

## **Summary Statement on African American Vernacular English\***

This statement is grounded in current knowledge of African American Vernacular English concentrating on those aspects that have the most relevance to the acquisition of standard academic English reading and writing in the classroom. It is in response to the new criterion in the California Curriculum Commission 2008 K-8 Reading/Language Arts/English Language Arts Criteria, adopted April 17, 2006, which requires:

additional support for students who use African American Vernacular English who may have difficulty with phonological awareness and standard academic English structures of oral and written language, including spelling and grammar. –p. 456.

The range of linguistic research on the language of the African American community conducted by the authors dates from the 1960s to the present. Though there is wide variation in the use of English across the African American community, this description concentrates on African American Vernacular English [AAVE], the linguistic system used by and among many African Americans in every-day life. Throughout more than one hundred years of research conducted on this linguistic phenomenon, scholars, including the authors of this document, have given it a variety of names. Here we shall use the terminology employed in the California Curriculum Commission Adoption Criteria: "African American Vernacular English" (AAVE). Our hope is that this knowledge will be used to ensure that all children, regardless of social, ethnic, or linguistic background, have the ability to read and to write English in ways that lead to academic success.

There are still many areas of disagreement on the origin and past history of this variety and many open questions concerning the current direction of its development. However, there is general agreement on the main sound patterns and grammatical features that distinguish this variety from others. These features have often been found to be similar across the United States in areas with a high degree of residential segregation, and are represented in the language of African American children with great regularity, particularly in schools in low socioeconomic areas with a high concentration of African Americans. There is also general agreement that the goal for African American students should be additive, not subtractive: that is, learning standard academic English, without a focus on eliminating AAVE.

Because AAVE is a language system with well-formed rules for sounds, grammar and meanings, children whose speech follow these rules will be helped to learn standard academic English if they receive special practice at just those points where their language differs from the standard.

Posted by CDE April 25, 2008

1

*\*This document represents the work of several linguists, and does not form part of Chapter 9, Criteria for Evaluating Instructional Materials: Kindergarten Through Grade Eight, 2007 Reading/Language Arts Framework for California Public Schools, Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve. Created on February 13, 2008*

While there are numerous patterns that are unique to AAVE, an exhaustive account is beyond the scope of this summary, which concentrates on those patterns that have the most immediate effect on reading and writing. The crucial point is that these patterns do not form a list of separate items, but rather combine to reinforce each other. The sound patterns described in (I) below intersect in many ways with the grammatical patterns in (II). Those interested in a comprehensive, detailed description of AAVE are referred to the references attached to this summary. The most complete published account of AAVE features is to be found in J. R. Rickford, *African American Vernacular English: Features and Use, Evolution, and Educational Implications*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.

## I. Sounds.

### /th/

The initial *th-* in function words *this, then, these, other, either*, etc. is often produced as a rapidly spoken /d/, and less often like a /t/ in content words like *thing, think, through*.

At the ends of words or syllables, many speakers of AAVE do not make a difference between *-th* and *-f*, and use the sound /f/ for both, so that *bathroom* is pronounced as *bafroom* and *death* as *deaf*. Moreover, many speakers of AAVE do not hear the difference involved here.

This also applies to the consonant spelled *th* in the middle and ends of words, as in *brother* and *breathe*, which is frequently pronounced with a /v/.

The *th* words pose more of a problem for learning to spell and speak standard academic English than for learning to read.

### Pronunciation of /r/

The main regional feature of AAVE concerns the pronunciation of /r/. In the high prestige pronunciation of southern England, the sound spelled *r* after a vowel is normally pronounced as a continuation of the vowel, so that *father* and *farther, source* and *sauce* are alike. This vowel-like pronunciation was also the prestige pronunciation in Boston, New York, Richmond, Charleston and Savannah, but shortly after World War II, people in these cities began to pronounce /r/ as a consonant in careful speech, as in other parts of the U.S. In all these cities and elsewhere, African Americans use the vowel-like pronunciation of /r/ more than Whites, not only at the ends of words, but also between two vowels, as in *Flo'ida, Ca'olina, inte'ested*, etc. In cities with *r*-less dialects like New York, speakers of AAVE show much more of this pattern than in *r*-pronouncing cities like Chicago. As in Southern varieties, AAVE may eliminate all

traces of the vowel that represented /r/ in words like *sto'*, *do'*, *fo'* which sound like *stow*, *foe*, *dough* instead of *store*, *door*, *four*.

