

Varieties of English around the World IV

**Sociolinguistic Issues on
African American Vernacular English (AAVE)**

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ABSTRACT

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is one of the most studied varieties of English due to the heated debates that have surrounded this variety over the years. Since the 1960s, research into AAVE has increased significantly. Although there is now a lot of information about AAVE, no consensus has been reached on some of the controversies the variety has sparked. This paper attempts to give an overview of AAVE as a variety of English spoken in the United States, addressing the main research topics that have been studied by different scholars. For this purpose, it is divided into three main sections. The first part deals with the origin and development of AAVE. In this section, the origin of the variety is described along with the hypotheses proposed about its creation and development, which are one of the main causes of debate concerning the variety. Secondly, the linguistic characteristics of AAVE are discussed as a way of showing the legitimacy of the variety. Given space constraints, this section is restricted to morpho-syntax and phonology. Finally, the section about attitudes towards AAVE deals with the controversy surrounding the legitimacy of the variety, as well as educational issues regarding the methods of improving the performance of African American students. AAVE became known to the world as a result of the Oakland Resolution Controversy, which exposed the American people's beliefs about linguistic diversity and the lack of knowledge they had on the subject. As a consequence, AAVE became better known and began to be more investigated by scholars.

Key words: varieties of English, AAVE, colonialism, migration, linguistic features, legitimacy, attitudes, education.

INTRODUCTION

“A language is not just words. It’s a culture, a tradition, a unification of a community, a whole history that creates what a community is. It’s all embodied in a language.”

Noam Chomsky

No dialect has received more attention than African American Vernacular English (AAVE) when it comes to the study of ethnic varieties of English and in turn, it has finally gained recognition through the English-speaking world. Studies on AAVE outnumber significantly those on ethnic and regional varieties of American English, with more than five times the number of publications devoted to AAVE than to any other American variety (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016). According to Lanehart (2015), the studies surrounding this variety began around the 1920s when there was still little interest in research on the African American speech community in the United States. It was not until the 1960s when research really began to gather importance through the investigations of linguists such as William Labov or Walt Wolfram, who stand out among the researchers cited throughout the paper.

In the last six decades, the variety spoken by African Americans has been designated by a series of names which have been “often related to underlying issues of racial politics and ethnic ideologies in American society” (Wolfram, 2006, p. 328). Over the last decades, it has been assigned the following labels: “Negro Dialect, Substandard Negro English, Nonstandard Negro English, Black English, Vernacular Black English/Black English Vernacular, Afro-American English, Ebonics, African American Vernacular English, African American Language, and Spoken Soul” (Wolfram & Thomas, 2002, p. xiv). All these labels show how complex it is for scholars to define concepts related to language and ethnicity. In fact, it is important to be wary when defining a linguistic variety, as it is not a matter of terminological fashion and it has social consequences regarding the characterisation and perception of the variety and its speakers (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016). In the present paper, I have decided to use the term African American Vernacular English (AAVE) because it is currently used by many linguists as it underlines the ethnolinguistic status of the variety spoken by the African American community.

The structure of this paper follows three key areas of study explored by scholars, each of which distinguishes AAVE as a unique, robust and stable socio-ethnic variety of English that has remained as a legitimate variety. The first section examines the origin and development of AAVE from the 17th century to the 20th century. In the second section, which deals with the linguistic characteristics of this variety, I have decided to explore only the field of morpho-syntax and phonology, leaving aside the lexicon due to the limited length of this paper. The last broad section discusses the attitudes that both African American and American white speakers have towards AAVE and the controversy that arose over the education of Afro-American students, in which there is a lot of research because of the debate surrounding the teaching of this variety.

THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF AAVE

In order to make a brief reconstruction of the history of AAVE, it is necessary to explore the context in which this variety emerged and developed. In the following, I will give an overview of major socio-historical events that occurred in North America, including the establishment of the colonies in North America by colonial Britain, the arrival of the first African Americans to the New World, patterns of immigration, migration within United States and other factors, all of which influenced the evolution of AAVE (Wolfram & Thomas, 2002).

For the sake of making this section more comprehensible, four-time phases from the seventeenth to the twentieth century will be taken into consideration, in which the events relevant to the evolution of this variety took place.

In the seventeenth century, the British Empire began to establish colonies in North America. As Winford (2015) states, the first settlements were located in the Chesapeake Bay area situated in the eastern United States, with the first Jamestown colony established in Virginia in 1607. This colony was succeeded by the colonies of the coastal areas of South Carolina, which were founded in 1670. The first Africans to arrive in the Virginia colony in 1619 were employed as servants of the wealthier settlers. At that time the population “was not yet racially segregated, though, to be sure, the Africans were not treated as equal” (Mufwene, 2015, p. 58). As a matter of fact, these differences grew from 1660 onwards, when colonies such as Maryland and the Carolinas enacted laws prohibiting union, sex and contact with black people (Winford, 2015). Anyway, due to

the regular interactions that took place in this colonial setting, Africans were continually exposed to the vernacular of the British settlers. Africans who worked as servants did not become slaves until 1675, when slavery arose due to the need for labour on plantations. As a consequence, the colonists began to import more Africans to work on the plantations and the African population began to grow (Mufwene, 2015).

Wolfram & Schilling (2016) point out that as a result of the aforementioned labour requirement, the 18th century was the peak of slave trade. Mainly in Virginia there was a large importation of slaves and Africa became a major source of slaves in the 1720s. South Carolina institutionalised racial segregation, as in 1720 the black slave population doubled that of whites. The separation between blacks and whites increased due to the strong opposition of the black population, which resulted in the Stono Rebellion¹ of 1739. This rebellion was followed by the Slave Code in 1740 “introducing new restrictions on slaves and the importation of slaves from Africa” (Winford, 2015, p. 97). On the other hand, in 1730 a general increase in white population began as a result of continuous immigration. The immigrants were mainly Scots-Irish and Germans who moved from Pennsylvania to Virginia and the Carolinas (Winford, 2015). As a consequence, this situation gave rise to contact between Scots-Irish dialects and other forms of English that had already emerged among whites and blacks in the eastern United States. Thus, it can be assumed that all these migrations and varieties of English that converged in the eastern area influenced the African American variety which was spoken in the Chesapeake colonies (Winford, 2015).

The 19th century can be considered the period in which the vernacular language of African Americans began to stabilise. Although slavery was officially abolished, the status of African Americans continued to be precarious mainly in the south, where they were concentrated (see Figure 1). In the following decades, racist organisations and the Jim Crow laws² of 1877 emerged (History.com Editors, 2021a). As a consequence of the already mentioned segregation and the high number of African American speakers that were located in the colonies of North America since the 18th century, vernacular

¹ A slave uprising that took place in South Carolina, which was one of the largest slave revolts in colonial America (Hinks et al., 2007).

