



Sociolinguistics: Language Change

Wardhaugh chapter 8

(Labov's homepage: <http://www.ling.upenn.edu/~wlabov/home.html>)

Non-prestige dialects of English and Language Dispersion

A common preconception about non-prestige dialects or colloquial forms of English is that they are unsystematic and 'lazy' forms of language, and that they either reflect or even *encourage* illogical thought.

Over the past 4 decades many linguists have studied non-prestige and colloquial forms of English (and other languages) and arrived at the conclusion that these varieties are just as systematic as prestige varieties of English, that their 'non-standard' features are typically features found in prestige varieties of other languages, and that there is no basis for claiming that their phonology, morphology or syntax reflects 'illogical' or lazy thinking.

We focus here on the dialect of English that has received the most attention: it is known variously as "Black English Vernacular" (BEV), "African American Vernacular English" (AAVE) or "Ebonics". The first two terms are the most commonly used terms used in sociolinguistic research; the third term has achieved wide recognition in the wake of a highly controversial resolution of the Oakland (CA) Board of Education involving the role of Ebonics in K-12 education. In what follows I will use the term AAVE, which is the most widespread term in current linguistic research.

Some excellent readily accessible articles on AAVE are available on-line.

Note1: the colloquial English spoken by African American communities spans a wide varieties of styles, often identical to or barely distinguishable from the English spoken by other ethnic groups, including the prestige white variety. When linguists talk about BEV or AAVE they are typically referring to the variety of English spoken by ethnically uniform black communities, typically living in poor urban settings. It is this variety that differs the most from prestige 'Standard' English.

Note2: in studying non-prestige dialects linguistically, it is important to separate **linguistic** from **sociological** and **political** issues. The issue of whether non-prestige dialects are 'just like other languages' is a matter of **fact**, and does not entail any particular sociological or political commitment. From this fact it does follow that many widespread prejudices about non-prestige dialects are unfounded. However, the question of how best to deal with the diversity of varieties of English is an independent question: should dialect diversity be encouraged, in particular in education -- this is a rather complicated sociological and political question.

Phonological features of AAVE

/r/ deletion:

/r/ is not pronounced except in syllable onsets. The effect of this is that the following pairs of words are pronounced the same by many speakers.

guard, god
nor, gnaw
court, caught

This phonological feature is also found in some varieties of British English and Boston (MA) English. Notice, interestingly, that whereas /r/ deletion is a stigmatized phonological rule in the United States, it is a 'prestige' phonological rule in the UK ... many British dialects do not show /r/ deletion, but this is a phonological feature often used as an object of humor! Clearly, then, the social prestige (or lack of prestige) of the /r/ deletion rule is entirely arbitrary, given its opposite status on the two sides of the Atlantic.

/l/ deletion: (some speakers)

An /l/ deletion process, also applying in syllable-final position, has the effect that the following pairs of words are pronounced identically by many speakers.

toll, toe
all, awe
help, hep

Loss of distinction between front lax high and front lax mid vowels.

A feature of the speech of the general population in the western states is found in AAVE throughout the United States. The following pairs are pronounced identically (i.e. they are **homophones**).

pin, pen
bin, Ben
tin, ten

Merger of Interdental and Labiodental fricatives

Loss of distinction between /th/ and /f/ and between /thorn/ and /v/.

Ruth [ruf]
brother
think

[Students in some classes report that there may be varieties of AAVE in which the contrast between interdental and labiodental fricatives is lost in syllable-final position, but it preserved in syllable-initial position. This makes the dialect different from the dialect of London English ('Cockney') that I am familiar with, in which the interdental/labiodental distinction is lost in all positions.]

Syntactic Features of AAVE

Negation

One feature of AAVE syntax that attracts a good deal of attention is its expression of negation using 'double negatives' or 'negative concord'. [This feature is also found in many colloquial UK dialects.] Observers worry that this is illogical, because "two negatives make a positive".

he don't know nothing
I ain't seen nobody

In this respect, though, AAVE is doing just the same thing that the prestige varieties of many other languages do, e.g. Spanish or French. The simple fact is that in natural languages, negative concord does *not* entail a positive assertion.

Spanish: no ha visto nadie
French: Elle n'a pas fait rien

Critics of negative concord are therefore making two mistakes. First, they are failing to notice that negative concord is not specifically connected with colloquial speech, since it is found in prestige/formal varieties of many languages (and the *lack* of negative concord is stigmatized in some languages). Second, there is an unspoken assumption that the words of natural languages should correspond as closely as possible to the terms of classical logic: but semanticists and philosophers have long known that expressions of natural languages are quite difficult to translate into classical logic.