Among the consonant clusters at the beginning of the word, AAVE frequently shows the absence of /r/, as in the words *throw*, *through*, *brought*, often pronounced *th'ow*, *th'ough*, *b'ought*.

The general tendency in AAVE as elsewhere is for speakers with r-less pronunciation to pronounce /r/ as a consonant in formal speech. Whether or not speakers of AAVE acquire the pronunciation of /r/ at the ends of words, they should become aware of which words are spelled with *r* (i.e., *snore*) and which are not (*snow*).

### **Pronunciation of //**

As in several other varieties, AAVE speakers pronounce // with a vowel-like quality at the ends of words, particularly after the vowels of *cool* and *coal*. This is most extreme before the consonants /p, t, k/ where it is hard for AAVE speakers to develop phonemic awareness of the next to last segment in *help*, *belt*, *milk*, and such words are often spelled without // by AAVE-speaking students. Final *-le*, as in *people*, *couple* and *little*, is often produced as an /u/ vowel.

### **Consonant clusters.**

All English speakers show some tendency to drop the second of two consonants in words like *fist*, *wild*, *find*, *desk*, *lift*, especially when the next word begins with a consonant. Speakers of AAVE do this at a higher rate than speakers of other varieties, and show a much greater tendency in sentence final position (*This is a test.*), where other varieties tend to preserve the /t/. When the *-s* of the plural is added (*tests*, *wasps*, *desks*) the combination of three consonants is rarely heard; *tests* is realized as *tes'* or *tesses*.

As a result of these simplifications, AAVE speakers may produce and hear as homonyms *miss* and *mist*, *cold* and *coal*, *find* and *fine*. Given the vowel-like pronunciation of //, one can have even larger sets of homonyms, so that *bow* = *bowl* = *bold*. When a vowel follows, the second consonant is much more likely to be produced and heard. This is especially true within a word, so that the final /t/ of *test* is most likely to appear in *testing*, and the final /t/ of *accept* even more likely to appear in *acceptable*.

The situation is quite different for the consonant combinations *-mp*, *-nt*, *-nk*, *-lp*, *-lt*, *-lk*, where it is the first consonant that tends to be weakened and is hard to hear.

A prominent sound pattern of AAVE is the elimination of the /t/ in the common words *it's*, *that's*, *lots*, *what's*, so that these words sound like *i's*, *tha's*, *lo's* and *wha's*.

Speakers of AAVE from some regions of the South use initial /skr/ in place of /str/ so that *street* is pronounced like *skreet*.

### **/i/ and /e/ before /m/ and /n/**

As in the South generally, speakers of AAVE do not make a difference between /i/ and /e/ before the nasal consonants /m/ and /n/, so that *pin* and *pen*, *him* and *hem* sound the same. Most of the time the vowel will sound like –in for both words, but sometimes –en will be used for both. Many speakers of AAVE do not hear a difference between /i/ and /e/ in these words. This type of pronunciation is heard among most educated speakers in the South, Black and White, who are not speakers of AAVE.

Words spelled with –ing are often pronounced with the vowel of –ang, so that words like *thing*, *sing*, *ring* may have the vowel of *thang*, *sang*, *rang*. This pronunciation is widespread in the South, and generally considered non-standard.

## **II. Grammar.**

### **A. The verb system**

#### **1. Subject-verb agreement**

In the present tense of Standard academic English, a suffix –s is added to the verb if the subject is in the third person (*he*, *she*, *it*...). In AAVE, this suffix is most often absent, and there is no consistent difference between the third person and other persons. The main agreement of subject and verb is found in the verb *to be*: *I am*, *you are*, *he/she/it is*. . . In speech, the –s will sometimes appear in other places (*we goes there*; *He can gets hurt*). To acquire standard academic English speech and writing, speakers of AAVE have to learn to use –s with the third person and only there.

