Issues Concerning Black Vernacular English

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This essay was written for Fundamentals of English Grammar, taught by Dr. Lloyd. The assignment was to write a research paper based on any topic related to grammar.

For centuries, the legitimacy of Black Vernacular English (BVE), or African American English (AAVE), has been contested widely among several publications, opinions, media outlets, scholars, average Joes, et cetera, because of its inadequacy to measure up to the highly anglicized Standard American English (SAE). What most people do not realize, or fail to notice, is that BVE is a credible dialect of the English language, just like the Bostonian dialect or Southern dialect. However, since BVE is more widely used than most of its other non-SAE dialectical counterparts, it almost becomes a threat to the typical manic grammarian. Several misconceptions are to be addressed throughout this writing, including a brief history on BVE, the use of linguistics as a form of racism, the fact that it is and can be used competently as a useful grammatical structure, and some controversy that has risen in modern times.

Like just about any other language or dialect, BVE has its roots within another language. While BVE is a dialect of SAE, meaning, it is more or less a sub-language of SAE, its roots are also comprised of African languages and dialects. When African slaves were brought to America, they obviously did not have the privilege of being able to speak their own language within their community as other immigrants did such as Germans, Italians, Asians, and so on. They were not afforded the luxury of building their own “Little Africa” or carving themselves a place in American history. It was built and carved for them. When African slaves became the property of someone else, namely, a slaveholder, he or she made the decisions of every aspect of the slaves’ lives for them, including the language that was to be spoken. Think about what it is like to learn another language. Given the circumstances, one would rely heavily upon native speakers to learn the language, pronunciations, and inflections in order to speak in a competent way. The slaveholders, recognizing this difficulty, spoke to their slaves in the least formal way, stripping phrases and sentences completely to their deep structures: from the very beginning the white overlords addressed themselves in English to their black vassals. It is not difficult to imagine the kind of English this would be. It would be a very much simplified English – the kind of English some people employ when they talk to babies. It would probably have no tenses of the verb, no distinctions of case in nouns or pronouns, no makers of singular or plural. Difficult sounds would be eliminated, as they are in baby-talk… [the slaves] themselves were driven to the use of this infantile English in speaking to one another… (Smitherman 172)

From this, we can gather that the slaves had no reinforcement or grading scale in which they could keep track of their progress in pursuing another language. While the issue is not whether or not they received a gold star along the way of acquiring a new language, obviously being taught in an inefficient way had detrimental effects in that it became yet another way for slave owners and whites in general to mark them. And so the language began to change. What was once a “ pidgin,” a rough communication between two types of people that spoke two different languages, became what is called a “creole,” or a completely different dialect. Connie Eble describes this transformation in her widely publicized PBS article: “Africans...creat[ed]
a language for immediate and limited communication called a *pidgin*. When Africans forgot or were forbidden to use their African languages to communicate with one another, they developed their English pidgin into their native tongue. A language that develops from a pidgin into a native language is called a *creole*” (Eble).

It is also important to note that while most white Americans have books with first accounts of their history, many pictures of their ancestors (perhaps sometimes butchered) records of them coming to Ellis Island, most blacks today do not have that same luxury. This is because their history, more or less, is an oral one that was passed down through the generations because for a long time, there were not many slaves that were given the opportunity to learn how to read and write. In John Baugh’s scholarly article titled “A Survey of Afro-American English,” he explains this concept in more depth:

Black Americans were the only group to migrate to the United States who were not allowed to preserve their native language through transitional bilingual communities. Unlike the European immigrants, who typically left countries with well-established written traditions, black slaves left a homeland where oral histories were more common.” (Baugh 345)

Surely, this had some implications on the way BVE is styled today. Foreexample, there are tens, if not hundreds of thousands of books today that directly explain the proper and improper ways of using SAE. Not so much for BVE.

Unfortunately, those who use BVE are often socially marked. The case between BVE and SAE certainly is no different. Whites using “baby-talk” as a tool for talking down to their slaves is only one illustration of many types of hegemonic uses concerning grammar and rhetoric. In Geneva Smitherman’s book, *Talkin’ and Testifyin’*, she demonstrates such a notion: “The early grammarians who envisioned their task as one of ‘regularizing’ and ‘purifying’ common speech unwittingly became part of the grand design to perpetuate the centuries-old class system” (Smitherman 187). She also talks about the “national mania for correctness” (185), a phrase coined by linguist Donald Lloyd in the regard that it applies to major white elitism. The fact that there is even an issue concerning whether or not BVE should be accepted into our American institutions such as schools or the workforce is a chilling example in itself. Because of the way those who use BVE speak, they are almost automatically discounted by most of their white counterparts because for some reason, such a dialect is considered “ghetto” or “lazy speak.” Such a racist notion has leaked into just about every single American institution. We constantly hear about how we should all express ourselves and embrace our uniqueness. The part that is left off is that it is okay to be an individual, as long as you conform to the collective whole (collective whole being white upper-to-middle class America).