² In the American southwest, these laws were associated with radical segregation and discrimination. They prohibited slaves who had just been emancipated from slavery from sharing public facilities with whites and competing with them for the same jobs (Mufwene, 2014).

languages such as AAVE, which were in a developmental process, were allowed to stabilise due to the lack of linguistic contact. Over the next century, a series of migrations spread AAVE throughout the United States (Mufwene, 2000).

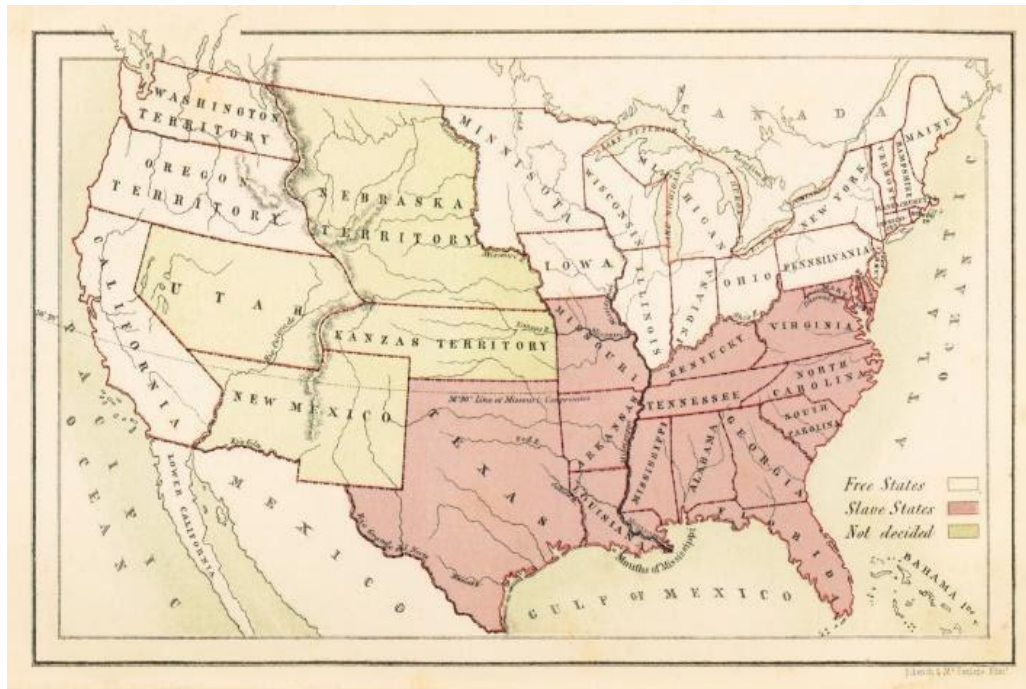


Figure 1. A map of the United States depicting the location of the African American population circa 19th century in the ‘free states’, ‘slave states’ and ‘not decided’ states (History.com Editors, 2021a).

In the 20th century, owing to the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the areas of the North, Midwest and West were left with a shortage of workers, which attracted African Americans willing to improve their living conditions. This situation encouraged the relocation of African Americans that had already begun in 1910, giving way to the First Great Migration. Between 1910 and 1920 the African American population grew by very high percentages in major northern cities such as New York (66%), Chicago (148%) and Detroit (611%) (History.com Editors, 2021b). As Mufwene (2014) states, in 1919 race riots began in the United States. These disturbances resulted in the formation of ghettos in which African Americans created their own neighbourhoods within the big cities in order to keep themselves segregated from the white population. In this way they fostered a new Afro-American urban culture in which they largely retained the same variety they used in the American Southeast. The most notable example was Harlem in New York, a formerly white neighbourhood that hosted around 200,000 African Americans in the

1920s. However, in the 1930s, when America suffered the Great Depression, there was a slowdown in African American migration, but it recovered with the outbreak of World War II in 1940. The second wave was called The Second Great Migration, which was considered to be the sequel of the first one (History.com Editors, 2021b). It ended in 1970 and its impact was significant (see Figure 2). In 1910 almost 90% of African Americans were located in the south, but by 1970 about 47% of African Americans lived in other areas. More than a third of all African Americans lived in these seven cities - New York, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Washington DC, Los Angeles and Baltimore (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016).

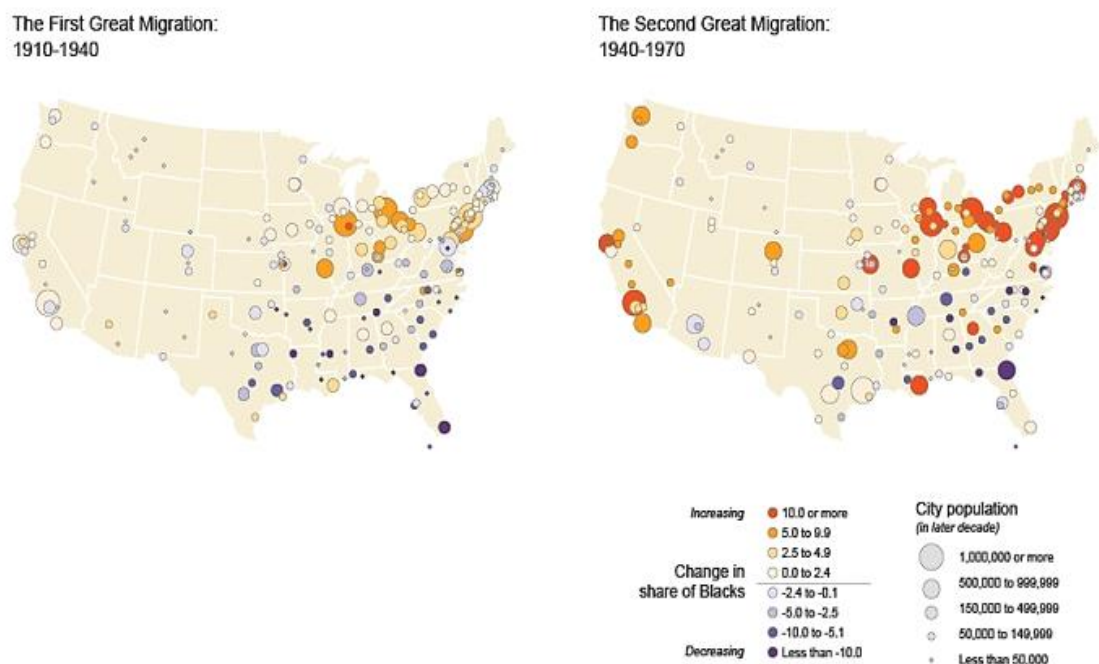


Figure 2. The movement of the black population in the First and Second Great Migrations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

All in all, colonialism, the enactment of laws, migratory movements, segregation of the Afro-American community, among other events, contributed to the emergence, development and preservation of AAVE. Although it is clear that this variety emerged in the rural south, the linguistic background of AAVE is still a matter of debate (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016).

