

Re-Viewing the Origins and History of African American Language

Sonja L. Lanehart

University of Texas at San Antonio

Introduction

Like most language varieties that are considered nonstandard, African American Language (AAL) developed and continues to persist, in part, because the communities who speak it often do not have much contact with other ways of speaking and/or because such communities define themselves partly by their speech (Obgu 1992). According to Geneva Smitherman in *Black Talk* (1994), “As far as historians, linguists, and other scholars go, during the first half of this [i.e., twentieth] century it was widely believed that enslavement had wiped out all traces of African languages and cultures, and that Black ‘differences’ resulted from imperfect and inadequate imitations of European American language and culture” (4). There are many in the African American community who share these beliefs despite their continued use of AAL. They either refuse to publicly recognize that there is a name for what they speak, besides “Bad English”, or they do not believe that AAL is something to be proud of and, therefore, preserved. Yet, AAL persists and thrives due in part to its covert prestige—just like it always has.

In examining the origins of AAL, linguists have taken a number of different approaches to explain how it has developed historically, including considerations of Anglicist, or Dialectologist, origins (Labov 1969; Poplack 2000; Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001; Schneider 1989; Wolfram and Thomas 2002); Creolist origins (Dillard 1972; Rickford 1998, 1999; Rickford and Rickford 2000; Smitherman 1977, 2000; Weldon 2003, 2007); Substratist

connections (Dalby 1972; DeBose and Faraclas 1993; Dunn 1976); (4) Ecological and Restructuralist factors (Mufwene 2000; Winford 1997, 1998); and Divergence/Convergence theorists (see Butters 1997). Proponents of monolithic origins hypotheses (e.g., Anglicist, Creolist, and substratist) have compared morphosyntactic and syntactic processes in creoles, early varieties of English, and (to a limited extent) African languages to those in AAL as a means of determining the origins, development, and classification of AAL. Restructuralist and ecological theorists have also considered factors such as second language learning, social dynamics, and contact effects in explaining the evolution of AAL.

However, there is another position that, in spite of evidence to the contrary, persists: the “Deficit” position. It has been pernicious and difficult to dismiss in the minds of some, including scholars, who continue to believe that African Americans are inferior to European Americans and, as such, their language must be as well.

Deficit Position

The Deficit position emerged in the nineteenth century and is based on the idea that Blacks are genetically inferior to Whites. This position posits that Africans in America were at most capable of imperfectly learning American English and that imperfection is what accounts for the differences between AAL and varieties of American English spoken by European Americans. Since the native languages of these slaves, from the Deficit position, were inferior and uncivilized, the slaves did the best they were capable of doing in learning English—as is seen in their “imperfect” language use.

This position endures till this day for the cultural and linguistic practices of Africans in America and reached a climax within the linguistic literature with the research of Carl Bereiter

and Siegfried Englemann in *Teaching Disadvantaged Children in the Preschool* (1966) with the complicity of these and other Educational Psychologists in the 1960s. The publication of William Labov's polemical "The Logic of Nonstandard English" (1969) was meant to quash the ethnocentric and racist perspectives espoused by those who used language differences as social, cultural, linguistic (i.e., human) deficit. What made this worse was the use of so-called empirical evidence to support deficit beliefs (e.g., standardized tests), which has continued for decades since (see Farrell 1983, 1984; Hernstein and Murray 1994; Orr 1997).

The persistence of this position in the 1990s occurred with the publication of *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (1994) by Harvard psychologist Richard J. Hernstein and American Enterprise Institute political scientist Charles Murray as well as Eleanor Wilson Orr's *Twice as Less: Black English and the Performance of Black Students in Mathematics and Science* (1997). Orr was the co-founder of the Hawthorne School in the District of Columbia. Her observations of the low-income scholarship students she admitted led her to believe that Blacks had cultural deficits that did not allow them to understand math and science in a way necessary for abstract thinking and learning. These views seem to have been re-packaged in recent years with code words such as "at risk" and "urban" to signify deficient. Though Labov (1969) and John Baugh's review of *Twice as Less* (1988) provide substantive rebuttal of deficit theory, both cultural and linguistic, the belief just will not die.

