of the largest and most rapid mass internal movements in history—perhaps

the greatest not caused by the immediate threat of execution or starvation. In sheer numbers, it outranks the migration of any other ethnic group—Italians or Irish or Jews or Poles—to [the United States]. For blacks, the migration meant leaving what had always been their economic and social base in America and finding a new one” (p.6).

Thus, the great migration allowed the AAVE to spread throughout America by the movement of the blacks from the South to the rest of the country as the following map shows:

Fig 1. Map of the African American Migration 1915-1970



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Source: Rege, 2015

From here, the African American Vernacular English emanates as the Africans had their own way to use the English language. The origins of AAVE have been the focus of research more “than any other vernacular variety in the history of American English” (Wolfram, 2000, p.39).

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In fact, AAVE has got several names mainly “Black English, Black Vernacular English, and Afro-American Vernacular English. Today, the most-used term is African American Vernacular English” and also ebonics which is “a blend of Ebony and phonics” (Wardhaugh, 2006, p.342). As a matter of fact, the term ebonics was coined by Robert Williams, an African American social psychologist in 1975 who assumes that “It includes the various idioms, patois, argots, idiolects, and social dialects of black people, especially those who have adapted to colonial circumstances.” (p.24)

The value of AAVE had always been controversial and considered as an inferior and bad variety of English (Fishman, 1972), yet, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998) believe that “the uniqueness of AAE lies more in the particular combination of structures that makes up the dialect than it does in a restricted set of potentially unique structures” (p.218).

3. AAVE Linguistic Features

For sure, AAVE has its distinguished linguistic features including different vocabulary, variant grammatical rules and contracted pronunciation. Starting with vocabulary, the AAVE words, expressions and slang were gathered in a set of established works, mainly a chapter in Rudolph Fisher’s book *The Walls of Jericho* (1928) entitled “Introduction to Contemporary Harlemlense”, J.L. Dillard’s *Lexicon of Black English* (1970), and Clarence Major’s *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African American Slang* (1994). The following table presents some words from the large ebonics lexicon:

Table 1. AAVE Words and Expressions

Word/Expression	Meaning in SE
Blade	Knife
Crib	House
Grip	Money
Nigger	A black person

Off da heezy/off da hook	Excellent
Paper	Money
Threads	Clothes
Trippin	Crazy

Source: Prepared by the authors based on data from (Twain, 1885)

Moving to grammar, “the greatest differences between contemporary Black and White English are on the level of grammatical structure”(Smitherman, 1999, p.87). The first feature which distinguishes the AAVE is the *zero copula* feature which means the absence of the present tense conjunction of the auxiliary *to be* as in “She ready” (She is ready) or “They laughing” (They are laughing) (Smitherman, 1999, p.23). Additionally, the absence of the relative pronouns as in “that’s the man come here” for SE “that’s the man who came here” (Rickford, 1999, p.8). Also, the suffix “s” of the present tense third person singular is added to other pronouns such as “I says” and “they feels”. A negation aspect is notable in the AAVE which is the use of "ain’t" "for am not, “isn’t”, “aren’t”, “hasn’t”, “haven’t” and “didn’t”” (Smitherman, 1999, p.23).

One can gather many other AAVE phonological features in the following table based on the research of John R. Rickford (1996), in which he studies them with samples presented:

Table 2. AAVE Grammatical Features

Sample Sentence in AAVE	Name of Grammatical feature	Explanation	Transaltion in SE
"She BIN had dat han'-made dress"	tense aspect marker BIN	a stressed form, marking the inception of the action or state at a subjectively defined remote point in time	She's had that hand-made dress for a long time, and still does

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Can't nobody tink de way he do	Double negation Negation inversion	marking the negative on the indefinite quantifier "Nobody" as well as on the auxiliary verb "can't" Nobody can't--> Can't nobody with the semantics of an emphatic affirmative	Nobody can think the way he does
I ast Ruf could she bring it ovah to Tom crib	Absence of possessive 's	reliance on the adjacency to express the possessive relationship	I asked Ruth if/whether she could bring it over to Tom's place
Befo' you know it, he be done aced de tesses	invariant "be"	"be done" (a future or in this case a conditional perfect, a future in the hypothetical past)	Before you know it, he will have already aced the tests