1. The debate over the linguistic history of AAVE

The origin of AAVE in the United States is a matter of speculation since many of the records on the variety are incomplete. The lack of written historical sources leads to

the fact that the linguistic history of AAVE remains a subject of debate among scholars as there are different standpoints on the roots of the variety (Wolfram & Thomas, 2002). The main theories that scholars have put forward about the emergence of AAVE are the Anglicist hypothesis, the Creolist hypothesis, the Neo-Anglicist hypothesis and the Substrate hypothesis.

1.1. Anglicist Hypothesis

Proposed in the mid-twentieth century by Hand Kurath and Raven McDavid, this theory had great relevance between the 1960s and 1970s as the main theory of the origin of AAVE. The hypothesis asserts that “the roots of AAE can be traced to the same sources as earlier European American dialects, the dialects of English spoken in the British Isles” (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016, p. 226).

Wolfram (2006) claims that the slaves brought by English settlers from Africa carried with them their own African languages and over the course of two generations, these languages were replaced by other regional varieties. In this way, few traces of these slaves’ ancestral languages remained because they learned both social and regional varieties as a result of contact with the white speakers around them (Wolfram & Thomas, 2002).

Therefore, as the differences between AAVE and other European American varieties cannot be explained primarily in relation to social and regional factors, they are attributed to earlier British features (Wolfram, 2006). In other words, as Wolfram & Schilling (2016) observe, the differences that could not be explained between these varieties were attributed to AAVE retaining distinctive features of British English that other varieties of American English gradually lost.

1.2. Creolist Hypothesis

Up to the mid-1960s and 1970s, the Anglicist hypothesis was the predominant theory until the arrival of the Creolist hypothesis (Wolfram, 2006). The scholars holding this theory suggest that AAVE may have developed from a creole language resulting from early contact between Africans and Europeans, which was widespread in the south of the United States.

Creolists believe that what may have given rise to AAVE can be found in Gullah, which is “the creole still spoken by some African Americans in the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia” (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016, p. 227). This theory suggests that Gullah was not used in any case by whites, but it was widely spread among the plantations in the south by African slaves.

According to Wolfram (2006), not all the researchers accepted such a strong interpretation although many accepted part of it during the 1970s and 1980s. That is, in the process of decreolisation³, the contact that Gullah speakers had with the speakers of local varieties made it gradually change and become more similar to other varieties of English. However, decreolisation was not a process that happened gradually and was not complete, so remnants of Gullah can still be found in modern AAVE.

1.3. Neo-Anglicist Hypothesis

The Creole hypothesis was questioned since new data emerged in the form of ex-slave records. The data included ex-slave accounts and letters from the mid-nineteenth century written by semi-literate ex-slaves (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016). The evidence indicated that AAVE was more similar to the European American varieties than the Creole hypothesis suggested. Moreover, further studies showed that both the slave situation and the demographics of the south indicated that “the distribution of slaves in the Southeastern Plantation region of the US was not particularly advantageous to the perpetuation of a widespread Plantation Creole, as had been postulated by earlier creolists” (Wolfram, 2006, p. 334).

Therefore, in the 1990s, the Neo-Anglicist hypothesis proposed by Montgomery and Fuller arose from this assumption (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016). The Neo-Anglicist hypothesis maintains, as does the Anglicist hypothesis, “that earlier, postcolonial African American speech was directly linked to the early British dialects brought to North America” (Wolfram & Thomas, 2002, p. 14). However, the difference with the Anglicist hypothesis is that the Neo-Anglicist hypothesis proposes the divergence of AAVE, claiming that this variety is now very different from contemporary European American vernacular speech. In other words, as the African American community became more

³ The process in which a creole language gradually loses its distinctive characteristics, frequently as a result of contact with a standard variety of the language (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016).

stable, this community innovated more specific features that were the result of its own evolution (Wolfram & Thomas, 2002). As Wolfram (2006) asserts, the debate on this hypothesis revolves around the origins of linguistic relations between Africans and Europeans in the most isolated Afro-American communities located on coastal North Carolina. Anyway, with the finding of new evidence, the Substrate hypothesis made its way into the debate.

1.4. Substrate Hypothesis

According to Wolfram (2006), the Substrate hypothesis suggested by Walt Wolfram and Erik Thomas puts forward that some of the characteristics that currently make AAVE distinct may be caused by a “subtle but enduring influence from early contact between Africans and Europeans” (Wolfram, 2006, p. 335). Substratists claim that although features of regional dialects may have influenced AAVE, it is the enduring substrate effect⁴ which has distinguished it from other varieties of American English.

This standpoint differs from the Neo-Anglicist hypothesis in that the Neo-Anglicist theory asserts that AAVE is virtually the same as earlier American vernacular varieties of English while the Substrate hypothesis focuses on the influence of the earlier American vernacular varieties on AAVE. In fact, the substrate effect may have come from the original contact between the speakers of English dialects and the speakers of African languages (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016).

The debate is still open because the data on the origin and development of AAVE are still rather scarce. However, the controversy is no longer restricted to the hypotheses about its beginnings and early development. Another subject of debate is the change that AAVE underwent in the 20th century. Wolfram & Thomas (2002) wonder whether AAVE “is changing in ways that make it more distinct from other vernacular varieties of English or is aligning more closely with other varieties of English” (p. 1).

In response to this question, the so-called divergence issue arose. According to Miethaner (2014), in 1985 William Labov and Guy Bailey stated that AAVE had undergone significant structural changes in the 20th century. These linguists claimed that AAVE was evolving independently and the differences with other vernacular languages

⁴ The influence of one language or contact situation on another variety, after the first is no longer the source of direct transfer or after the time of the original contact between the varieties has elapsed (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016).

of English were on the increase. This theory is of interest to academics as well as to the rest of the population. The divergence of AAVE is perceived among people as a mere reflection of the situation of the African Americans. This view is based on the increasing racial segregation that has occurred throughout the history of the United States and the economic disparity that exists among lower class minority groups such as African Americans (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016).

LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF AAVE

In order to continue putting the pieces together to form a picture of AAVE, it is essential to look at the morpho-syntactic and phonological characteristics of the variety. In this way, this section aims at showing that AAVE has its own rules and regularities like other varieties of English (Mufwene et al., 1998).

For this purpose, I will first focus on the most salient morpho-syntactic features of AAVE and I will group them in various grammatical domains: noun phrase, verb phrase, negation and questions. Afterwards, I will deal with the most significant phonological features, exploring both the consonant and the vowel systems of AAVE.