Before describing the positions about the history and development of AAL, most of them make their claims based on salient linguistic features of AAL (see Table 1 and Table 2). There are many characteristics of AAL just as there are for any language. However, the research literature tends to focus on a subset of those characteristics as salient linguistic features (i.e., those that define AAL). Below is a compilation of salient phonological (pronunciation),

morphological (word structure and formation), and syntactic (sentence structure) AAL features as compiled from the research literature and used to support the various positions about AAL.

Table 1: Phonological Features (Features 1-6 from Bailey and Thomas 1998:89 as cited in Mufwene et al. 1998)

1.	Reduction of Final Nasal to Vowel Nasality	man [mæ̃]
2.	Final Consonant Deletion (especially affects nasals)	save [se:]; sane [se:]
3.	Final Stop Devoicing (without shortening of preceding segment)	bad [bætʔ]
4.	Coarticulated Glottal Stop with Devoiced Final Stop	bad [bætʔ]
5.	Loss of /j/ after Consonants	computer [kɒmpudɔ̃]; Houston [hustɒn]
6.	Substitution of /k/ for /t/ in /str/ Clusters	street [skrit]; stream [skrim]
7.	[v > b] in Word-medial Position:	haven [hebɒn]
8.	Deletion of /b/, /d/, /g/ as First Consonant in Tense-Aspect marker or Auxiliary Verb	<i>Ah 'on know</i> = “I don’t know”; <i>Ah ma do it</i> = “I’m gon do it”; He ain’t do it = “He didn’t do it”
9.	Reduplicated Suffix –s:	I went and took my <u>tests</u> . [tɛsɪz]
10.	Labialization of Interdental Fricatives	bath à [bæf]; baths à [bævz]

Table 2: Morphological and Syntactic Features (Examples from Lanehart 2002 unless noted otherwise)

<i>Preverbal Markers of Tense, Mood, and Aspect</i>		
	Linguistic Feature	Example of Feature
1.	Zero Copula	He up in there talking that now.
2.	<i>Gon</i>	I'm <u>gon</u> fix some grits.
3.	Habitual Invariant <i>be</i>	He <i>be</i> in the house all summer. (Cukor-Avila 2001:105)
4.	Invariant <i>be</i> ₂ (<i>Be</i> + verb + <i>ing</i>)	<i>Do they be playing all day?</i>
5.	Invariant Future <i>be</i>	He <i>be</i> here tomorrow. (Rickford 1999:6)
6.	Aspectual <i>steady</i>	They <i>steady be</i> laughing.
7.	Completive, or Unstressed, <i>been</i>	It <i>been</i> raining ever since y'all came here.
8.	Stressed <i>been</i>	I <u>BEEN</u> drinking coffee.
9.	Completive, or Perfective, <i>done</i>	I knew you was foolin cause I <i>done</i> waited on you before.
10.	Future Perfective, or Sequential, <i>be done</i>	He <i>be done</i> left by the time we get there.
11.	Future <i>finna</i> or <i>fitna</i>	He <i>finna</i> go. (Rickford 1999:6)
12.	Indignant <i>come</i>	He <i>come</i> walkin in here like he owned the damn place. (Spears 1982:852)
13.	Counterfactual <i>call</i>	They <i>call</i> themselves dancing. (Mufwene et