The regular agreement of subject and verb is also missing for the irregular verbs *does/do*, *have/has* and *was/were*. In AAVE, these are most often *do*, *have* and *was*.

#### **2. The past tense**

Standard academic English forms the past tense of regular verbs with the suffix –ed, which usually forms a consonant combination or cluster in verbs like

*worked* or *rolled* (but not in *started*). In pronunciation, these –ed suffixes form clusters of consonants (/kt, ld/). Like other consonant clusters (see page 1), this combination can be simplified, but less often than clusters that form part of the basic word (*fist, hand*). In speech, in AAVE, the second consonant is deleted more often than in other varieties, so that the past can sound the same as the present. In speech, the past sometimes is realized with two consonants (*pickted*), and this happens very often in reading, when struggling readers are trying hard to pronounce past tense verbs. This and other evidence indicates that speakers of AAVE usually understand the past tense meaning of –ed, whether or not they pronounce it. However, it is sometimes omitted in writing, and AAVE speakers have to learn when and where to use it in writing standard academic English.

AAVE can also mark the simple past tense with the auxiliary *had*, which always indicates the past perfect in standard academic English.

Standard academic English has a past perfect form, *John had told me that*, which indicates that John had told me the information at some time previous to the time being talked about. In AAVE, the past with *had* is often used to mean the simple past, so that *John had told me that* means the same as *John told me that*.

As noted above, the past tense of *be* is regularly *was*.

Like many other varieties, AAVE has many nonstandard forms of irregular verbs for the simple past and the past participle, as in *He seen that* and *He had ran over there*.

### **3. The verb *to be***

In the first person present, AAVE uses *I am* or *I'm* like other varieties, but is often reduced to “Uhm.”

Otherwise, AAVE can have the full forms *are* or *is*, the contracted forms *'re* or *'s*, or no form at all (*We are coming, we're coming, we coming; he is going, he's going, he going*). Wherever Standard academic English can use contractions, AAVE can have either contraction or nothing at all. The frequency of the “zero” form varies, less often with nouns (*He my brother*) and more often with verbs (*She goin' over there*). Children who speak AAVE often have difficulty with contracted forms, and find the uncontracted forms easier to read. To master Standard academic English, AAVE speakers have to learn not to delete *is* and *are*.

This variation is not found when *is* or *are* receive stress, as in *That's what he is*, or *Is he coming?* or *Yes he is*.

After *it, that* and *what*, *is* is fused with the /t/, as noted in the discussion of existentials below.

The complete deletion of the verb *to be* is not found in the past tense, where *was* is rarely deleted. But *was* very often appears in the plural as well as the singular, giving *They was* as well as *He was*.

Posted by CDE April 25, 2008

5

\*This document represents the work of several linguists, and does not form part of Chapter 9, Criteria for Evaluating Instructional Materials: Kindergarten Through Grade Eight, 2007 Reading/Language Arts Framework for California Public Schools, Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve. Created on February 13, 2008

AAVE frequently uses an invariant form of the verb *to be* to indicate habitual action (*He always be doing this*). To master Standard academic English, speakers of AAVE must learn to avoid this form in favor of *am*, *are* and *is*. Moreover, practice is needed in placing these words before the adverbs *always*, *never*, etc. rather than after (*He is always doing this* instead of *He always is doing this*).

## **B. The possessive system.**

In Standard academic English, 's is added to a noun to indicate possession, as in *John's cat* and *This is John's*. In AAVE, the 's suffix is normally absent when another noun follows (*John cat*) but it does appear when there is no noun (*This is John's*.) The possessive 's is also regularly added to *mine* (*This is mines*).

The possessive pronoun *whose* is not found in AAVE, but is realized as *who* (*I don't know who book it was*).

To acquire standard academic English, speakers of AAVE must learn to recognize and reproduce the 's marker of possession between two nouns.

## **C Existential constructions.**

AAVE has a number of ways of expressing 'existence', but we will focus here on the use of *it*. Like other Southern varieties, AAVE uses *it* in existential sentences, "It's a man at the door." where standard academic English uses *There* ("There's a man at the door".) As with standard academic English, the contracted verb is normally singular. This grammatical difference combines with the AAVE reduction of consonant clusters, so there are three forms pronounced [Is]

(1) existential *it*, as in "It's a whole lotta people birfday today."

