

Linguistics 101

African American English

AAE - Basics

- AAE = AAVE (African American Vernacular English)
- AAE is a dialect continuum
 - ranges from Standard American English spoken with a AAE accent to the Gullah creole like that spoken off the coast of Georgia.
- AAE is neither spoken by all African Americans, nor is it spoken by only African Americans.
- Most speakers of AAE are bidialectal.

AAE - Basics

- Why focus on AAE?
 1. Case study for the relation between a society and language.
 2. Many misconceptions exist, more so than with other dialects.

AAE - Misconceptions

- Common misconceptions:
 - AAE is just slang
 - AAE is bad English
 - AAE is illogical
 - ...
- There is no scientific basis for the above misconception.
- Like Standard American English (SAE), AAE has:
 - a grammar
 - a lexicon
 - social rules of use

AAE - Misconceptions

- Reasons for misconceptions
 - confusing 'prestige' with 'correctness'
 - lack of linguistic background, understanding of languages and dialects
 - perception of group using language variety
 - perception of various races, ethnicities, religions
 - perception of people from various regions
 - perception of people of various socioeconomic statuses
 - etc.

Characteristics of AAE

AAE - Characteristics

- AAE differs systematically from Mainstream American English (MAE).
- Characteristics of AAE which differ from MAE regularly occur in other dialects/languages.
- Not all varieties of AAE exhibit all of the aspects discussed below.
- Only characteristics of AAE which *differ* from MAE are presented below.

AAE - Phonology

- R-Deletion
 - /ɹ/ is deleted unless before a vowel
 - e.g. 'sore' = 'saw'; 'poor' = 'Poe'
 - also common in New York, Boston, England
- L-Deletion
 - e.g. 'toll' = 'toe', 'all' = 'awe'
 - also happens in Delaware!
 - 'folder' => 'foder'

AAE - Phonology

- Consonant cluster reduction
 - e.g. 'meant'/'mend' = 'men'; 'past'/'passed' = 'pass'
 - also occurs in some other English dialects (with different characteristics)
 - e.g. 'didn't' => 'din'(t'); 'ghosts' => 'ghoss'
- [ɪ] and [ɛ] neutralizes before nasals
 - e.g. 'pin' = 'pen'; 'bin' = 'Ben'
 - common in Southern English

AAE - Phonology

- Diphthong reduction
 - /ɔj/ → /ɔ/
 - /aj/ → /a/
 - occasionally occurs in colloquial speech of MAE speakers
- 'Im gonna go now.' ([ajm] → [am])

AAE - Phonology

- Loss of interdental fricatives /θ/, /ð/
 - /θ/ → /f/
 - e.g. 'Ruth' => [ruf]
 - occurs in some British dialects
 - /ð/ → /v/
 - e.g. 'brother' => 'brover'
 - Initial /ð/ → /d/
 - e.g. 'this' => 'dis'; 'that' => 'dat'
 - occurs in New York, New Jersey, Boston, the Yooper dialect

AAE- Morphology

- 3rd person singular agreement marker -s not necessary
 - ‘When he come down here...’
- Plural marker -‘s not necessary
 - ‘That’s the church responsibility.’

AAE- Morphology

Middle English

present indicative	singular	plural
1 st person	luve	luves, luve(n), luveth
2 nd person	luves, luvest	
3 rd person	luves, luveth	

Modern SAE

present indicative	singular	plural
1 st person	love	love
2 nd person	love	
3 rd person	loves	

AAE – Morphosyntax

- Existential constructions formed with it/dey + be/got/have
 - It's/Dey some coffee in the kitchen.
 - It/Dey got some coffee in the kitchen.

- MAE = 'There is/are'
- French = 'It there has'
- Spanish = '(It) has'
- German = 'It gives'

AAE - Morphosyntax

- Double/Multiple negatives
 - I didn't have no lunch = I didn't have any lunch.
- Is double negation illogical?
- Double negation is required in many languages:
 - Spanish: (Yo) No he comido nada.
I not have eaten nothing
 - French: Je n'ai rien mangé.
I not.have nothing eaten

AAE - Morphosyntax

- Double negation occurs in many other English dialects.
- It was also the norm in Old English!

