

PREFACES

CORAAL IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

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More than 20 years ago, I contacted several scholars in the field of language uses in African American communities to discuss the importance of and need for an open-access database of African American Language (AAL) for scholarly research. The scholars I approached did or were doing longitudinal research, city-wide research, regional research, and seminal work in the field that we all cite to this day. Unfortunately, this hoped-for corpus never materialized, but it has stayed with me all of these years.

Despite being told that AAL was the most studied language variety in the United States, I knew more needed to be done than an exoticization of language uses in African American communities. More needed to be done to dispel the belief that AAL speakers are homogeneous regardless of where they come from, where they live, and their varied identities and sociocultural histories beyond being African American. More needed to be done to dispel the belief that AAL was substandard, unsystematic, and just plain lazy speech by “those people” who refused to learn “good English” because they were “incapable and uneducated.” More needed to be done to show the inclusive spectrum of AAL voices along the lines of diverse and intersecting gender, sexuality, religion, regional affiliation, zip code, educational experiences, socioeconomic status, ethnic identity, and more—all the ways we know languages vary because people’s contexts vary and because isolation, whether physical or sociopsychological, naturally leads to variation. We also know language contact contributes to language variation and change, so African Americans with these diverse and intersecting identities articulate them, in part, based on space and place as well as on which factors are more salient in the moment. I knew more than 20 years ago that linguistics needed at least one open-access corpus of AAL to advance our understanding of AAL and AAL speakers. Finally, we have the Corpus of Regional African American Language, or CORAAL, housed at the University of Oregon (Kendall and Farrington 2018b).

I have been a lifelong learner of language variation because, as an African American, I come from a community whose language is not valued. It is why as a teen I asked my family at a gathering, “Why do Black people use *be* so much?” I shunned my own native language variety and chose to study

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speech pathology at university so I could “fix” African Americans for speaking AAL (Lanehart 2002). While I have been healed of my ignorance, I know these negative beliefs about AAL persist because I still experience them in my family, other African American communities, and society (just look at the news or social media). I see them in my classes when African American students, usually while using AAL, reject that there is such a thing as AAL or that they themselves speak it. This is why I know the CORAAL website and its content (Kendall and Farrington 2018a, 2018b) are necessary and overdue.

CORAAL contains linguistic data collected mostly from Washington, D.C., which is divided into the DCA component (Kendall, Fasold, et al. 2018), with interview data collected in 1968–69 by Roger Shuy, Ralph Fasold, and Walt Wolfram, among others, for the Center of Applied Linguistics’s Urban Language Study, and the DCB component (Kendall, Quartey, et al. 2018), with interview data collected in 2015–17 by Minnie Quartey and Carlos Huff at Georgetown University. However, CORAAL is still developing and continues to grow in scope and size. It is not the final nor only database of AAL needed, but it does provide a roadmap for future directions.

I hope CORAAL spawns an urgency and desire to make available through open-access AAL data from not only large data collections, but also seminal works of Guy Bailey and Patricia Cukor-Avila, John Baugh, Lisa Green, William Labov, John Rickford, Geneva Smitherman, Walt Wolfram, and Tracey Weldon as well as the work of their many students and their students’ students. Open-science based approaches and access such as CORAAL should become the norm in linguistics as well as collaborative large data-collecting projects to provide more robust, inclusive corpora. Such corpora could provide stratified and intersectional data across locales/regions, ages/generations, sexualities, gender identities, socioeconomic status, educational experiences, religious/spiritual identities, political ideologies, racial/ethnic identities, and so on—in other words, the same way linguistic research is collected, studied, and analyzed for language varieties and their varying manifestations around the world. We could even have corpora that better articulate AAL in the African Diaspora, such as Hip Hop Nation Language (Alim, Ibrahim, and Pennycook 2008), Afro-Latinidad, and the multitude of linguistic and paralinguistic appropriations of AAL in the United States and elsewhere by non-African Americans.

CORAAL provides a blueprint for creating these diverse and inclusive AAL corpora that would allow us to address fundamental questions about AAL, such as, What is AAL? How do we define AAL? Who speaks AAL? Lanehart (2015) tried to address these questions, but our picture is incomplete until we have the data to provide a more holistic picture of AAL—not only

by the varied subjectivities of researchers and those researched, but the many communities who claim AAL in all its glory. Thanks, CORAAL and all of your contributors, for finally getting this party started.

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