1. Morpho-syntax

Over the last half century, linguists have conducted a great deal of research on the morpho-syntactic properties of AAVE, or at least on those morpho-syntactic properties that are considered to be defining features of this vernacular variety (Thomas & Bailey, 2015).

In the following pages, the most prominent features of AAVE in relation to its morpho-syntax will be described.

1.1. Noun Phrase

▪ **Plural *s* and *dem***

As Wolfram (2004) asserts, in AAVE the absence of the plural morpheme occurs in quantifier nouns as illustrated in examples (1) and (2), provided by Wolfram (2004, p.125):

(1) *It's four **mile** from here.*

(2) *Some **dog***

AAVE speakers also make regularisations in irregular plurals, including shifts in words from irregular forms to regular ones, such as *oxes* and *gooses*, or adding the plural mark to words that have zero marking in standard varieties, for example, *three sheeps* and *two corns*, and marking the plural twice in irregular plurals like *two firemens* and *childrens* (Wolfram, 2004, p. 125).

Moreover, Rickford & Rickford (2000) state that AAVE uses the particle *dem* (or *an dem*) to mark the plural. This particle is used after a person's name to refer to others who are associated with that person, as exemplified in (3) (Rickford & Rickford, 2000, p. 111):

(3) *John an dem*

'John and his friends' (Standard English) (StE)

Dem can also be placed before a noun as a mark of plurality as in example (4), but apart from being a plural marker, it also has the function of demonstrative determiners 'those'. Rickford & Rickford (2000, p. 111) offer example (4):

(4) *Dem books*

'Those books' (StE)

▪ **Genitive marking**

AAVE speakers place one word next to the other without an apostrophe, only taking into account the order in which the possessive is realised, as shown in example (5) (Green, 2002, p. 103):

(5) *Sometime Rolanda bed don't be made up.*

'Sometimes Rolanda's bed isn't made up.' (StE)

This is a distinctive feature of AAVE since it is not very common among other American English vernaculars (Wolfram, 2004).

▪ **Pronouns**

There are different usages in relation to pronouns, which are quite common in urban and rural areas of the United States, such as the possessive noun *they*, which functions as possessive *their*, regularisations in the reflexive *hisself* and the shift of *mine* to *mines*. In addition, AAVE uses the personal pronoun *y'all* to refer to the standard

second person plural pronoun *you*. Wolfram (2004, p. 125) provides the examples in (6) and example (7) to illustrate these uses:

(6) a. *It's **they** book.*

b. *He washed **hissself**.*

c. *The book is **mines**.*

(7) ***Y'all** done now.*

On the other hand, a double subject is used by introducing a pronoun corresponding to the subject as illustrated in (8) (Rickford & Rickford, 2000, p. 125):

(8) *That **man, he** walks to the store.*

Lastly, sometimes AAVE speakers delete the relative pronouns *that*, *who*, *whom* and *which* as in example (9) (Rickford & Rickford, 2000, p. 125), and they also use the particle *what* as a relative as shown in (10) (Wolfram, 2004, p. 126):

(9) *He the man got all the old records.*

(10) *That's the man **what** I was talking about.*

- ***It and dey***

According to Green (2002), existential *it* and *dey* mark the existence of something, substituting *there is* of Standard English (StE). Green (2002, p. 80) offers the example set (11):

(11) a. ***It** have some coffee in the kitchen.*

b. ***Dey** some coffee in the kitchen.*

1.2. Verb phrase

- **Copula absence**

The absence of copula *be*, also known as zero copula, is one of the most widely described features of AAVE. The use of zero copula often depends on the subject phrase, the type of grammatical elements preceding the copula, and the phonetic context. Kautzsch (2008, p. 541) points out that “personal pronouns favour copula absence over noun phrase subjects” and offers the following examples:

(12) a. *She running.*

b. *The woman's running.*

The grammatical categories which determine copula deletion are *V-ing*, *gonna*, adjectives, locatives and noun phrases as the examples in (13) show (Kautzsch, 2008, p. 541):

- (13) a. *He running.*
b. *He gonna go to the park.*
c. *She pretty.*
d. *He in the house.*
e. *He a man.*

▪ **Subject-verb agreement**

According to Wolfram (2004), subject-verb agreement affects the verbal suffix *-s* and the conjugation of the past and present forms of *be* and other auxiliaries. In Standard English, the simple present tense is formed by adding *-s* to verbs when the subject is a third person singular. AAVE gets rid of *-s*, which can be seen as a way of standardising the rules of English. Example (14) exemplifies this (Kautzsch, 2008, p. 539):

- (14) *She run.*

Rickford & Rickford (2000) claim that AAVE makes regularisations of the verb *be*. In the present tense, *is* replaces *are* and *am*, and in the past tense, *was* is used as shown in examples (15) and (16), which are provided by Wolfram (2004, p. 122). Another distinctive feature is the use of *do* and *don't* with the third person singular. Rickford & Rickford (2000, p. 112) give example (17):

- (15) *The folks is home.*
(16) *The folks was home.*
(17) **Don't** *she have a house down there?*

▪ **Verbal markers**

Auxiliaries

According to Green (2002), AAVE uses *invariant be* to refer to habitual or regular events, as shown in the example (18) provided by Green (2002, p. 47):

- (18) *Bruce be running.*

‘Bruce is usually running.’ or ‘Bruce usually runs.’ (StE)

AAVE also uses double modals. Although *might could* is the most frequent double modal, it is possible to combine different modals or use a triple modal. Examples (19) and (20) illustrate these uses (Martin & Wolfram, 1998, p. 32-33):

(19) He *might could* do the work.

(20) They *might should oughta* do it.

Aspectual markers

AAVE uses a number of aspectual markers. One of them is *been*⁵, which has a special aspectual function when it is followed by a verb in the past tense (Wolfram, 2004). It denotes that an activity took place in the distant past as shown in the example below provided by Green (2002, p. 55):

(21) She *bin* had him all day.

‘She has had him all day.’ (StE)

Another relevant aspectual marker is completive *done*. This particle emphasises that an action has been completed in the present. As can be observed in example (22), it can be equivalent to the structure *have/has + already + past participle* of the verb in StE (Rickford & Rickford, 2000, p. 120).

(22) They *done* tore the school up.

‘They have already torn the school up.’ (StE)

Completive *done* can also be combined with the particle *be*, in a construction that refers to a future state or consequence, as exemplified in the example below, offered by Wolfram (2004, p. 120):

(23) My ice cream *be done* melted by the time we get there.