Source: Prepared by the authors based on data from Rickford's Research (1996)

Talking about AAVE phonological aspects, a set of variant rules occur, fundamentally the consonants cluster at the end of the word including the omission of the final consonant of the word such as "res'" for "rest", "lef'" for "left", "respec'" for "respect" and "han'" for "hand". Also, the monophthongization of /ai/ is a common familiar sound; these two vowels are shortened into one vowel /a/. In addition, some words are pronounced differently from standard English. For instance: thing → ting, this → dis, Bath → baff, brother → bruvver, nothing → nuffin, thread → tred (Wardhaugh, 2006, p.342). Moreover, the /th/ sound is converted to /d/. For example, "they", "this", and "the" are pronounced "dey", "dis" and "de".

4. AAVE Use in *Huckleberry Finn*

In *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain made use of several dialects as a literary device serving in implicitly shaping the identity of dialect characters and

provide realism. In the preface of the novel, one can feel Twain's glory for using seven distinct varieties of language. Twain (1885) under the title of EXPLANATORY writes in the preface:

“In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri Negro dialect; the extremest form of the backwoods South-Western dialect; the ordinary ‘Pike County’ dialect; and four modified varieties of this last. The shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion or by guess-work; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech. I make this explanation for the reason that without it many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding” (p.5)

First of all, Huck is the hero of the story, he is a child of thirteen years old. Huck is presented as an uncivilized and uneducated boy, thus, along the whole novel Huck's dialect is full of grammatical dialectal constructions including verbs conjugation, the present tense third person singular “s” use, pronouns, double negation, the use of the past participle form *done* as simple past form and many other features.

Additionally, Jim is Miss Watson's "big nigger" as described by Huck (1885, p.5), a black slave who ran away from his owner in search for freedom. He is a smart adventurer and superstitious boy, which is an allusion to his ignorance as Twain (1885) mentions that “Jim always kept that five-center piece round his neck with a string, and said it was a charm the devil give to him with his own hands, and told him he could cure anybody with it and fetch witches whenever he wanted to just by saying something to it; but he never told what it was he said to it” (p.7).

Conjointly, Jim as a strong AAVE speaker, makes use of a set of variant spellings and slang deviations with a large number of other deviated forms of verbs as the past participle “done” as a simple past form “did” and the omission of “To have” when forming the present perfect tense with keeping the past participle as in “I never heard”. And contracted forms of adverbs, pronouns, prepositions such as “alwuz” for “always”, “dey” for “they” and “an” for “and” .

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Jim is a pure AAVE speaker; his speak interaction with Huck carries a heavy set of dialect features. As a matter of illustration the following passages from their dialogues will be analysed:

I says: (Huck)

“Hello, Jim!” and skipped out.

He bounced up and stared at me wild. Then he drops down on his knees, and puts his hands together and says:

“Doan’ hurt me—don’t! I hain’t ever done no harm to a ghos’. I alwuz liked dead people, en done all I could for ‘em. You go en git in de river agin, whah you b’longs, en doan’ do nuffn to Ole Jim, ‘at ‘uz awluz yo’ fren’.”

“What’s de use er makin’ up de camp fire to cook strawbries en sich truck? But you got a gun, hain’t you? Den we kin git sumfn better den strawbries.” Well, I warn’t long making him understand I warn’t dead. I was ever so glad to see Jim. I warn’t lonesome now.

I told him I warn’t afraid of him telling the people where I was. I talked along, but he only set there and looked at me; never said nothing. Then I says:

“It’s good daylight. Le’s get breakfast. Make up your camp fire good.” (Twain, 1885, pp.43-44).