Auxiliary verbs

The auxiliary verb system of AAVE turns out to be an extremely interesting area: the pattern of use and omission of auxiliary verbs is rather different from the auxiliary system of 'Standard' English, but it is quite systematic in its own right.

'Standard English'	AAVE
He is happy	He happy
He is late	He late
They're mine	They mine
I'm gonna do it	I gonna do it

Forms with 'be' express habitual/continuing states; no equivalent in 'Standard' English

He be happy
He be late
Do you be tired?

Examples with auxiliaries in AAVE

- 1a. When they get caught stealin, they be talkin bout how innocent everybody is.
- 1b. But the teachers don't be knowin the problems like the parents do.

'be done' as future completive markers, equivalent of English 'will have':

- 3a. We be done washed all the cars by the time JoJo gets back
- 3b. I'll be done bought my own CB waitin on him to buy me one.

Omission of 3rd person singular '-s' in simple present or habitual present contexts.

- 4a. He walk to school every day.
- 4b. She like chocolate the best.
- 4c. Derrick don't know nothing.

Presence of 3rd person singular '-s' in 'narrative past' contexts (telling a story that happened in the past, using the present tense).

- 5. an' then he goes into the back door an' takes out his camera an' catches her right in the act...

Development of AAVE

A. Former Creole language, converging on Standard American English. (widespread theory, with good degree of support)

Origins as slave pidgin language
Developed into plantation creole language
Creole survives in some places, e.g. Gullah (outer banks of GA/SC)
Undergoing gradual 'decreolization'

B. Evidence for Divergence of BEV and White English Dialects (challenge to at least the view that AAVE is gradually converging on 'Standard' English)

- (1) a. Philadelphia vowels
- b. Philadelphia use of verbal -s *just* for narrative past tense

- (2) a. Central Texas 'be': with -ing as well as adjectives
 He be happy [old and young]
 He be running [young]
- b. Central Texas 'be'-omission in 'is' contexts, not 'are' contexts ... unlike whites

How Does Divergence Occur?

Some of the best evidence on this point comes from the work of Univ. of Pennsylvania linguist [William Labov](#) on the case of changes in the vowel system on Martha's Vineyard, an island off the coast of Massachusetts. The key to the explanation involves the need of a group to assert its unique identity.

Martha's Vineyard (Labov 1963)



Martha's Vineyard has been home to a community of fisherman for centuries; more recently, though, it has become a highly sought after tourist destination for the rich and famous (e.g. [this rather famous person](#) has taken his summer vacation there on a number of occasions).

For some time, apparently, there was free alternation in the speech of the inhabitants of the island between the diphthongs /aj/ and /aw/ and the alternate forms /[^]j/ and /[^]w/.

Following the influx of tourism, the speech of the old Yankee fishing families moved from free alternation to the more or less fixed forms /[^]j/ and /[^]w/. This sound change initially restricted to environments preceding voiceless consonants.

diphthong /aj/ becomes /[^]j/, as in 'rice, fright'
diphthong /aw/ becomes /[^]w/, as in 'house, shout'
favored environment: ____ [-voice]

Over time, the sound change extended further, both in speakers and in phonological environments: (i) more speakers who wished to identify themselves with the island's traditional way of life began to adopt the sound change; (ii) the sound change extended to more phonological environments, such as environments preceding voiced consonants.

rise, fried
house (vb.), pound

Therefore, the lesson from Martha's Vineyard shows that language contact does not always lead to a 'melting pot' situation. Sometimes it can be a trigger for language diversification, as a means for groups to assert their individuality.

Stages in Divergence

- (1) free alternation for some speakers
- (2) rise of tourist industry, local community feels identity under threat
- (3) obligatory raising before voiceless consonants for descendants of original settlers (often fishing families)
- (4) spreading to other phonological environments
- (5) spreading to other groups of inhabitants of the island

How does Language Change Originate?

- (1) Had been thought to be triggered by elite/prestige classes
- (2) Evidence points to leading role of upper working classes (e.g. Philadelphia, Norwich)
- (3) Strong social networks clearest in upper working classes (in West, at least)
- (4) Strong networks support preservation of non-prestige speech norms