Preverbal markers

Wolfram’s (2004) points out that in AAVE some auxiliaries fulfil semantic-pragmatic functions that make this variety contrast with other varieties of English. In the

⁵The forms *bin* or *BIN* can also be used in order to distinguish phonetically and semantically from unstressed *be* forms, which can also be found in AAVE (Green, 2002).

following, constructions with the verbal markers *finna*, *steady* and *come* will be presented.

Finna expresses that something is going to happen immediately. It comes before a non-finite verb, as can be seen in example (24) provided by Green (2002, p. 70):

(24) *I don't know about you, but I'm **finna** leave.*

'I don't know about you, but I'm getting ready/about to leave.' (StE)

Steady serves to emphasise that an action is performed consistently or intensely. This marker precedes a progressive form of the verb, for example (25) (Green, 2002, p. 72):

(25) *They want to do they own thing, and you **steady** talking to them.*

'They want to do their own thing, and you're continuing to talk to them.' (StE)

Finally, Green (2002) states that the particle *come* is used to highlight the speaker's discontent. It comes before verbs in the progressive form as illustrated in the example below (Green, 2002, p. 73):

(26) *You the one **come** telling me it's hot. I can't believe you got your coat on.*

'You're the one who had the nerve to tell me that it's hot. I can't believe you've got your coat on.' (StE)

Irregular verbs

The pattern used in AAVE for irregular verbs is quite similar to the one used in other vernacular varieties including rural Southern White varieties. There are several ways of expressing past tense in AAVE: the auxiliary *had* with the past simple form of the verb as illustrated in (27a), the past participle of the irregular verb without the auxiliary *had* such as (27b), the usage of the bare root as past tense exemplified in (27c) and the regularisation of irregular verbs by adding *-ed*, for example (27d). The set of examples (27) are from Wolfram (2004, p. 122):

(27) a. *I **had went** down there.*

b. *They **seen** it.*

c. *They **run** there yesterday.*

d. *Everybody **knowed** him.*

1.3. Negation

The formation of negative constructions in AAVE does not differ much from other American vernacular varieties (Wolfram, 2004). According to Rickford & Rickford (2000), one of the most common particles used to make a negative statement is *ain't*, which is similar to the present forms *am not*, *isn't*, *aren't*, *don't*, *hasn't*, and *haven't* of StE. AAVE also uses *ain't* as a substitute for *didn't*. The examples offered by Rickford & Rickford (2000, p. 122-123) illustrate the uses of this negative particle:

(28) *He ain't comin' in now.*

'He is not comin' in now.' (StE)

(29) *He ain't go no further than third grade.*

'He didn't go any further than third grade.' (StE)

In addition, one of the most notable features of AAVE is the use of multiple negation. Two or more negation particles are used in a sentence in order to express a single negation as it is shown in (30) (Martin & Wolfram, 1998, p. 18):

(30) a. *He ain't got no car.*

'He doesn't have a/any car.' (StE)

b. *Nobody ain't gonna spend no time going to no doctor.*

'Nobody is going to spend (any) time going to a/any doctor.' (StE)

c. *He went out into that storm without no coat or nothing.*

'He went out into that storm without a/any coat or anything.' (StE)

Furthermore, negative markers *ain't* or *can't* may also appear at the beginning of the sentence followed by a negative noun or pronoun such as *nobody* or *nothing*. This phenomenon called *negative inversion* is illustrated by Rickford & Rickford (2000, p. 123) in examples (31) and (32):

(31) *Can't nobody beat 'em.*

(32) *Ain't nothin' went down.*

Lastly, Wolfram (2004) states that the negative construction *ain't/don't + but* is often used to indicate 'only' or 'no more than' as in (33) (Wolfram, 2004, p. 124):

(33) *She ain't but three years old.*

1.4. Questions

As Rickford & Rickford (2000) explain, questions are formed in exactly the opposite way to StE. In AAVE the order of the subject and auxiliary in direct *yes/no* and *Wh*-questions is not inverted. Therefore, there are no auxiliaries in the initial position and instead, speakers use rising intonation to make it clear that a question is being asked as shown in (34) (Rickford & Rickford, 2000, p. 124):

(34) *This is a microphone, too?*

However, unlike StE, AAVE reverses the subject and auxiliary in indirect or embedded questions and does not use particles *if* or *whether*. Rickford & Rickford (2000, p. 124) offer the following example:

(35) *I asked him **could he** come with me.*

2. Phonology

Research in speech production carried out with vernacular speakers in the south of the United States revealed that AAVE differs significantly from any other non-African American Vernacular (Thomas, 2007). Substantial differences were perceived in the pronunciation of both consonants and vowels.

In the following, the most salient phonological and phonetic features of the consonant and vowel systems of AAVE will be explored.

2.1. Consonants

In this section I will describe the main consonant realisations that characterise AAVE speech.

- **Word-final consonant cluster reduction**

The reduction of final consonant clusters in which the consonant is a stop occurs in most varieties of English although they seem to occur more frequently in AAVE (Thomas, 2007).

Word-final consonant cluster reduction consists of the loss of the final stops /t, d, k, p/ and is determined by the type of cluster involved and the phonetic environment that follows the cluster (Thomas & Bailey, 2015). Reduction is frequent when the consonants of the cluster have the same voicing as in *pas* ' for *past* and *find* ' for *find* (Thomas, 2007,

p. 455). Simplification is likely to occur when the cluster is part of a single morpheme as in irregular past forms like *kep'* for *kept* and *slep'* for *slept* (Thomas, 2007, p. 456) whereas deletion of the second consonant does not occur when it marks past tense as in *missed* and *guessed* (Wolfram & Thomas, 2002, p. 132). The final consonant is likely to be deleted when the cluster is followed by an obstruent consonant (a plosive, affricate or fricative) as in *firs' place* for *first place* (Thomas & Bailey, 2015, p. 405).

Speakers of almost all varieties do not simplify this type of clusters when the next word begins with a vowel. However, AAVE speakers are likely to delete the stop in this environment, for example in *pas' a house* for *past a house* (Thomas, 2007, p. 455).

- **r-lessness**

In AAVE, r-lessness is common in unstressed syllables, final position after a vowel and pre-consonantal position such as in *forget*, *four* and *hard* respectively (Thomas, 2007, p. 453). However, it is also possible to pronounce the *schwa* sound in words like *bear* [bæə] (Green, 2002, p. 120).

In some varieties of English such as Received Pronunciation (RP), r-lessness does not occur when the *r* sound is between two vowels, for example *Carol* [kærəl]. However, in AAVE it is possible to vocalise *r* in this environment; thus *Carol* [kæəl] (Green, 2002, p. 121).