		al. 1998:16)
14.	<i>Had</i> + Simple Past	Today I <i>had went</i> to work. (Cukor-Avila 2001:105)
15.	Multiple Modals	They <i>might should oughta</i> do it. (Mufwene et al. 1998:33)
16.	Quasi Modals <i>liketa</i> and <i>poseta</i>	I <i>liketa</i> drowned. (Rickford 1999:7); You don't <i>poseta</i> do it that way. (Rickford 1999:7)
17.	Zero Third Person Singular Suffix <i>-s</i>	At least he <i>know</i> you have a phone.
18.	Generalization of <i>is</i> and <i>was</i>	They <i>is</i> some crazy folk. (Rickford 1999:7)
19.	Use of Past Tense Form as Past Participle	She has <i>ran</i>
20.	Use of Past Participle Form as Past Tense Form	She <i>seen</i> him yesterday.
21.	Use of Verb Stem as Past Tense Form	He <i>come</i> down here yesterday.
22.	Zero Past Tense or Past Participle Suffix <i>-ed</i>	I probably woulda <i>end</i> up keeping it.
23.	Reduplicated Past Tense or Past Participle Suffix <i>-ed</i>	I <i>likeded</i> that show.
24.	Aspectual Verb <i>-s</i> Suffix	I don't let it tempt me; I <i>tempts</i> it.
<i>Nouns and Pronouns</i>		
	Linguistic Feature	Example of Feature
25.	Zero Possessive Suffix <i>-s</i>	I ain't never seen nobody don't know they

		wife phone number.
26.	Zero Plural Suffix –s	That man done changed car places since then two or three <i>time</i> .
27.	Associative Plural (<i>nem</i> or <i>and (th)em</i>)	Larry <i>nem</i> lef already when I got here.
28.	Pronominal Apposition	That sausage, <i>it's</i> nice and hot.
29.	<i>They</i> and <i>Y'all</i> Possessive	Who want to put on <i>they</i> good clothes looking like that?
30.	Use of Object Pronouns after a Verb as Personal Datives	Ahma git <i>me</i> a gig. (Rickford 1999:8)
31.	Bare Subject Relative Clause	That's the man \emptyset come here. (Rickford 1999:8)
32.	Less Differentiated Personal Pronouns (pronouns can serve as subject and object form)	<i>They</i> should do it <i>themselves</i> .
<i>Negation</i>		
	Linguistic Feature	Example of Feature
33.	Use of <i>ain't</i> as a General Preverbal Negator (includes <i>ain't</i> for <i>didn't</i>)	He ain' here. (Rickford 1999:8); He ain' do it. (Rickford 1999:8)
34.	Negative Concord (Multiple Negation)	<i>I don't let myself get in no</i> more habit than I want to get in.
35.	Negative Inversion of Auxiliary and Indefinite Pronoun Subject	<i>Can't nobody</i> say nothin. (Rickford 1999:8)

36.	<i>But</i> Negative (Use of <i>ain't but</i> and <i>don't but for only</i>)	He ain't but fourteen years old. (Rickford 1999:8)
<i>Questions</i>		
	Linguistic Feature	Example of Feature
37.	Formation of Direct Questions without Inversion	Why I <i>can't</i> play? (Rickford 1999:8)
38.	Auxiliary Verb Inversion in Embedded Questions (without <i>if</i> or <i>whether</i>)	I asked him <i>could he</i> go with me. (Rickford 1999:8)
<i>Existential, Locative, Complementizer, Quotative, and Other Constructions</i>		
	Linguistic Feature	Example of Feature
39.	Existential <i>it</i> instead of <i>there</i>	<u>It's</u> a lot of it in there.
40.	Existential <i>they got</i> (as a Plural Equivalent of Singular <i>it is</i> , instead of <i>there are</i>)	<i>They got</i> some angry women here. (Nina Simone song, Rickford 1999:9)
41.	<i>Here go...</i> or <i>There go...</i>	<i>There go</i> Mister beatin Celie again.
42.	<i>Tell say</i> Constructions	They told me <i>say</i> they couldn't go. (Rickford 1999:9)
43.	Inceptive <i>get/got to</i>	I got to thinking about that. (Cukor-Avila 2001:105)

