African American English: Recalcitrant Myths and Syntax, Semantics, and Pragmatics

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Myths about AAE?

What has driven the focus on AAE?
Focus

*What is the goal?*

AAE System

Description and systematic analysis
Relating AAE to other American dialects

Common  Negative  Positive
Characterizing AAE: Speakers

The uniform grammar used by African Americans who have minimal contact with other dialects typically in contexts where only speakers of that vernacular are present.
Characterizing AAE: Features

- Øcopula
- Ø3rd sg.-s
- aspectual be
Characterizing AAE: Co-existent systems

AAE contains two parallel systems with different functions and properties

- Main work of the grammar is done by the GE system
- Optional AA component is freed from the drudgery of every-day grammatical work
- AA component specialized to develop highly colored semantics of social interaction

Tense/Aspect/Modality
- aspectual particles
- affective uses
- syntactic restrictions
- semantic efflorescence
Development of co-existent systems

Two parallel systems with different functional properties
Labov (1998, p. 138)
Based on the view that speakers have more than one system of grammatical knowledge, so variation is due to the choices that speakers make about grammatical output; grammars are subsets of rules that can coexist.
“Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-hearer, in a completely homogeneous speech community.”
N. Chomsky (1979)
“I...am convinced that it would be extremely difficult to come to any suitable agreement regarding ‘ideal’ black speech or the corresponding homogeneity of the community.” J. Baugh (1983)
“In any case, the construction of complete grammars for ‘idiolects,’ even one’s own, is a fruitless and unrewarding task; we now know enough about language in its social context to realize that the grammar of a speech community is more regular and systematic than the behavior of any one individual.”
W. Labov (1972)
Characterizing AAE: Patterns and systems

Patterns & Systems

Variety that has set syntactic, phonological, semantic and lexical patterns that are intertwined with structures of general English

Idealized General English        Idealized African American English

A   B   C   D

[   X   ]

[   Y   ]
Patterns and systems view

- Substantial syntactic and semantic differences (e.g., tense/aspect)
- Type of variation (auxiliary, copula)
- Pragmatic contexts (BIN meaning: aggrandizement)
- Prosodic differences such as stress and intonation (question contours)