



April 2011

Australian Aboriginal English and African American Language: The Development of Marginalized Language Varieties

Sarah E. Hercula
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/hilltopreview>



Part of the [Other English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hercula, Sarah E. (2011) "Australian Aboriginal English and African American Language: The Development of Marginalized Language Varieties," *The Hilltop Review*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 3.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/hilltopreview/vol4/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Hilltop Review by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL ENGLISH AND AFRICAN AMERICAN LANGUAGE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF MARGINALIZED LANGUAGE VARIETIES

By Sarah E. Hercula
Department of English
sarah.e.hercula@wmich.edu

The development of distinct varieties of English is a diverse and interesting process. In places over the entire globe where once existed exclusively non-English speaking peoples, various forms of English are now used as the primary means of communication in many different settings: governmental, business, educational, and home. Frequently, new varieties of English form out of necessity as a way for groups of people with differing linguistic and cultural backgrounds to communicate and effectively coexist. Two such languages, Australian Aboriginal English and African American Language, though they developed within different circumstances, have some interesting similarities in terms of their origins and source language influences, linguistic features, and social stations. In analyzing these similarities and why they exist, we can draw some important conclusions about language as a frequently overlooked form of social injustice as well as its role in developing cultural and individual identity.

Australian Aboriginal English (AAE), like many other varieties of English, does not exist as a single, fixed language variety, but instead is constituted by a language spectrum with variation among its speakers. This spectrum has come about as a result of the combination of English with what were once around 250 “mutually unintelligible” Aboriginal languages when the British arrived in the 1770s (Kirkpatrick 79). Kirkpatrick explains that at the time, “[t]he multilingual nature of Aboriginal society meant that a single Aboriginal language was unlikely to assume the role of the language of communication among all Aboriginal Australians” (79). Because of this, the need for Aboriginal groups to communicate with one another and with the British was fulfilled by English, specifically AAE, interestingly the very language that would eventually eradicate many of the original source languages. Today more than half of the Aboriginal languages “have ceased to be spoken at all” and “[f]ewer than 10” of the remaining languages “have more than 1000 speakers,” as most of the Aboriginal people now communicate solely in AAE (Butcher 625). On one end of the AAE spectrum, speakers use language varieties close to the mainstream variety used and valued in academic and professional settings in Australia. These varieties tend to have vocabulary that is also used in this more mainstream variety (Butcher 636). On the other end of

the spectrum, AAE speakers use varieties that resemble creoles, or early yet stable forms of language originating as a combination of two distinct languages—in this case, one or more of many possible Aboriginal languages and English. In these varieties, much of the vocabulary is comprised of “loanwords from local indigenous languages” (Kirkpatrick 79; Butcher 636). Though there are differences in the lexicon used by speakers of AAE, for the vast majority of varieties of AAE along the entire spectrum, many of the prominent syntactic and grammatical features are derived from Aboriginal languages (Kirkpatrick 79).

There is a debate among linguists concerning the origin of African American Language (AAL), also commonly referred to as African American English, Black English, Ebonics, and other terms. (Herein, it will be referred to as AAL in order to maintain its difference from the other language variety of consideration and because this term is currently widely accepted among linguists.) Most linguists agree that AAL found its origin in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, around “the point at which African slaves were thrust into a linguistic situation in which they had to learn English” (Green 8). However, Rickford and Rickford explain the debate about how the language formed:

Some scholars contend that [AAL] bears the vivid imprint of the African languages spoken by slaves who came to this country in waves from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Others maintain that the devastating experience of slavery wiped out most if not all African linguistic and cultural traditions, and that the apparently distinctive features of [AAL] come from English dialects spoken by white (British) peasants and indentured servants whom Africans encountered in America. (129)

Essentially, the argument stems from whether or not AAL was originally formed as a creole, with its basis being deeply affected by African languages, or as a result of slaves adapting the languages of native English speakers, with its basis in other varieties of English, particularly southern varieties. Similar to AAE, the uncertainty of the origin of the variety is further fueled by the variation that exists within the variety, affected by each speaker’s geographic location, generation, socioeconomic status, and other factors. Despite the origin debate and internal variation of AAL, many linguists agree that the vocabulary of the variety can be linked most closely to English, while, like AAE, there is influence from African languages on the variety in terms of its grammatical rules, sound patterns, and pragmatic usage (Rickford and Rickford 145; McLaren 101).

Within countless linguistic studies, both AAE and AAL have been

identified as unique, rule-governed language varieties with set patterns that govern their usage (see Melchers and Shaw, Kirkpartick, Green, Smitherman, and Rickford and Rickford, among others). Just as the mainstream varieties in each country (those currently valued in academic and professional settings) can be spoken or written incorrectly according to their rules for usage, AAE and AAL can also be used incorrectly. Because of this, each language variety can be deemed linguistically equivalent to its mainstream counterpart. However, this research has not yet been saturated into broader society, and as a result, the marginalized and mainstream varieties are unarguably socially unequal. Certain linguistic features of AAE and AAL, by nature of how they are perceived by those who are not users of the varieties, seem to contribute to this social inequality and set them apart from their corresponding mainstream varieties. Three of those features, common to both language varieties, are explained in-depth below.