The dominant perspectives about the history and development of AAL are held by two distinctive groups: (1) Anglicists, mostly European American scholars who spend much of their time trying to support their claim that AAL is a dialect of British English and that Africans in America who created AAL forgot their native culture and language upon arrival in America; and (2) Creolists, mostly Black scholars who spend much of their time arguing for and trying to support their belief that AAL derived from contact between Blacks and Whites and the cultures and languages they brought to their contact situation. In other words, the latter group believes Africans in America maintained aspects of their languages and cultures in adapting to their oppressive environment while the former believes Africans in America either did not value their cultures enough to preserve at least some aspects of them or they did not have the ability to do so.¹

The Creolist position regarding the origins and development of AAL, which emerged in the 1960s in response to the Anglicist position, purports that AAL developed from a prior US creole developed by slaves that was widespread across the colonies and slave-holding areas. The Southeastern US is considered the cradle of AAL given the large number of plantations and the Southeast's strong support of slavery and the slave trade through the Middle Passage. The economic interest in slavery increased with the dependence on cotton and other crops. Creolists tend to use morphosyntactic features (see Table 2), phonological features (see Table 1), and lexical features (see Turner 1949; Mufwene 1993; Smitherman 1994) to support their perspective on the history and development of AAL.

The most contentious feature used to support the Creolist position is zero copula. Because many African languages, Gullah, and other Caribbean creoles do not have a copula, the absence

¹ See Bailey (2001); Baugh (1983); Green (2002); Lanehart (2001, 2007) for an overview of the various positions regarding the origins and development of African American Language.

of a copula in many circumstances in AAL has been used as a primary connection to creoles. Until recently, there had been no instances of zero copular in British English varieties cited in the literature. However, Poplack (2000) and Poplack and Tagliamonte (2001) make the claim that zero copula is also present in a variety of British English. While that claim is contested, I should point out that both Creolists and Anglicists rely heavily on features to support their positions without any extensive recordings for the language of Africans in America at their inception in the Americas. While Caribbean creoles are still recognizable creoles in present-day use, that is not the case for AAL—with the exception of Gullah. While there is no dispute that Gullah is a creole, its existence as being widespread in the US is disputed. Currently, Gullah is found in the islands off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina, though its use is receding due to economic and ecologic conditions. While Gullah's persistence in the South Carolina islands seems to be better than in the Georgia islands due to infrastructural and economic supports in South Carolina that are not as prevalent in Georgia. In Georgia, many of the Gullah people have to leave in order to survive—which contributes to the loss of language and culture.

The existence of Gullah and the perspective of its speakers (i.e., Gullah speakers say they speak English, not a creole) is a complicating factor, but how complicating depends on how you define AAL. I choose to define AAL in agreement with Mufwene (2001:21): “African American English (AAE) is English as spoken by or among African Americans” because “A language variety is typically associated with a community of speakers and, in many communities, a language means no more than the particular way its members speak.” Given this definition, AAL is the umbrella term for all ways of language use of African Americans—including Gullah. In

that case, the discussion often becomes how to define African American Vernacular Language (AAVL) as a way to distinguish varieties of AAL.²

The Anglicist position purports that Africans in America learned regional varieties of British English dialects from British overseers with little to no influence from their own native languages and culture. This position emerged in the mid twentieth century and is in opposition to the Creolist position. Anglicists use ex-slave recordings and texts (see Bailey, Maynor, and Cukor-Avila 1991) as well as comparisons to other historical texts, British varieties, and slave resettlement in the Americas to support their position. More current is the belief that non-standard varieties of British English are the precursors of AAL as opposed to standard ones since the whites that slaves would have had contact with would have spoken non-standard varieties of British English instead of standard varieties (i.e., Neo-Anglicist). Anglicists, like Creolists, believe they have accounted for all salient linguistic features in some past or current variety of British English, including zero copula. According to Mufwene (2001), “To resolve the creolist-dialectologist debate, what is needed is convincing information regarding different kinds of plantations, their settlement history, and the patters of Anglo-African interaction on them. Although history argues against the creole-origin hypothesis, the literature against it has done a poor job in attempting to refute it” (315). He goes on to say that Poplack (2000) had done a better job of this, there are still contradictions in evidence even with her collection of essays: Samaná English, a variety used in the Spanish-speaking Dominican Republic by African Americans who sailed from Philadelphia in the 1820s (Mufwene 2001). While Poplack finds

