Sophia Huber

# African American Vernacular English as a Literary Dialect

## A Linguistic Approach

English and Beyond | Band 6

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Herbert Utz Verlag · München 2018

English and Beyond
Band 6

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Sophia Huber

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## A Linguistic Approach

Herbert Utz Verlag · München

**English and Beyond**

**herausgegeben von Hans Sauer, Gaby Waxenberger und Monika Kirner-Ludwig**

Band 6

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For me

To all strong women – and the men who stand next to them

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**Abbreviations**

| | |
|---|---|
| AAVE | African American Vernacular English |
| C | *Clotel, or, The President's Daughter* |
| CP | *The Color Purple* |
| *DARE* | *Dictionary of American Regional English* |
| EModE | Early Modern English |
| GA | Georgia |
| GB | *The Gold-Bug* |
| GWTW | *Gone with the Wind* |
| H | *The Help* |
| HF | *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* |
| HOW | *His Own Where* |
| IM | *Invisible Man* |
| MC | *Modern Chivalry* |
| ME | Middle English |
| Midl | Midland |
| MT | *The Marrow of Tradition* |
| OE | Old English |
| P | *Push* |
| PA | Pennsylvania |
| S | southern; South |
| SF | *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* |
| Sth | Southern |
| TEWWG | *Their Eyes Were Watching God* |
| UR | *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus* |
| UT | *Uncle Tom's Cabin* |

## 1. Introduction

Why do we investigate languages? Through synchronic as well as diachronic analyses, social and political differences can be accounted for and attitudes towards their speakers be explained. Furthermore, knowledge about one's linguistic background, especially when it is different from mainstream varieties, provides a basis for identity and self. Ancestral values can be upheld, celebrated, and rooted further in the consciousness of their speakers.

In the case of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) the matter is not simply resolved by agreeing that it originates from British dialectal and African influences. Ultimately, the social implications its speakers still face today are unresolved. Like other dialects, AAVE and its speakers are prone to stigmatisation and discrimination. In order to find out what it is exactly that causes such perceptions, the driving forces and mechanisms in the background need to be unearthed.

Discovering these mechanisms is what the present study tries to achieve. By analysing AAVE's use in literary prose and by taking into account social and political factors, I have tried to establish the development of AAVE as a literary dialect. Furthermore, by unearthing in what ways AAVE in its written form is different from the spoken variety, I will expose long established social stigmata and stereotypes which have been burned into the nation's consciousness through a (initially) white dominated literary tradition.

A linguistic study of this scope has not yet been conducted. Linguistic analyses of AAVE in literature are rare and usually focus on one, sometimes two works.[1] Generally, linguistic analyses feature as props for literary arguments. Therefore, they are difficult to find, hidden within the literary analysis, and incomplete. The last point stems from the fact that only the most obvious linguistic features are analysed, which are usually restricted to orthographic and phonologic elements, rarely include morphological ones, and generally ignore syntax and vocabulary. On top of that, linguistic analyses have a tendency to describe indications of quantity with vague statements. What does *frequent* mean when it stands next to *often*, and is *often* also *regularly*? Despite noticing this pitfall, even I found it difficult to avoid. However, by providing statistics and counts I have tried to reduce inaccuracies in this respect.

The present study is divided into two main parts. The first part contains the study and analysis, while the second part provides the material and is added as CD-ROM.

Part one starts off with Chapter *3. Historical Background*. It traces the history of the Atlantic slave trade and ends with a note on the political and social implications for American Slave Descendants today. This chapter not only creates the appropriate socio-historic and political background for the present

[1] Holton (1984) is the only comprehensive study which claims to focus on the linguistic aspects. However, the main interest of this book lies elsewhere and, more importantly, the linguistic analyses conducted for each work are often fundamentally lacking.

study, but it also embeds the topics of the individual works in their historical reality.

Chapter *4. A Brief History of AAVE* investigates the linguistic research on AAVE. While it also looks at the terminology for its speakers, it mainly outlines some of the linguistic features associated with AAVE.

Chapter *5. Literary Dialects* is included to embed the present study in the general discussions surrounding literary dialects. Furthermore, it clarifies that AAVE as a literary language can be analysed with linguistic tools.

