

Ebonics: Slang vs. Language

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“I’m a linguist.”

- How many languages do you speak?
- Are you the grammar police?

“I’m NOT an English teacher.”

- a. ✓ I’m not going anywhere.
- b. ✓ I’m not going nowhere.
- c. ✗ I not am nowhere going.

Languages, Dialects, Varieties

- What is a language?
- What is a dialect?
- What is a variety?
- What is the difference between a language, a dialect and a variety?

Languages, Dialects, Varieties

- What do you think when you hear these speech samples:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=03iwAY4KIIU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQrtB7cZDrA>

<http://sounds.bl.uk/Accents-and-dialects/BBC-Voices/021M-C1190X0007XX-0101V0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OlleFVVXRpc>

- Why do we have these judgments?

Quiz

- How many of the following words do you understand?
- How many do you use?

- fam
- lit
- turnt
- clap back
- shade
- savage
- squad
- fire
- salty
- bae

What is slang?

- bae
- lit
- She bin married.
- He ain't do it.
- you're a **drag**, you **bug** me, **make out**, **scarf** a meal

What is slang?

- **Words/phrases** – new to the language or with a new meaning
- Used by younger speakers
- Typically short-lived
- “drag, bug, make out, scarf (a meal)”

Big L – Ebonics (1998)

- Please listen to the lyrics (closely)
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eC_4Wgyn_co
- Big L is describing Ebonics
 - What does he focus on?

Ebonics

- 1960s – 1st large-scale linguistics study of African American speech community
 - ‘Nonstandard Negro English’
- 1973 – A group of black scholars coined ‘Ebonics’
 - ebony ‘black’ + phonics ‘sounds’ = Black speech
- 1996 – Oakland School Board recognized Ebonics as primary language of its students
- Currently – ‘African English’ (AE), ‘African American English’ (AAE) or ‘African American Vernacular English’ (AAVE)

Ebonics

- Who speaks Ebonics?
 - Working class speakers
 - Adolescents
 - Informal contexts

History of AAE

- Three main views on the origins:
 1. The Afrocentric view
 2. The Eurocentric view
 3. The Creolist view

The Afrocentric View

- Most of the features found in AAE come from Africa:
 - Simplification of consonant clusters (hand → han)
 - Omission of 'is' and 'are' (he happy)
- HOWEVER!
 - Languages in the Niger-Congo family vary greatly!
 - Not all languages show these forms found in AAE
 - Yoruba does lack 'is' as a linking verb but instead has a different linking verb to use with adjectives and SIX! other linking verbs with other constructions.
 - Dropping final consonants is also found in English varieties in England.

The Eurocentric View

- African slaves learned English from white settlers.
 - Colonial English, Irish, or Scotch-Irish settlers spoke with these features:
 - The omission of final consonants (hand → han) and
 - The use of 'habitual be' (he be walkin' → he is usually walking)
 - OR! These may be features that emerged in the 20th century after social isolation in urban ghettos.
- However...
 - The omission of 'is' was rare or non-existent with these settlers

The Creolist View

- AAE evolved from a simplified fusion of English and African languages.
 - Creole languages are common in the Caribbean and Pacific islands:
 - The slave workers spoke radically different languages than the European colonizers → Haitian Creole French and Jamaican Creole English
 - The English creole, Gullah (SC Sea Islands) has features found in AAE.
 - Creole speech might have been introduced to the American colonies through slaves imported from Jamaica and Barbados.
 - West African slaves could have brought with them pidgins or creoles from West African trading forts.
 - It's also possible that some creole varieties developed here on American soil.
 - Traveler records from the 18th and 19th centuries show creole-like features in African American speech.

What do these sentences mean?

1. He be workin'.
 - a. He has a job.
 - b. He is working right now.

2. He workin'.
 - a. He has a job.
 - b. He is working right now.

African American English Activity

- Compare African American English to Standard American English:
 - Come up with **a rule** or **a set of rules** to explain the differences
- Focus on the first section - Pronunciation

(Some) Grammatical Features of AAE

- **Pronunciation:**

- Word-final consonant clusters

- hand → han
- desk → des
- BUT! pant → pant

- Word-final single consonants

- man → ma
- cat → ca

- Final 'ng' → n

- walking → walkin

Pronunciation

- ‘-ing’ becomes ‘-ang’ and ‘ink’ becomes ‘ank’
 - thing → thang
 - sing → sang
 - drink → drank
- Devoicing of word-final voiced stops
 - bad → bat
 - pig → pik
- ‘th’ becomes ‘t’ or ‘f’
 - thin → tin
 - bath → baf
- ‘th’ becomes ‘d’ or ‘v’
 - then → den
 - smooth → smooov
- ‘str’ becomes ‘skr’
 - street → skreet
 - destroy → deskroy

Verbs

- Compare the verbs between the two varieties of English.

Verbs

- Absence of 'to be'
 - He's tall → He \emptyset tall
 - They are running → They \emptyset running
- 'be' marks a habitual action
 - He is usually walking → He be walkin'
- 'BIN' a remote past event
 - She has been married for a long time (and still is) → She BIN married
- 'done' emphasizes a completed action
 - He's already done it → He done did it
- 'is' and 'was' generalization
 - You are crazy → You is crazy
 - We were there → We was there

Existentials

- “There is/there are”

Existentials

- 'it' (is, 's, was, ain't) instead of 'there' (is, 's, was, isn't)
 - **There is** a school up there → **It's** a school up there

Negation

- How does negation work in AAE?

Negation

- 'ain't' as a general negator with verbs, (replaces: am not, isn't, aren't, hasn't, haven't, didn't).
 - He **didn't** do it → He **ain't** do it
- Negative inversion
 - **Nobody is** home → **Ain't nobody** home (from 'nobody ain't home')

African American English

- Does it seem more complex than anticipated?

Other Varieties of English

- Roughly 14 different varieties of English spoken in the US
 - Cajun English <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2QtyHultEA>
 - Chicano English
 - Pennsylvania Dutch English
 - Eastern New England English (Boston, Maine, Rhode Island)
 - New York City English

AAE and Other Varieties

- There are negative connotations associated with all varieties that are not the standard.
- How can we fix this?

Thank you!

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