Teach Real English!
Teaching materials based on current research

Queen Mary
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# Teaching unit 15: Grammar and code-switching in African American English

Background

English is spoken more extensively across the planet than any language in human history. Estimates suggest that up to two billion people use some English today. The language has developed different forms on every continent, and is used by increasingly diverse groups of users.

This unit looks at a very well-known dialect of English: African-American English. African-American English is a long-standing native dialect of English spoken across the United States. It has roots in the African languages that were brought to the Americas and the Caribbean during the Transatlantic Slave Trade and also the early British English dialects spoken at the time. Like speakers of vernacular dialects around the world, African-American English speakers often have a range of speaking styles that they can use, from more standard to more vernacular. The vernacular variety is called African-American Vernacular English (AAVE). Switching between two dialects (or two languages) is sometimes called "code-switching". The accompanying transcript and discussion points help students understand the grammar of the dialect as well as motivations for code-switching.

AAVE has contributed more to English vocabulary than most dialects through the dominance of African-American music and culture in the United States and globally, from blues and jazz music 100 years ago (e.g. *cool, hip, right on, uptight, get down, do your thing, gig*) to innumerable terms adopted around the world (e.g. *chill out, high five, home boy, player, off the hook, you go girl*), often though not always via hip-hop and rap. Paradoxically, despite this global appropriation of the dialect, it remains one of the most stigmatized English dialects in the world, prompting many scholars to suggest that the attitudes to the dialect in fact reflect attitudes to the social group. (This article and video offer a brief summary of a backlash against an attempt to recognize AAVE as the native dialect of Black schoolchildren: https://highline.huffingtonpost.com/articles/en/ebonics/.)

Optional activity: This unit forms an interesting comparison to the unit on Singapore English. These two native, vernacular dialects of English have developed in two entirely different parts of the world, in very different social situations. The map below shows the two locations. Both units show that the grammar of English dialects are not simply mistakes, but rather are systematic sets of rules that some individuals choose to switch on or off in their speech depending on the social circumstances. A comparison also shows that vernacular dialects have very different rules that outsiders would need to learn in order to use them correctly.
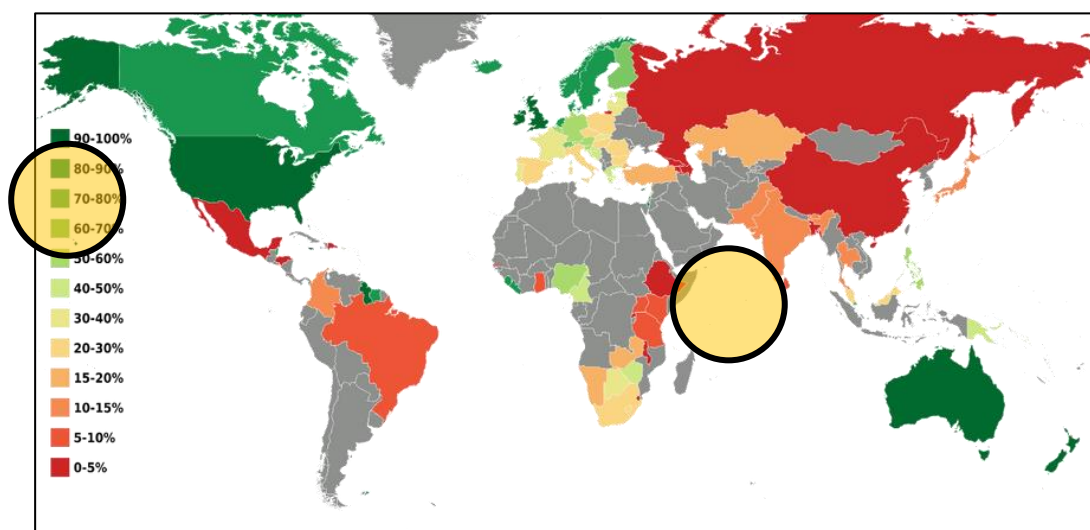
Audio and a link to a relevant Linguistics Research Digest articles are available at:
http://www.teachrealenglish.org/TU15

Discussion points

Questions for discussion

1. What are some of the distinctive grammatical features that the preacher uses when she shifts to AAVE?
2. How do we know these aren't just mistakes? (Hint: Examine her command of standard English.)
3. Why do you think she shifts, or 'code-switches'? What advantages does the vernacular have for her, over the standard variety?
4. AAVE has a global presence in the world via popular culture. Why has it been so popular?
5. At the same time, AAVE is also one of the most stigmatized varieties of English in the world. Why are attitudes to this vernacular variety so much more negative than to many other varieties?
6. Are there some similarities to the case of Singapore English (see separate Teaching Unit)? For example, do both the standard and the colloquial variety both have some advantages for the speakers?

Observable language features

Bare nouns: We see singular nouns appearing without articles in lines 9-11. Just like Standard English, AAVE has specific rules for when this is allowed and when it is not: AAVE allows a singular generic noun to omit the article ('pet' in lines 9-11 doesn't refer to a specific pet), but does not allow this with a specific noun (*She gave me present* is ungrammatical in AAVE). Many other English dialects do not allow the article to be dropped with singular generic nouns, but do allow it in more specialised and restricted constructions (*at church, on television, playing piano, dancing cheek to cheek, head of department*). It is even possible to find differences in rules for bare noun usage across Standard English varieties: British English speakers use *in hospital* or *going to hospital*

whereas American English speakers prefer *in the hospital* or *going to the hospital*. So AAVE is just one of many sets of rules for how to use this grammatical form.

Omission of auxiliary verbs: We see omission of the auxiliary verb *have* in line 9. This usage is shared with many other native vernacular dialects of English in the UK and in the United States. Another well-known auxiliary omission in AAVE is the omission of the verb *be*, e.g. *He crazy!* or *She runnin'*. Again, AAVE has rules for the use of this feature. For example, the verb *be* cannot be omitted if the sentence is in past tense and is rarely omitted when the subject is in first person (*I*).

Non-standard negative form: AAVE uses *ain't* (line 10). This too is a feature shared with many vernacular native varieties of English around the world. But again, there are specific rules for how to use *ain't* and other negative forms that are specific to AAVE, as in sentences such as: *Ain't nobody seen it. Can't nobody beat it. Won't be none left tomorrow.*

Non-standard negative syntax: We can see multiple negation (line 11), another feature that is shared with dialects of English around the world and that is extremely common in human languages. Although this features is stigmatised now, it was standard in Old English (e.g. in *Beowulf*), in Middle English (e.g. in Chaucer), and in Early Modern English (e.g. in Shakespeare). It came to be prohibited from Standard English through prescriptive grammars published in the 18th century.

As with any language, all of these grammatical rules are implicitly learned and known by native speakers of AAVE but not by others, which is why a person who "pretends" to speak AAVE or mocks the dialect rarely sounds authentic.

Further reading

Rickford, John, and Russell Rickford. 2000. *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English.* New York: John Wiley.

McWhorter, John. 2017. *Talking Back, Talking Black: The Truth about America's Lingua Franca.* Bellevue Literary Press.