Auxiliary deletion is a linguistic feature of both AAE and AAL that occurs in declarative and interrogative constructions when the verb “to be” is omitted. Butcher explains that “[AAE] is sometimes said to have verbless sentences . . . but it would be more accurate to say that AAE, like many other languages, including many indigenous Australian languages,” uses auxiliary deletion as a feature of its grammatical structure (631). Butcher offers these examples to illustrate: “That my brother house” and “They really big” (631). Green provides the following AAL examples of the same feature: “They walking too fast” and “He be there in a minute” (40). This construction, though it regularly and systematically occurs in both languages, has been pinpointed as a stigmatizing feature in both languages—a feature that some have used to show that the varieties are “lacking sophistication” in some way, as compared to the mainstream varieties in America and Australia.

Multiple negation is another grammatical attribute of both languages that occurs regularly in their usage. This construction is used in negative sentences in which more than one element can be marked with the negative, even if this causes what some would refer to as a “double negative” or “triple negative.” This rule nullifies the “traditional prescriptive” teaching which “states that ‘double’ negatives are not grammatical because they make a positive” (Green 77). In fact, Rickford and Rickford point out that “double negatives [in AAL] are virtually never interpreted as positives . . . the meaning is crystal clear in context” (123). The following examples illustrate multiple negation in AAL: “She wadn’t no young lady, neither” and “I don’t want nothing nobody can’t enjoy” (Rickford and Rickford 123). It is clear in these examples that each item in the sentence that can be marked with the negative is indeed marked, following the pattern for usage. AAE also has these constructions, as illustrated in these examples: “They not give us nothing” and “I never

got no pay” (Butcher 633). Like auxiliary deletion, multiple negation is one of a very small set of features of AAE and AAL that have been used to marginalize these varieties. Ironically, these constructions are “often used incorrectly by the same people who try to show that what is taken as AAE is illogical speech” (Green 35). This incorrect overemphasis on features that differ from the mainstream varieties, coupled with a lack of understanding and misuse of the varieties’ constructions, causes many to cast negative viewpoints on these varieties and their speakers.

Another interesting feature used in both languages is the verbal marker *bin* to signify “remote past” tense (Green 54). Green provides the following AAL example of the construction, “She BIN [capitalized to indicate stress] running,” represented in more mainstream English as, “She has been running for a long time” (55). Melchers and Shaw illustrate this quality in AAE with the example, “[T]hat man bin come inside the bar,” alternatively represented as, “That man came into the bar a long time ago” (103). In addition, Green indicates a particular phonological aspect of this verbal marker: “The stress (or pitch accent) distinguishes *BIN* phonetically (i.e., pronunciation) and semantically (i.e., meaning) from *been* (the unstressed form), which also occurs in [AAL]” (55). This element of using phonetic difference to illustrate meaning is not easily misinterpreted by those who have grown up learning and using AAE or AAL; however, it can be and is frequently misunderstood by those who are not speakers of these varieties. The use of *bin* and other constructions that are indicated by pitch or stress variance is sometimes misinterpreted by those who do not understand the pronunciation intricacies of the language as unintelligence or a lack of grammatical understanding on the part of the speaker.

An additional aspect of both language varieties is their quality of having maintained some of the speech pragmatics common in their source languages. For example, Kirkpatrick explains that speakers of AAE frequently use indirectness, a “communicative strategy of Aboriginal languages” (81) when answering and/or asking questions. “Speakers of Aboriginal English may not respond at all to a direct request, but provide what has been called the ‘yes of gratuitous concurrence’ . . . This ‘yes’ lets the speaker know that the listener is attending to what is being said, but it does not mean that the speaker agrees with what is being said” (Kirkpatrick 81). Speakers of AAL have also inherited many pragmatic traits inherent of the linguistic tradition and culture of Africa, the country which most linguists believe to be at least a part of the source of the language. Smitherman explains: “‘Oral Tradition’ . . . refers to games, stories, proverbs, jokes, and other cultural productions that have been passed on from one generation to the next by word of mouth” (223). One specific aspect of “Oral Tradition” is called “signifyin” or “playin the dozens,” in

which two (usually friendly) parties compete against one another in a battle of insult and wit (Smitherman 224). Outsiders to AAE or AAL who encounter the “yes of gratuitous concurrence” or witness two people “playin the dozens” might misunderstand the significance of these speech events, viewing the speakers as rude or callous. However, in relating this concept to another culture, to immediately draw those conclusions would be just as severe as judging a Japanese person to be aloof or impersonal because he bows rather than shaking hands. Each of these practices is an important part of the cultural heritage that has been passed down through the traditions of these groups of people.