The previous passage shows how Jim’s speech handles a heavy set of dialect features as it is full of deviated forms of language. The following table gathers some of the grammatical deviations used by Huck and Jim in the novel :

Table 3. Grammatical Deviations used by Huck and Jim

Character	AAVE Form	SE From
Huck	I caught a good big catfish That don’t make no difference I never see the wind blow When we was up He needn’t done it I could almost kissed his foot	I caught a good big catfish That don’t make any difference I have never seen the wind blow When we were up He doesn’t need to do it I could almost kiss his foot

	That's what she done	That's what she did
Jim	I couldn't git nuffin else One night I creeps Dey wuz people When it come dark I didn't have no luck How you gwyne to git 'm? I knowed dey was arter you	I couldn't get anything else One night I creep They were people When it comes dark I do have no luck How are going to gey it I knew they were after you

Source: prepared by authors based on data from Twain (1885)

The analysis of the previous table leads to depict the AAVE grammatical variations in Huck's speech, mainly:

- a. The use of the past participle form "done" as a simple past form.
- b. Omission of To have when forming the present perfect tense with keeping the past participle as in I never heard.
- c. The addition of "ed" to irregular verbs in simple past tense.

Jim's speech as well presents a set of deviant forms, one can cite the followings :

- a. The present tense third person singular "s" is added to other pronouns such as in the sentence i creeps .
- b. The past participle done is often used as a simple past form did .
- c. Omission of to be when forming the present continuous tense as in dey gwyne
- d. Absence of the auxiliary to be in asking the question
- e. Were/was aternate use
- f. Addition of ed to irregular verbs in the past tense
- g. Double negation

AAVE speech is also characterized by the use of slangy and contracted words, which are used by Huck and Jim as the following table illustrates:

Table 4. Slang/Contracted Words Used by Huck and Jim

Character	AAVE form	SE Form
Huck	Smouch Hard lot	to steal tough customer

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	Yo Dog-tired Yo'self 'bout	you exhausted yourself about
Jim	Doan' Hain't Ghos' Alwuz en/ 'n' agin b'long	Don't Has/have not Ghost Always And Again Belongs

Source: prepared by authors based on data from Twain (1885)

Language and social traits have mutual relationship as the social parameters affect one's speech. Hudson (1996) points out that "to study speech without reference to the society which uses it, is to exclude the possibility of finding social explanations for the structures that are used"(p.3).

When comparing dialect characters with standard language speakers, it is notable that a high level of education and a high-upper social class are attributed to standard language speakers and their speech is clean. However, illiteracy and low social class are accorded to dialect speakers and their speech is slangy and full of grammatical and phonological deviations. Wolfram and Thomas (2002) assume that "people who share important cultural, social, and regional characteristics typically speak similarly, and people who differ in such characteristics usually differ in language or dialect as well" (p.1).

In fact, Twain could not focus his theme on slavery and anti-slavery without sketching the slaves' real speech form which is far from the standard; full of slangy words and expressions and deviant grammatical and phonological structures.

5. Conclusion

Literary dialect was a successful literary material of characterization

the fact that can be remarked when investigating in its analysis in *Huckleberry Finn* where the AAVE serves to shape the social traits of characters and define the social parameters of each including their race, social class and the level of education. Mark Twain and other writers contributed to the flourishing and development of dialect writings in standard literary texts and proved that literary dialect enriches the literary and linguistic value of the work. Twain proved his linguistic competence by making a balance between the use of standard language and dialect while maintaining the text's consistency.

The analysis of the linguistic features of AAVE leads to the conclusion that dialect is not very far from standard English form. Phonologically speaking, certainly, some words are new, however, others are only spelled differently with the omission or the addition of some letters. In grammar, AAVE features may be called "mistakes" as they are not bound to the standard grammatical rules.

Throughout the examination of the selected novel, the value of dialectal literature is displayed. Many may be confused and believe that the texts written in dialect makes it populist, yet, they are in fact of valuable standard establishment.

Information, analysis and results presented in this paper hope to inspire the upcoming researches as it contains several materials related to literary dialect study including the expansion of key concepts, Lancashire and AAVE features and the case novels dialect analysis.

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