In AAVE there is also an absence of *linking -r*, in other words, *r* is not pronounced when it is followed by a vowel across words, as in *four eggs*. Finally, another r-lessness feature of AAVE is the absence of *r* after /θ/, e.g., *throw* or *through* or after other consonants in stressed syllables such as *prefer* (Thomas, 2007, p. 454).

- **l-lessness**

In some environments, the liquids /l/ and /r/ exhibit some similar sound patterns in AAVE. /l/-lessness can occur in three forms. The first one is the vocalisation to a back and rounded vowel /o/ or /w/; thus, *feel* [fio]. Vocalisation of /l/ is common in both AAVE and other American English varieties. Nevertheless, /l/ can also be vocalised to *schwa* sound; for instance, *feel* [fiə], which is a salient feature in AAVE (Thomas & Bailey, 2015, p. 409).

The third variant is deletion of /l/. This deletion occurs before labials, such as *help* [hɛp] and it also happens in syllable-final position, for example *full* [fʊ]. Nevertheless, a following vowel disfavours the deletion of final /l/, thus *full of*. This loss also takes place in other American varieties (Thomas & Bailey, 2015, p. 408).

- **Consonant shifts**

- Mutation of dental fricatives**

- In AAVE the voiceless interdental fricative /θ/ is realised as the voiceless alveolar [t] or the voiceless labiodental [f] whereas the voiced interdental fricative /ð/ is produced as the voiced labiodental [v] (Fromkin et al., 2007). Furthermore, Thomas (2007) explains that the use of [f] and [v] only occurs in the middle or at the end of words, whereas the realisations [t] and [d] can occur in any position; for example, *Ruth* [rut] or [ruf], *brother* [brʌdə] or [brʌvə] (Fromkin et al., 2007, p. 444), and *think* [tɪŋk] (Thomas, 2007, p. 454).

- Mutation of /str/**

- Another feature that distinguishes AAVE from other North American dialects is the substitution of /str/ for /skr/; thus, *street* [skrit], *straight* [skret] or *strawberry* [skrɔbəri] (Green, 2002, p. 122). This feature is claimed to come from Gullah and other Southern American varieties of English (Green, 2002).

- Devoicing of word-final stops**

- According to Green (2002) devoicing is a process that consists of applying voicelessness to voiced consonants. As a result of the devoicing process that takes place in AAVE, the word-final stops /b/, /d/ and /g/ are realised as their voiceless counterparts [p], [t] and [k] respectively, and thus, the words *cab*, *feed* and *pig* are pronounced [kæp], [fi:t] and [pɪk] respectively (Green, 2002, p. 116).

- Devoicing of voiced stops is often accompanied by glottalization [ʔ] and therefore, a word like *mud* is pronounced [mʌʔt]. In addition, deletion of word-final voiced stops is possible, for example *mud* [mʌ:], and word-final voiceless stops can even be deleted, for instance *rack* [ɹæ] (Thomas, 2007, p. 456).

Yod-dropping

Another characteristic of AAVE, which is also common in other varieties of American English is the absence of /j/. Yod-dropping happens after non-coronal consonants such as *new*, *tune* and *due*. Nevertheless, the loss of /j/ after other consonants is a distinctive feature of AAVE, for example *computer* [kəmputə]. This occurrence is not found in other American English varieties. The deletion of /j/ is a retention of an Old English form, which was once common in Southern White Vernacular English (Thomas, 2007, p. 453).

▪ Metathesis of /sk/

A feature that is strongly associated with the AAVE speaking community is metathesis⁶ of adjacent consonants (Wolfram & Thomas, 2002). Metathesis of /sk/ to [ks] and /sp/ to [ps] occur in AAVE speech and thus, words like *ask* and *wasp* are pronounced [æks] and [græps] respectively (Thomas, 2007, p. 453). Since the former realisation [æks] is also used in some British dialects, it has been suggested that it is a retention of an Old English form *aksian* rather than a more recent process (Wolfram & Thomas, 2002; Thomas, 2007; Thomas & Bailey, 2015).

2.2. Vowels

The vowel system of AAVE is different from other American English varieties in some aspects. However, some features are also found in Southern White varieties (Edwards, 2008; Thomas, 2007). Table 1 presents the vowel repertoire of AAVE according to their place of articulation.

Table 1. *Vowels of AAVE (Edwards, 2008, p. 183).*

	front	central	back
close	i	ɨ	u
			ʊ
close mid	e	oɪ	o
		ə	ɔ
open mid	ɛ		ʌ
		aɪ	
open	æ		a
			ɑ

⁶ A phonological process in which two sequential sounds are reversed (Fromkin et al., 2007).

In the following, the salient vocalic variants of AAVE will be discussed.

- **Glide reduction or monophthongisation of /ai/**

One of the most distinctive features of the vowel system of AAVE is the glide reduction and monophthongisation of the diphthong /ai/ [aɪ → a:] in open syllables, before nasals and voiced obstruents, such as *mine* [ma:n], *hi* [ha:], *slide* [sla:d] (Edwards, 2008, p. 184). As Pollock & Meredith (2001) point out, this feature is shared with Southern White Vernaculars with the difference that in White vernaculars the monophthongisation of /ai/ happens before voiced and voiceless consonants.

- **Merger of /ɛ/ and /i/**

According to Fromkin et al. (2007), another feature found in AAVE, which is also shared with other regional dialects, is the neutralisation of the vowels /i/ and /ɛ/ when they are followed by the nasal sounds /n, m, ŋ/. This phonological process occurs in pairs of words such as *pin* and *pen*, *bin* and *Ben* or *tin* and *ten*, in which the vowels *i* and *e* are realised as [ɪ] (Green, 2002, p. 123).

- **Raising and fronting of /æ/**

Another vowel that is relevant in AAVE is /æ/. This sound is raised and fronted towards [ɛ], especially in words that are followed by nasals, such as *Ann* [ɛn] and *bang* [bɛŋ]. This feature occurs in the speech of other Northern cities although evidence shows that it is an innovation in AAVE (Edwards, 2008, p. 184).

In conclusion, Edwards (2008) states that the sound system of AAVE does not differ much from other English varieties in the United States. However, the distinctive sound patterns that AAVE exhibits reveal that the variety of English spoken most consistently by the working-class African American community is a system that works according to different rules from those of other American English systems. According to Green (2002, p. 119) “what may sound like ignorant and uneducated speech to those who are unfamiliar with the variety [...] is actually rule-governed language use”.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS AAVE

The previous section has shown that AAVE is a legitimate variety which is supported by linguistic features although these features are usually not effective in changing negative attitudes towards the variety and eliminating stereotypes (Green, 2002). The discussion throughout this section is divided into two main parts: the status of AAVE and the inclusion of AAVE in education.