Chapter *6. Analyses of Works* forms the main part of this study. In it, a total of fourteen novels and one short story which feature AAVE are analysed using the findings of current linguistic research in the spoken variety as a guideline. The criteria for selecting the works were: the earliest prose appearance of AAVE and one of the most recent publications, the first novel by an African American using AAVE, a balance between black and white, as well as male and female authors, a mixture of well-known works and lesser known ones. Lastly, with regard to the scope of speech acts, the AAVE-speaking character needed to have at least one coherent paragraph or several complete sentences to be deemed useful for analysis. As a result, this study covers over two hundred years of AAVE in prose. Apart from the linguistic analysis, the respective author is introduced and a summary of the work is also provided. The biography was added to provide the individual background setting for the author as well as the work. The analysis proceeds in chronological order.

Finally, Chapter *7. Summary and Conclusion* brings together the findings from the previous chapters and interprets the results.

The second part, which is added as CD-ROM, contains three appendixes. *9.1 Features in Individual Works* contains the complete data recorded for each work. Especially for the vocabulary sections, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) and, more importantly, the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (DARE) were invaluable sources.

In order to be able to select works in which authors feature AAVE-speakers I started this research by compiling a list of these works. This survey ends with the year 2014 when I reached the decision which works to include in the present study. Each table contains the author, the title and the year of publication. While *9.2* lists the works chronologically, *9.3* follows an alphabetical order by author. While this survey tries to be comprehensive, it cannot claim completeness.

## 2. Review of Research

Since its establishment in the 1940s and with its first peak in the 1960s the study of AAVE has evolved creating more and more specialised fields of research. Before presenting an overview over the individual core themes within AAVE research, I would like to provide a general review on what is available on the history of African-Americans. A quick look at the list of contents of the bibliography *The Harvard Guide to African-American History* provides the following picture of publications on the subject. There are:

- *bibliographies* on historiography, general bibliographies, library catalogues, rare books, history, guides, autobiography and biography, slavery, the slave trade, and abolitionism, black-white relations, violence and racial disturbances, politics, military, demography, family, rural life, religion, nationalism, language and linguistics, folklore, literature and poetry, education, work and enterprise, medicine and health, women;
- *reference works* such as dictionary catalogues, biographical sources, encyclopaedias and dictionaries, indexes, chronologies and atlases, directories, yearbooks, and annuals, guides, statistical sources;
- *internet resources* on arts, biography, dance, film, history, regional history, literature, music, photographs and prints, politics, theatre, libraries, institutes, and research centres, library catalogues;
- *manuscript collections* with the subcategories African background, slave trade, slavery and slave life, abolitionism, civil war and reconstruction, labour, religion, education, family, literature, performing arts, science, architecture, business, civil rights;
- primary sources on *microform*;
- *newspapers* and selected *periodicals*;
- *government documents*;
- *oral history*;
- *art*;
- *music* including early repositories, historical surveys, folk music, sheet music and songbooks, 20th-century popular music, gospel music, blues, ragtime, jazz, classical music;
- *photography*;
- *film* and *television*.

Being aware of this vast spectrum of publications, which underlines the significance, relevance, and actuality of the topic, I will now focus on the linguistic strand of research. By working through journals, anthologies, and reference books two major areas of linguistic interest in AAVE could be established: sociolinguistic and evolutionary. The following will provide an overview over each category by dividing them into smaller entities.

**a) Sociolinguistic Research**

While working through the forest of journals, books, and papers, I came to the conclusion that sociolinguistics is probably the most extensively researched field in AAVE to date. This is not surprising as the integration of African Americans is still a major issue not only in US politics but the American society as a whole. To get to the bottom of long manifested social and political inequalities, obvious and hidden discrimination as well as racism sociolinguists investigate the perception of and attitudes towards AAVE-speakers. Approaches range from observational fieldwork, which can either be participating or non-participating, to the three different types of interviews, which can be individual or group interviews or questionnaires. The contexts of these studies vary between individual communities or groups of people in different regional settings, and observations in schools and classrooms as well as universities. In the latter, the focus is either on the teacher or the pupils depending on the issue at hand. One of the most prominent of such studies was conducted by William Labov (1972) *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*. Other such studies include Walt Wolfram's (1969) *A Sociolinguistic Description of Detroit Negro Speech* and Poplack / Tagliamonte's (1993) *African American English in the Diaspora: Evidence from Old-Line Nova Scotians*.