þæt he **na** sippan geboren **ne** wurde
that he **never** after born **not** would.be
'That he should never be born after that'
'(lit) That he should **not never** be born after'

AAE - Morphosyntax

- Different use of 'be'
 - not required in some instances when required in MAE
 - SAE: He is late.
 - AAE: He late. = He is late now. (temporary)
 - remains uninflected in other instances
 - AAE: He be late. = He is regularly late. (habitual)

AAE - Morphosyntax

'Be' – habitual usage

MAE

- The coffee is always cold.
- She is always angry.
- She is late every day.

AAE

- The coffee always be cold.
- She always be angry.
- She be late every day.

AAE – Morphosyntax

‘Be’ – deletion of ‘is’

MAE

- The coffee is cold now.
- Right now she is angry.
- She is late today.

AAE

- The coffee cold now.
- Right now she angry.
- She late today.

AAE – Morphosyntax

‘Be’ – inclusion of ‘is’

MAE

- The coffee is cold now.
- Right now she is angry.
- She is late today.

AAE

- The coffee is cold now.
- Right now she is angry.
- She is late today.

Rules Determining Use of Be/Is/Ø in AAE

- Use **be** when what you are describing is **permanent or usual**:
She **be** late **every day**.
- Use **is** or **Ø** when what you are describing is **temporary**:
She **is** late **today**.
She **___** late **today**.

Are the AAE rules for *is* and *be* found in other languages?

Yes! A similar rule exists in Spanish.

The rule determines whether you use *ser* or *estar* for the verb *be*.

Ser and *Estar*

- Use **ser** for permanent characteristics, like AAE **be**:
Mi hermana **es** muy bonita.
My sister is very pretty
- **Es** from **ser** means she is a pretty girl and **not** that someone did a good makeup job on her.
- Use **estar** for temporary characteristics, like AAE **is** and **Ø**:
Mi hermana **está** muy bonita.
My sister is very pretty
- Use **está** (from **estar**) to mean that she looks great tonight (but this is **not** the norm).

AAE Grammar Summary

- The grammar of AAE differs from the grammar of MAE.
- AAE and MAE are related but distinct, rule-governed language systems.
- The 'unique' characteristics of AAE are quite common cross-linguistically.

AAE & the Oakland School District

Background

- Oakland, CA has a large Black population (35% in 2000)
- It is one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the U.S.
- More than 50% of students in 1996 were Black. Many spoke AAE at home.

Background

- Black students in Oakland averaged lower on English (SAE) proficiency tests than students in other parts of the country.
- Schools can receive funds for English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction.
- Claiming Ebonics as a separate language could possibly get them funding for such instructors.

The Issue

- In 1996, the Oakland School District passed a resolution calling 'Ebonics' a language.
- Sought to include some instruction in AAE in schools, train teachers in AAE
- This started a nationwide controversy.

The Issue

- Poor wording of original resolution caused problems:
 - claimed Ebonics was 'genetically-based' without clarifying meaning
 - claimed Ebonics to not be a dialect of English
 - implied that Ebonics was the primary language of *all* its African American students
- There was also a gross misunderstanding
 - the resolution did not call for the teaching of Ebonics to the exclusion of SAE

The Issue

- Many people opposed the resolution for various reasons:
 - belief that it would encourage use of ‘bad’ English
 - belief that it would discourage learning of SAE
 - negative socioeconomic consequences
 - misunderstanding that Ebonics would be taught as a standard language
 - claim that it was racist to associate ‘bad’ English with Blacks
 - (Standard) English-only mindset
 - belief that immersion is best solution

The Issue

- Many people favored the resolution for various reasons:
 - some similarities with ESL contexts, for which special instruction is available
 - children learn best in native language/dialect
 - comparative instruction of AAE and SAE leads to higher proficiency in SAE
 - more effective instruction if instructors are trained in AAE
 - use of home language increases pride, academic interest of students
 - use of home language increases understanding of subject matter

The Intention

- The intended outcome was largely instruction like this.
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxjwMn0GkR0>)

Historical Perspective of AAE

Origin of AAE

The two prominent theories:

- **Dialectologist view:**
 - AAE based on non-standard varieties of English spoken in the South
- **Creolist view:**
 - AAE based on a pidgin language that creolized and later decreolized
- The latter view is more accepted.

Origin of AAE

- Dialectologist view:
 - Slave owners often spoke non-standard dialects of English.
 - Slaves learned basic English from slave owners.
 - Children of slaves learned English primarily from parents, who were not native speakers; thus, the English they came to speak differed from those of slave owners.
 - Social/racial barriers between Whites and Blacks caused the dialects to diverge further.