² You should note my use of the term African American (Vernacular) Language as opposed to African American (Vernacular) English. I now use the former instead of the latter because the latter is fraught with connotations and assumptions that preclude certain discussions. While AA(V)L can instigate contentious discussions as well, at least they have the potential to be new ones. Also, ‘language’ is less restrictive or limiting than ‘English’ in this situation, it allows me to be non-committal about the origins and development of AAL, which I am, and lessen the focus on the origins of AAL and increase the focus on the social and cultural lives of those who use AAL.

Samaná to be closer to AAL than to Caribbean English creoles, Hannah (1997) and others find that not to be the case. So the fierce debate continues.

Substratist, Restructuralist, Ecological, and Divergence Theorists

Substratists such as Dalby (1972), Dunn (1976), and DeBose and Faraclas (1993) purport that distinctive patterns of AAL are those that also occur in Niger-Congo languages such as Kikongo, Mande and Kwa. In effect, the view is that AAE is structurally related to West African languages and bear only superficial similarities to general English (Green 2002:8-9). It is so named because it is argued that the West African or substrate languages influenced the sentence and sound structures of AAE (Green 2002:9). As Goodman 1993:65) notes, one characteristic of a substratum “is the subordinate social or cultural status of its speakers vis-à-vis those of the reference language [i.e., English]” (see Green 2002).

Restructuralists and Ecological theorists such as Wolfram and Thomas (2002), Bailey (2001), Cukor-Avila (2001), and Mufwene (2000) support a perspective within the Anglicist position that acknowledges the difficulty of knowing the origins of AAL but propose that we can say something useful about Earlier African American Language (not nascent AAL) given settlement and migration patterns as well as socio-ecological issues. Mufwene (2000:234) purports:

1. The socioeconomic history of the United States does not support the hypothesis that AAVE developed from an erstwhile creole, either American or Caribbean.

2. However, this position does not preclude influence ... from Caribbean English varieties imported with slaves in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on the restructuring of colonial English that produced AAVE.
3. Nor does the recognition of possible Caribbean influence entail that AAVE could not have developed into what it is now without it.
4. Closer examination of sources of the direct origins of slaves during the eighteenth century suggests that influence from African languages was perhaps more determinative than that from the Caribbean.
5. By no means should anyone overlook or downplay the nature of colonial English as spoken by both the English and the non-English in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, nor its central role as the target language during the development of AAVE, Gullah, and their Caribbean kin.

Restructuralists and Ecological theorists are in some ways closer to Neo-Creolist positions. As noted by Mufwene (2000:254), Creolists' "recognition of some merits in assuming that AAVE had an independent development; i.e., it did not originate as a creole nor does it simply represent 'the transfer and acquisition by Africans and African Americans of English dialects spoken by British and other white immigrants to American in earlier times.'" In other words, AAL likely did not originate from or as a creole, but that absence does not then preclude the influence of native African languages in the subsequent emerging language of Africans in America.