Education as manifestation and breeding place for social inequalities has emerged as the focal point for linguistic studies. The public and linguistic attention it receives is dependent upon the political climate– it ebbs and flows like the tidal movement. Or as Rickford and Rickford (2000, 183) put it:

> *every decade in the latter half of this century has contained at least one Ebonics flare-up.* One author even theorized that the mass media's relationship with Black English over the past two centuries has followed major twenty-five-to-forty-year cycles and lesser ten-to-twenty-year 'intercycles', during which lapses in interest have been broken at fairly regular intervals by periods of intense attention.

Many of the general works on AAVE refer to the 1979 *Ann Arbor* and the 1996 *Oakland School Board* cases or even spend whole chapters trying to amend the distorted perception of AAVE. Works like *Out of the Mouths of Slaves* (Baugh 1999), *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English* (Rickford / Rickford 2000), *Dialect Diversity in America* (Labov 2012), and *Articulate While Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the U.S.* (Alim / Smitherman 2012) are addressing a wider, even non-linguistic audience by explaining features and peculiarities with the hope of a better public understanding and acceptance of AAVE.

In addition, identity, identity formation, and style-shifting are also widely researched fields within this branch of AAVE-studies. Here, sociolinguistics seems to be crossing the boundaries to psycholinguistics.

Furthermore, language acquisition and gender differences in language use are another two fields within sociolinguistics. These two areas are sometimes studied in connection with each other.

Lastly, the use of AAVE in the media, in films, and music forms the latest strand of investigation.

**b) Evolution-Based Research**

In a nutshell, evolution-based research concerns itself with the origin and development of AAVE and according to the following findings, the dominant area of research is spoken AAVE. One of the most ardent linguistic debates centres on the creolist-Anglicist controversy which surfaced in the 1960s, which is essentially a question of status. This debate is often interwoven in other arguments and tends to surface within educational and political matters. While it is still not straightforwardly called a dialect (of English) or a language the *vernacular* in AAVE marks its special in-between-status – unless one interprets *vernacular* as fancy term for *dialect*, of course. Although tendencies to one or the other hypothesis can still be found in recently published works, new theories, such as the *Phylogenetic Networks Approach*, try to take a wider range of factors into account.

One approach to trace down the origins of AAVE is by investigating its African elements. Publications in this field have increased significantly since the mid 1970s – putting an end to Lorenzo D. Turner's (1949) *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* lone stance. An area in which this kind of investigation has been particularly enlightening is AAVE vocabulary as well as some phrasal expressions which look and sound English but have been translated from African languages, e.g. *cut-eye* and *suck-teeth*.

By far the most extensive research has been carried out in establishing the grammatical rules guiding AAVE phonology, morphology, and syntax. Phonological analyses investigate vowel systems and consonant cluster reductions amongst others. Morphological research concerns itself with the way tenses are formed in AAVE; it also looks at its verb classes as well as its use and omission of copula, to name but a few. Finally, research of AAVE syntax covers areas such as sentence structures, the formation of questions, (multiple) negation, and aspect markers such as invariant *be* and perfective *done*.

In recent years, scholars have relied on creating their own corpora through interviews and fieldwork from which they derive their conclusions – often based on sound recordings of AAVE-speakers. As a result, a more or less complete picture of regional variation within AAVE has been established. While such corpora usually contain enough data to cover a variety of features, many such works discuss and focus on one particular element of AAVE, for instance Traute Ewers' (1996) *The Origin of American Black English – Be-Forms in the HOODOO texts*.

The ex-slave narratives – which form the basis for Edgar W. Schneider's (1989) *American Earlier Black English* – seem to mark a transition phase in the linguistic studies on AAVE. Conducted by the Federal Writer's Project in the 1930s, they consist of extensive transcriptions of interviews with ex-slaves. Schneider argues convincingly that the corpus he gathered from this material had not only been carefully chosen and that his selection, therefore, provided authentic linguistic data for reconstructing AAVE in its earlier stages, but that it is the earliest trustworthy source available to linguists.[2]

Another field of research is concerned with the translation of AAVE. I have found few papers dealing with it, but this topic seems to surface every now and again, which is why it has been included here. On the one hand, there is the question of how to translate AAVE into Standard English, which often poses some difficulties of its own. On the other hand, translating AAVE into other languages may be even more challenging at times because certain features may not exist or require lengthy circumscriptions to be true to the original text. Particularly unmarked past forms and the aspect markers can implicate a truthful translation of AAVE.