(2) possessive *its*, as in "The lil bird hurt its lil wing."

(3) contracted form of *it is*, as in "The present I got, it's big."

The AAVE-speaking child will need help in the pronunciation of *its* in standard academic English, as well as help in expressing existential type sentences in standard academic English, using the patterns *there is/there are*. In writing, they will need help learning how to represent the contraction *it's* and help distinguishing the contracted form *it's* from the possessive form *its*.

## **D. The plural marking system.**

AAVE uses the plural -s like other varieties, except when numbers occur with the "nouns of measure" (*It cost five dollar, she owe me thirty cent.*) This is also a regional feature of Southern colloquial speech. However, the plural /s/ is

often observed to be absent in the writing of AAVE speakers, and practice in this feature of standard academic English can be helpful.

When the plural /s/ is added to a stem ending in /st/, the /t/ either disappears or is replaced by an unstressed vowel (*tests* is realized as *tess* or *tesses*).

### **E. The negative system**

Many nonstandard varieties of English use several negatives in a sentence where a single negative meaning is intended (*Nobody never said nothing*). The additional negatives with *no*, *never*, *neither*, appear where standard academic English uses *any*, *ever* and *either*. In AAVE, this pattern is almost 100%, and follows the logic that is most common in languages of the world, where negatives reinforce rather than cancel each other. This pattern is often combined with the foregrounding of the negative (as in Southern colloquial speech), giving *Can't nobody do that* as an emphatic way of saying *Nobody can do that*.

To master the writing and speaking of standard academic English, users of AAVE need considerable practice to gain control of *any*, *ever* and *either* after a negative word.

### **Socio-cultural attitudes**

In addition to linguistic patterns and features that impact language and literacy learning for AAVE-speaking children in K-8 classrooms, there are socio-cultural perspectives and attitudes that need to be taken into consideration, particularly for those who are middle school students, grades 5/6-8. Due to the often misunderstood, ambivalent status of African American Vernacular English in American society, some AAVE-speaking students approaching adolescence may exhibit resistance to and/or skepticism about the value of learning standard academic English. On the other hand, some students may display linguistic intolerance and rejection of their language. They may need support to learn that it is possible to acquire mastery of standard academic English without rejecting the language used by their parents in the home. The students in these upper grades will need help in understanding the relationship between language and a healthy sense of personal identity as well as assistance in identifying African American that what is appropriate in one setting is not appropriate in another, so that they can use linguistic role models fluent in both AAVE and standard academic English. Finally, we address the question of the goals of language instruction. We agree with all educators that the first and primary goal is to give the students full mastery of the reading and writing of standard academic English. This does not imply the goal of eliminating AAVE, the children's home language; rather, we

stress the importance of giving them shift easily and competently between varieties in different social contexts.

Although linguists may sometimes disagree about the historical development of AAVE and its current direction of development, it is generally accepted that AAVE is the rule-governed system described here. If appropriate methods are used in the classroom, children who speak this variety can achieve the goal of mastering standard academic English. Such instruction will be all the more effective if it identifies non-standard varieties as different, rather than inferior. We strongly advocate that all students (regardless of linguistic, social, and economic background) should be taught standard academic English in a way that respects the richness, legitimacy, and vitality of their home language.

(signed)

William Labov, Professor and Director of the Linguistics Laboratory,  
University of Pennsylvania  
H. Samy Alim, Assistant Professor of Anthropology, UCLA  
Guy Bailey, Chancellor, University of Missouri-Kansas City  
John Baugh, Professor, Director of African and African American Studies,  
Washington University in St. Louis  
Lisa J. Green, Associate Professor of Linguistics, University of  
Massachusetts, Amherst  
John R. Rickford, Professor of Linguistics, Stanford University  
Tracey Weldon, Associate Professor, English language and Literature,  
University of South Carolina  
Walt Wolfram, William C. Friday Distinguished Professor, Department of  
English, North Carolina State University