1. The status of AAVE

No other issue has created as much debate in the United States as the legitimacy of AAVE and its acceptance as a valid system of communication. Social attitudes towards this variety can be summarised in the following statement made by members of the audience in a talk show: “people should go back to their own country if they can’t speak proper English. You can speak your own language, but don’t force somebody else to have to suffer and listen to it” (Green, 2002, p. 217).

As can be observed, a large number of speakers of Standard American English believe that this variety is only the badly spoken version of their Standard English, which has been spoiled by mistakes made by ignorant people who do not know how to use grammar and pronunciation well (Pullum, 1999).

Taking these social attitudes into account, it is worth asking why AAVE is so widely spoken. This is because it is a symbol of identity, it is the driving force behind the maintenance of low prestige varieties that have survived the pressures of the dominant standard languages. In addition, events such as the enactment of the Slave Code, mentioned in the first section of this paper, may have also contributed to the establishment of an oppositional identity that is expressed through this vernacular. However, it is true that less educated African Americans make more extensive use of AAVE, so ignorance is often wrongly associated with it (Rickford & Rickford, 2000).

Two types of attitudes towards AAVE are distinguished according to how white Americans and African Americans perceive this American vernacular. On the one hand, many white Americans only know African Americans through the media, where Afro-Americans are powerful characters and sound very much like white Americans. Nevertheless, when someone who speaks AAVE is interviewed, they are usually poor,

victimised or suspected of crime. For this reason, white Americans do not have an informed view about AAVE speakers (Lippi-Green, 2012).

Lippi-Green (2012) states that within the Afro-American community there are also complex attitudes of AAVE speakers towards their own variety, masking painful issues of identity. African Americans view AAVE from three different perspectives: linguistic prejudice, linguistic shame and linguistic pride. Regarding the first, some African Americans hate each other since they are influenced by their background. Not being white is a problem for them as it implies not using a 'correct' standard variety (Lanehart, 2015). On the other hand, many African Americans feel linguistic shame. It is difficult for them to admit that although AAVE is not considered 'educated' English, it is still legitimate. For many African American speakers, claiming its legitimacy is a shame as it carries a stigma of inferiority and various stereotypes of how they cannot speak proper English (Green, 2002). In any case, as Lanehart (2015) points out, AAVE speakers deny the use of their variety out of shame, but they continue to use it. Of course, it is a matter of prejudice. The third perspective involves a speech community that, ignoring prejudicial attitudes towards them, use AAVE because they feel that language and community are inextricably linked and that their linguistic heritage must be preserved.

According to Lippi-Green (2012), there is no doubt that there is a great deal of conflict surrounding AAVE and the African American community. The irony is that people do not want to recognise AAVE speakers as a different cultural community speaking a distinct variety. However, the only way for white Americans to avoid their discomfort with African Americans and AAVE is to segregate them. What is clear is that African Americans will continue to speak their variety despite the social and educational pressures that they have faced, which are going to be discussed below.

2. AAVE and education

Education is considered the key to success and therefore, one of the most discussed topics regarding AAVE is the research into the instructional methods that can be used with AAVE-speaking students of school age in order to improve their performance. These methods aim to teach skills to speakers of AAVE including reading proficiency or mainstream English. The academic failure of African American children is an indication of a lack of progress in the education system and a sign of the need for some intervention (Green, 2002; Lippi-Green, 2012).

Many students arrive at schools speaking a variety other than Standard English, with its distinctive grammar, pronunciation and lexis. For that reason, when they read a text in Standard English, the patterns of their original variety are transferred to the oral reading of the text, affecting the reading skills of African American students (Wheeler et al., 2012).

Disparities in reading performance between African American and white children is a problem documented by many studies, which indicate a persistent gap in the United States (Labov & Barker, 2015). These studies show that in inner cities the reading scores achieved by African Americans are below average. As shown in Table 2, data collected by the National Centre for Education Statistics reports that “in the fourth grade in 1992 67% African Americans were performing below the basic level” (Green, 2002, p. 228), compared to 22% of their white peers. In 1994 and 1998 the trend was similar. In 1994, 69% of Afro-Americans were below the average, and in 1998 64%. In 2000, “63% African Americans in the fourth grade were reading below the basic level, and 27% whites were below that level” (Green, 2002, p. 228), so the situation remained the same.

Table 2. *African American and white students reading below the basic level from 1992 to 2000 (Green, 2002, p. 229).*

Year	Grade	African Americans	Whites
1992	4th	67%	29%
	8th	55%	22%
	12th	39%	14%
1994	4th	69%	29%
	8th	56%	22%
	12th	48%	19%
1998	4th	64%	27%
	8th	47%	18%
	12th	42%	17%
2000	4th	63%	27%
	8th	—	—
	12th	—	—

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress

Linguists considered that it was the phonetic differences between AAVE and the white American English variety that caused the disparity in performance when reading.

Phonetic variants are often used as a reason for assigning AAVE-speaking students to speech therapy and special education (Baugh, 1998).

According to Green (2002), what causes school failure is the fact that linguistic interference of the student's variety is not accepted, together with the negative attitudes of teachers towards the African American students and their variety. Teachers adopt two approaches in the classroom: the Interrupting Approach and the Black Artful Approach. In the former, teachers constantly interrupt students and continuously correct what they consider to be 'mistakes' (Hollie et al., 2015). As a result, Afro-American students become disengaged and hostile, achieving lower reading scores. On the other hand, the Black Artful Approach is used when teachers show students the differences between AAVE and Standard English, but do not interrupt or correct their African American pupils. Students participate enthusiastically and obtain higher marks in reading (Rickford & Rickford, 2000). These methods confirm that without knowledge of the dialectal patterns of learners, teachers are not able to give Afro-American students advice on the improvement of their reading skills (Wheeler et al., 2012).

Moved by the goal of helping these African American students, on 18th December 1996, the Oakland School Board in California brought AAVE into the spotlight by passing a resolution that declared that AAVE was the native language of 28,000 students in the school district. This sparked a heated debate in the United States, which is the focus of the following section (Baugh, 2000).

2.1. The Oakland Resolution Controversy

The Oakland Resolution was not proposed out of linguistic interests, but it was a measure taken in response to the serious educational problems affecting so many African American students, as was discussed in the previous section (Rickford, 1999). The main goal was to find new methods for African American children to successfully learn Standard English and improve their reading skills (Toporova, 2000). Green (2002) states that the Oakland board suggested the use of AAVE in teaching to highlight the linguistic features of AAVE that contrast with those of Standard American English in order to improve the acquisition of mainstream English.