Wolfram and Thomas (2002) and Bailey (1998) focus more on settlement patterns of European Americans in relation to settlements of Africans in American and their subsequent resettlements through migration. While no one can go back to the beginning, using these patterns

provides a picture of interaction and languages in contact. Over the history of America, Europeans have settled differing areas and brought their different varieties of English and other languages with them. “Variation 101” says that separation from native language speakers and their homeland results in language variation (i.e., variation via physical separation). While the expatriate British English speakers were undergoing linguistic changes, so were the languages of the involuntary immigrants (i.e., slaves) but with a larger pool of varieties that were in contact. Also, the conditions of contact changed over time as well as the interaction of language varieties. As such, these theorists believe that the language of Africans in American was different when compared to the eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries because the social and political and economic realities of those time differed in ways that greatly influenced language. So, for example, moving from Colonial indentured servants to colonial slaves to Southern/Southeastern plantation slaves to Southern sharecroppers to Northern industrialist workers to national migrants and then to Civil Rights Activists (all the while with ideas of identity and culture waxing and waning) impacted the language of these involuntary immigrants so that the comparison is more about these factors in relation to one another than about the origin of AAL.

The Divergence Theorists emerged in the 1980s with the work of William Labov and others. According to Labov and Harris (1986), to pursue this argument, divergence from white varieties has more recently shaped AAL. That is, AAL has diverged from varieties of American English due to racism, segregation, and inequality. As a result, African Americans are actually forming new speech communities with innovative forms, especially with a growth in urbanization (Bailey 2001). According to Labov (as cited in Butters 1987), “the more contact blacks have with whites, the more they move away from the vernacular side, and the more

contact whites have with blacks, the more we observe borrowings of black forms.” However, political, economic, and social issues (i.e., ecological issues) greatly contribute to AAL becoming more divergent instead of convergent with varieties of American English despite so-called desegregation in the 1960s to present. So, regardless of the origin of AAL, the current state of it reflects the historical ills of inequity in the US towards African Americans and their response to maintain their own distinct culture and language. Butters (1987) disputes the Divergence theory because of the few linguistic features studied, but, then again, most of this research and these theories are supported by features as opposed to the system as recommended by Lisa Green (2002).

Conclusion

My position is that we simply do not have the artifacts and hard evidence (recordings of nascent AAL) to make a definitive assessment about the origin and history of AAL. I would add that we should not rely on “salient” linguist features either since language is more than the sum of its parts or the handy grammar that we all like to turn to. If language could be learned from reading a grammar book, we could all be multilingual. Yet we consistently rely on features to make arguments about the history and origins of AAL in a way we do not for most other linguistic varieties.

As Rickford and Rickford (2000) point out, the power of culture and identity leads one to believe that no one would just forget everything about where they came from in order to learn the language of their oppressors at all cost. The late Linguistic Anthropologist John Ogbu’s (1978) work on involuntary minorities suggests that language and identity are powerful factors in

the persistence of motherland language and culture for enslaved people like Africans in America through the Middle Passage.

As I have stated in Lanehart (2007), when I tell people outside of linguistics about AAL, they seem dumbfounded that anyone would believe that AAL is not historically rooted to Africa since the people who speak it are, hence the African Diaspora. Yet, I have tried to convince myself that it matters whether AAL is historically a dialect of British English or an English and African creole by becoming involved in research groups and projects that engage in such questions. Scholars cannot prove that AAL is a creole or a dialect and I fundamentally do not feel the evidence exists that can support either side beyond reasonable doubt. My point is that, today, it does not matter what the outcome of this storied debate is. I know that some believe that given current language policy it might be helpful to prove that AAL is an English and African creole so that it could be classified as a foreign language and receive bilingual education funding, but I do not buy that argument because then I remember that the Gullah speakers have not benefited much from that designation. In fact, during the Oakland Ebonics controversy of 1996-1997, the Gullah people got no publicity at all even though there is no controversy among linguists about the origin, status, or nature of their language—it is an English and African creole.

If the “great debate” were decided without question today, how would we be better off? Would we be closer to helping AAL-speaking children to learn to read and write? Would we be closer to helping AAL-speaking children learn critical thinking and literacy skills? Would we be closer to helping AAL-speaking children have better schools with better facilities and better funding and better opportunities? I do not think so. That is a problem I cannot get past.

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