Finally, there is the analysis of AAVE in literary texts, i.e. as literary language. This leads me to the significance and purpose of the present study. Asking as to what kinds of secondary works are available on the topic of AAVE as literary language the following picture emerged: There are hardly any exclusively linguistic studies available for literary works. Although these studies may be conclusive in themselves, they do not allow for a comprehensive analysis. This means, there has so far been no systematic linguistic analysis of a variety of literary works which will allow for casting a wider net on the development of linguistic features in their literary context.

Furthermore – and this is something which I first noticed while researching the use of AAVE in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Color Purple* – linguistic analyses are often hidden within literary ones. This means, firstly, that a specific linguistic feature serves the purpose of enforcing a literary argument. Secondly, only the most striking linguistic features are mentioned resulting in unusual, infrequent, or unknown features to be left aside. Thirdly and finally, because other AAVE-features are disregarded the linguistic analyses are incomplete. As a result, there are no lists of the linguistic features occurring in the texts, no AAVE-vocabulary section, and no statistics for specific word orders or the formation of questions, to point out some shortcomings.

Covering a timespan of more than 200 years, this is precisely the gap the present study tries to fill. By linguistically analysing works of different periods not only will a unique linguistic corpus be created, but it will also provide the

[2] Schneider explains in detail what material he chose and how he hopes to eliminate and reduce as many human errors and mistakes made by the transcribers. He also acknowledges that his corpus might still not be entirely fault free but is at least as close a mirror of early AAVE as there can be (cf. Schneider 1989, 42ff.).

appendixes and statistics missing in previous analyses. This should then enable the presentation of a more conclusive picture of the development of literary AAVE.

## 3. Historical Background

### 3.1 The History of the Atlantic Slave Trade

There are many publications on the history of slave trade – most notably the Atlantic slave trade – and the slaves in America. There are two reasons why a brief history of slavery is included here. Firstly, few linguistic publications on AAVE include such an overview – presumably, and rightly, assuming a general familiarity with the history of the United States. Although such a setting is not essential for the discussion of linguistic features, it, nevertheless, embeds these developments in a wider historical context. What this chapter is, therefore, trying to achieve is twofold. On the one hand, it shall function as a reminder of the political and social consequences for AAVE speakers then and now. On the other hand, it shall also link historical events with AAVE development and its changes.

#### 3.1.1 General Overview[3]

Historically, the use of slaves as cheap labour is not the ingenious idea of a white settler in what is now the United States of America. Although this is, nowadays, the picture which springs to mind when the topic of historical slave trade is mentioned, it is slightly distorted. Even though histories, justifiably, point out the British dominance in both slave trade and its abolition, this is only one side of the coin.

Slaves have been around for as long as communities existed and territorial battles have been fought. "Slavery was certainly common in Bronze Age Egypt and the Ancient Near East, probably from the third millennium BCE, and in the Eastern Mediterranean from the second millennium BCE" (Black 2011, 13). There is early evidence of slavery from all corners of the world, from the ancient Greeks and Romans, the Chinese dynasties to Korea and Japan, from the Americas to the Maori in New Zealand, from the Islamic world to Christian Europe (cf. Black 2011, 25ff.).

It is probably not necessary to elaborate on the tasks of slaves. Let it just be said they have always worked under what are now considered inhumane conditions fulfilling tasks which are to the benefit and satisfaction of their owner. An example from Brazil shall illustrate the point: "Slaves laboured in sugar and cotton fields and at higher altitudes in coffee; they worked as agricultural labourers on and off the plantations and as cowboys in the country's ranches; and they were used extensively in the artisan trades. Slaves were vital in the brute labour of gold mining. And, of course, they populated the homes of the prosperous and not so prosperous as domestic workers, catering for their

[3] James Walvin's *The Slave Trade* (2011) gives a good visual impression of the slave trade. It contains a lot of pictures and photographs – many of them in colour – depicting the people involved and the tasks they carried out, as well as documents and newspaper articles of the time. There are also some facsimile documents which are transcribed in the latter pages of the book.