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_4Wgy_n_co](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eC_4Wgy_n_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 20\textsuperscript{th} 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 → smoov

• ‘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 Ø tall
  – They are running → They Ø 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’)
  
  **Example:**
  - He didn’t do it → He ain’t do it
  - 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](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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