In terms of the social factors surrounding AAE and AAL, there are some further commonalities between the two, albeit discouraging ones, especially with regards to education. Many students who are raised speaking AAL or AAE in their families and communities enter schools in which the more mainstream varieties of American and Australian English are spoken, valued, and taught as the correct and only option for verbal and written communication. These students’ languages (and therefore cultures) are denigrated, and students’ voices are invalidated; many students are judged and treated unfairly, which causes problems for them, both academically and socially. Sharifian writes: “[S]tudents speaking Aboriginal English or an Aboriginal language [are] more likely than other students to miss school and show lower levels of academic performance” (131). These factors are caused, in part, by students’ internalization of their teachers’ attitudes towards their language use, as they may come to view themselves as less capable of learning than those who speak more mainstream varieties and ultimately disengage from school. Smitherman adds that teachers of AAL-speaking students “correct constantly to the point of verbal badgering [and] exclude [students] from regular classes in order to take speech remediation” (141). While the teachers of these students may think that they are actually putting the students’ needs first in adamantly teaching them the language variety more widely accepted in professional settings, they are, as a detriment to *all* of their students, missing key opportunities to teach about language and cultural variation, as well as acceptance, tolerance, and social justice for people with different backgrounds. And ultimately, they put students who use marginalized language varieties at a grave disadvantage.

In both America and Australia, there is a call from scholars, linguists, and educators for change in the way speakers of AAL and AAE are taught mainstream English varieties as well as in the way language variation is presented to all students. The educational gaps between mainstream and marginalized speakers are only widening; teachers, curriculum developers, and administrators must take action to remedy this situation, and it doesn’t involve assigning more worksheets on “correct” verb tense. Sharifian explains:

[S]tudents speaking Aboriginal English may believe “the school is not respecting my home language, which is part of me and my identity, so school is not about me”. . . [Schools should] acknowledge the home language/dialect of students, while empowering them further by teaching them SAE. This does not mean simply saying to students, “Your language/dialect is fine and I respect it, but keep it for outside the school”, but that they be given opportunities to use their dialect appropriately at school (132).

These shifts in educational practices would require new teaching strategies that honor and validate students’ home languages in addition to using them as an important tool in the teaching of the more mainstream varieties. Even more importantly, teachers must examine their own language prejudices and biases in order to truly change their internal language attitudes, enabling them to take a healthy stance towards language diversity and advocate for that stance in the classroom. Smitherman reverberates this call, saying: “Now don’t nobody go trippin cause ain none of dese proposals suggesting that schools shouldn’t teach ‘standard’ English . . . My point has to do with how you teach [mainstream English] and the social and political messages that should accompany language and literacy instruction.” (161)

Though both AAL and AAE formed and continue to develop for their speakers as distinct varieties in different parts of the world, they clearly bear some interesting linguistic and social resemblances. The study of these commonalities seems to serve two purposes. The first is to provide a reminder that though cultural, social, and linguistic differences can negatively affect the combining of groups of people, communication, as a necessary condition for coexistence, will always prevail. And though there is a delicate balance between language as a marker of identity and as a tool for interaction, emerging language varieties do not always evoke the “power of the oppressor,” but can be owned by a group of people to present a prevailing statement of culture, identity, and belonging. Furthermore, all people, whether speakers of mainstream varieties or marginalized varieties should come to view language variation as a positive aspect of diversity among peoples, rather than as a factor to create hierarchy or as difference that should be leveled through assimilation.

The second purpose is to offer further evidence that no rule-governed language variety is linguistically “better” or “worse” than another. Daily, people are persecuted, judged, and left behind as a result of their language, a trait which for most people, is not chosen—it is merely an accident of birth. The fact that AAE and AAL, simultaneously evolving across the world from one another, contain the same stigmatized features that are so censured by speakers of more mainstream varieties proves that these features do not insinuate stu-

pidity or lack of sophistication on the part of their speakers. They are simply linguistic negotiations, formed as a result of language combination. If this fact were to be internalized by those in positions of power—those who, by accident of birth, were probably born into families speaking more mainstream language varieties—perhaps we could allow people all over the world another step, a linguistic step, toward educational, occupational, and societal equality.

References

- Butcher, Andrew. "Linguistic aspects of Australian Aboriginal English." *Clinical Linguistics and Phonetics* 22.8 (2008): 625-642. Print.
- Green, Lisa J. *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*. Cambridge: University Press, 2002. Print.
- Kirkpatrick, Andy. *World Englishes: Implications for International Communication and English Language Teaching*. Cambridge: University Press, 2007. Print.
- McLaren, Joseph. "African Diaspora Vernacular Traditions and the Dilemma of Identity." *Research in African Literatures* 40.1 (2009): 97-111. Print.
- Melchers, Gunnel and Philip Shaw. *World Englishes*. London: Hodder Arnold, 2003. Print.
- Rickford, John Russell and Russell John Rickford. *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000. Print.
- Sharifian, Farzad. "Aboriginal English in the Classroom: An Asset or a Liability?" *Language Awareness* 17.2 (2008): 131-138. Print.
- Smitherman, Geneva. *Talkin that Talk: Language, Culture and Education in African America*. London: Routledge, 2000. Print.