The Resolution garnered a media circus that lasted for weeks, with a wide range of public reaction (Baron, 2000). On the political side, very few politicians supported the

Oakland proposal. The US Secretary of Education Richard Riley was the first national figure to officially reject considering AAVE as nothing other than a dialect of English (Baugh, 2000). In addition, some African American community leaders went so far as to call AAVE little more than a jargon and described the resolution as an attempt to limit the learning of Afro-American students. One of the most determined opponents was Reverend Jesse Jackson, an African American social activist who criticised Oakland School for becoming a national laughing stock and for using AAVE slang as a second language (Baron, 2000).

The origin of the debate in the Resolution was related to the usage of three terms that were misinterpreted: *genetics*, *bilingualism* and *teaching*. Regarding *genetics*, the problem lay in the sentence: “African Language Systems are genetically based and not a dialect of English” (Oakland School Board Resolution, 1996). The use of the term *genetics* was a socio-political indiscretion given the linguistic debate and the racial politics of the United States at that moment (Wolfram, 1998). On the other hand, there were misunderstandings with the term *bilingualism*: “the English language acquisition and improvement skills of African American students are as fundamental as is application of bilingual or second language learner principles for others whose primary languages are other than English” (Oakland School Board Resolution, 1996). Some critics considered that the Resolution was a way to claim federal funding for bilingual education. However, the aforementioned Secretary of Education Richard Riley was quick to assert that since AAVE was not a language, Oakland school could not obtain federal funding to promote bilingual education (Baron, 2000). Finally, as regards teaching, this part of the resolution was highlighted: “implement the best possible academic program for the combined purposes of facilitating the acquisition and mastery of English language skills [...] known as African American Language System” (Oakland School Board Resolution, 1996). However, none of the educators involved in the Oakland Resolution advocated teaching AAVE to children who did not speak it, nor did anyone propose using AAVE as a teaching medium for African Americans (Wolfram, 1998).

In view of strong criticism and opposition to the Resolution, which actually revealed people’s beliefs about linguistic diversity and their lack of knowledge on the subject (Wolfram, 1998), the Oakland School revised the Resolution (Baron, 2000). After some tense meetings, members of the school board along with politicians, educators and community activists agreed on changing some statements and on 15 January 1997 an

amended resolution was approved (Wolfram, 1998). A remarkable aspect of the amended proposal, which was already in the original resolution, is the title in capital letters. Part of the title stated: “DIRECTING THE SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS TO DEVISE A PROGRAM TO IMPROVE THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND APPLICATION SKILLS OF AFRICANAMERICAN STUDENTS” (Oakland School Board Resolution, 1996). According to Baron (2000), the board insisted that the only aim was to educate teachers in the language of their African American students so that they would be able to guide these pupils, which did not involve teaching AAVE.

In May 1997, a third amendment was made to the Oakland Resolution. This seemed necessary to appease the continuing criticism, but it also meant that Oakland “lost the language battle” (Baron, 2000, p. 7).

It is worth noting that these resolutions caused a great deal of discussion in American society. As a result, a new type of humour emerged in relation to AAVE that humiliated the variety and its speakers (Green, 2002). Baugh (2000) points out that some of the racist comments were found in general news publications, cartoons, newspaper and magazine articles, etc. A clear example is an editorial cartoon in which the bubonic plague is compared with the ‘ebonics plague’ (see Figure 3). This idea arose from an article in the newspaper *The Economist* with the title “The Ebonics Virus”.

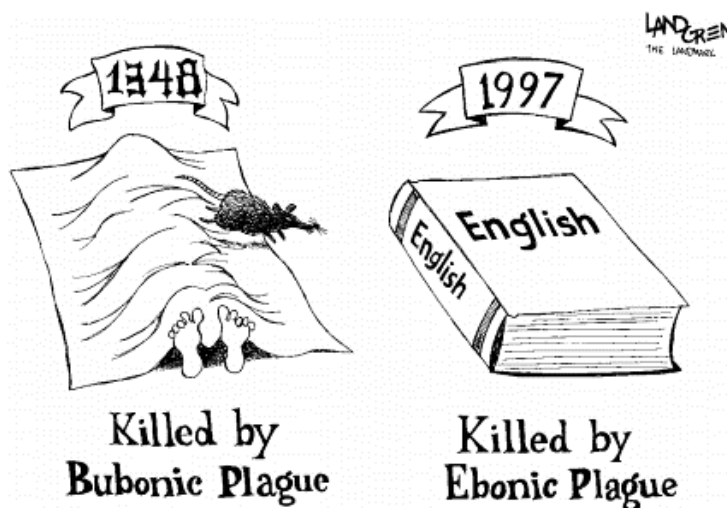


Figure 3. Cartoon from *The Economist* newspaper (Baugh, 2000, p. 90).

In conclusion, the controversy over the Oakland resolution masked deeper problems. Criticism of AAVE led to debates on race, education and social issues. Many saw these resolutions as a separatist move. However, it served to give Americans an appreciation of how varieties also fight for their privilege and against stigma. Lastly, it also served to raise awareness of the complicated situation of African American children in schools and the implications of language pedagogy (Baron, 2000).

CONCLUSION

As has been observed, both the origin and early development of AAVE played a fundamental role in how it has come to be what it is. Although the hypotheses about its origin are unclear due to the limited sources, the development of AAVE throughout history has significant importance. AAVE has been influenced by various historical events, from the early days when slaves were brought to North America to the migrations across the United States. In addition, further factors such as laws that demeaned African Americans along with other racist attitudes caused that African Americans segregated themselves and thus, they maintained their linguistic heritage by interacting less with other varieties of English.

Another conclusion that can be reached is that once the main linguistic features of AAVE have been described, the legitimacy of the language has been justified. In fact, AAVE is a system governed by rules and regularities just like other English varieties. Therefore, it is not the system of illiterate and careless speakers that many speakers of other varieties consider it to be. Pullum (1999, p. 58) states that the “linguistic study of AAVE makes one thing clear: AAVE is not Standard English with mistakes”.

Although the linguistic characteristics of the variety have been the subject of much research intended to provide a basis for AAVE’s legitimacy, attitudes towards the variety masked deeper attitudes. The debates surrounding the education and teaching of AAVE to African American students sparked debates about race, ethnicity, education and other social issues. Many Americans viewed the Oakland School Board’s Resolution as a declaration of independence, a separatist movement that went beyond language. It is worth noting that AAVE is still a topic of debate in America because some deny or are ashamed of the legitimacy of the variety.

African Americans will continue to speak the variety of their ethnic community regardless of the social or educational pressures exerted by the American society. The soul of AAVE not only lies in the linguistic characteristics that have been extensively studied by researchers in order to demonstrate that AAVE is a valid linguistic system, but also in other aspects related to the vernacular variety spoken by the African American community. AAVE is not just words, it is present in everyday life, in African American's culture, in the history of their community and in all the painful experiences suffered by its speakers. "It's all embodied in a language" (Noam Chomsky).

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