Origin of AAE

- Dialectologist View:
 - Claims that there is little difference between how AAE was formed and how French was formed from Latin.
 - Claims no significant West African influence in AAE.

Origin of AAE

- Creolist View
 - Slaves spoke mixture of West African languages.
 - Slave owners preferred slaves that did not speak same language so they could not revolt easily.

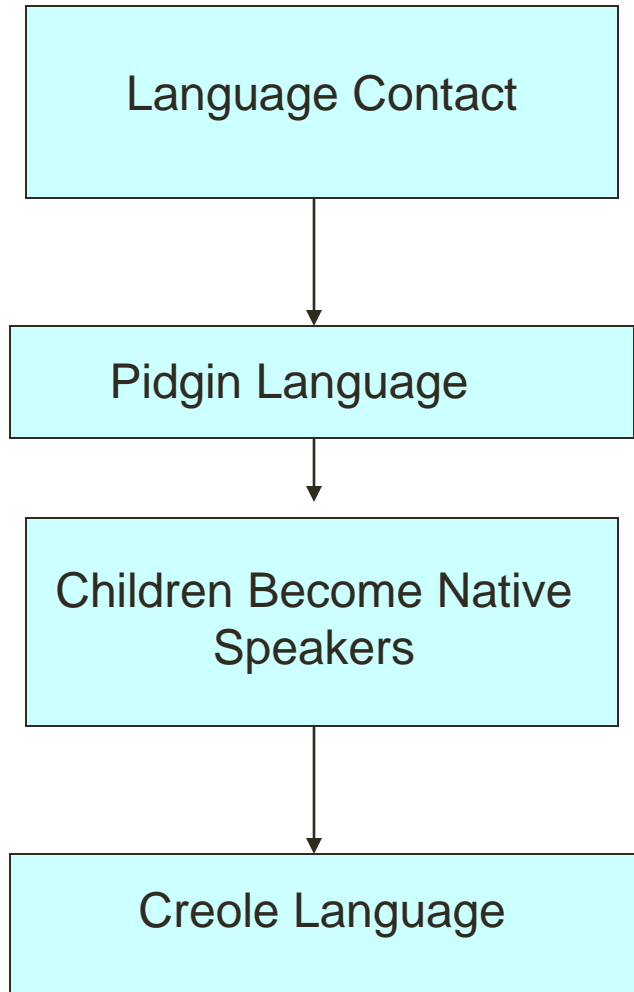
Origin of AAE

- Creolist View
 - Slaves needed language for communication
 - Used English vocabulary learned from owners and overseers
 - Formed simple communication system based on English vocabulary and simplified West African grammar (i.e. a *pidgin* language).
 - This pidgin originated in Africa, *before* the slaves were sent to the U.S.
 - This pidgin still exists there.

Origin of AAE

- Creolist View
 - Slave children heard pidgin English.
 - The children acquired pidgin English as their native language (i.e. it became a creole).
 - They filled in words and grammar that they needed to fully express themselves.

Creole Language Formation



American Creole Languages

- Gullah English, exemplified below, is a good example of the sort of creole that emerged.
- Similar creole languages are spoken in the West Indies today
- Jamaican English is another English-based creole.

Location of Gullah Creole: Sea Islands Off Georgia & S. Carolina



Gullah Tales

The Jealous Bragging Turtle

Narrated in English and Gullah
by Aunt Pearlie-Sue



- On the old Hazel Farm Plantation, there was a turtle by the name of Cootah. Now Cootah was a handsome guy, with the shiniest, prettiest shell you ever wanted to see. Folks would come from far and near to see themselves in Cootah's shell. Cootah was not only the most handsome turtle around, he was also about the smartest and very, very clever. He went around always bragging and boasting about how good he looked and how smart and clever

<http://www.knowitall.org/gullahtales/tales/turtle/flash/index.html>

Decreolization

- ‘Decreolization’ is when a creole language reconverges with one of the languages it derived from.
- According to the Creolist view of AAE, contact between creole speakers and non-creole speakers led to changes in creole.
- Creole became more and more similar to the English of neighboring whites.
- Education exposed ex-slaves and their descendents to standard English.

Decreolization

Creole decreolized:

- AAE lost many West African characteristics.
- AAE became increasingly similar to standard English & dissimilar to West Indian creole.

Summary of Creolist View of AAE

1. Pidgin Language
2. Creole Language
3. Decreolized