It is no secret, nor a surprise, that institutions often use racism, especially through language. In our schools, “traditional methodologies have failed primarily because they have been prescriptive and corrective, and have focused on language structure rather than on communicative competency” (Taylor 40). The idea of the nun with a ruler comes to mind, where a single utterance of “ain’t” could get someone in big trouble. Mr. Taylor goes on to say: “African American children are fully capable of acquiring competency in [SAE]. However, they must be taught to do so in an environment… that motivates them to master [SAE] and inspires in them the belief that they can do so” (Taylor 40). Sounds like common sense, right? That’s because it is.

The workforce is also a large hurdle with those that regularly speak BVE.

[T]he social world ‘out there’ (presumably beyond the ghetto, where all blacks aspire to, right?) demands linguistic conformity of blacks. Thus black students will need to master “correct” White English in order to get ovuh in the white world, hence they must learn to be switch hitters, dropping their Africanized English speech for White English as social situations warrant it.” (Smitherman 207)

Taking the previous idea a step further, Gerrard McClendon, author of the book *Ax or Ask? The African American Guide to Better English*, called for African Americans “to be able to code switch...moving in and out of a situation to basically protect [themselves]” (McClendon). His main argument is that while it is important to celebrate the language within BVE, it
is also important to have SAE readily available when a situation arises that makes it necessary. He goes on to say: "The black community basically suffers from economic, employment, and educational exploitation because we do not have adequate facility with the language" (McClendon). Mr. McClendon's gift is rare because he is sending a positive message to the young black community by example. Time and again, those who speak BVE are very negatively criticized for the way they speak by whites. That is why Mr. McClendon's work is so important. Instead of sending a negative message, "You'll never get a job or move up in society speaking like that," Mr. McClendon empowers black youth to not only learn SAE, but to want to learn it so they have the same chances and opportunities as their peers. Just like speaking a different way in front of peers than in front of elders, Mr. McClendon encourages the black youth to do the same with the way they speak. The example he used was something to the effect of: "You wouldn't wear pajamas to an interview... there's a time and a place for that" (McClendon). Just like there is a time and place for BVE (at home), there is a time and place for SAE (social settings).

Mr. McClendon is also unsettled by the education black children are receiving in regards to learning SAE. The message he is sending is a clear one: something needs to be done immediately within schools so that children may learn to speak "proper" English. His work involves traveling to schools across the country in order to educate our youth who regularly speak BVE to also familiarize themselves with SAE so they may have better opportunities. It is tremendously important for African Americans to take his message for what it is worth, because he could be seen as a role model for those who instead idolize rappers and sports stars. His solution is that teachers need to handle the issue regarding SAE versus BVE more carefully and take a more proactive role in these kids’ education by correcting their BVE, should the occasion arise. Because many black children and families do not have the advantage of being the ones in power, (i.e., board members and administrators in school districts, politicians, lawmakers, etc.) they are a minority among those who are raised to speak "proper" English and those who have the power to govern the way the education system operates. It is a slippery slope from the minute black children begin kindergarten because, according to Mr. McClendon, teachers are not correcting children's grammar. So what is the solution? In a perfect world, we could all speak in our own way, with our own dialect, and not be discriminated against or judged by the way we speak. But, as we have seen throughout history, it is only the popular group (and by popular, I mean the one that holds most of the power) that has the ability to shape the standards of society, make the rules, establish norms, and institutionalize acceptable ways of thinking, speaking, walking, working, playing, socializing in just about every aspect of our lives. It has been said that those who learn best are those who take what they already know and apply it to what they are learning. In my opinion, it is the best way to address the education issues children face with learning SAE. Going back to the example of learning another language, it would be most beneficial for children who speak BVE regularly to learn how to “translate” it into SAE, just as one would learn how to say a phrase in Spanish. Some may find it bothersome and unnecessary to learn BVE in order to teach SAE, but I feel that true lovers of grammar, especially those wanting to teach it, should familiarize themselves with the basic structures to enable them to ‘interpret’ sentences and phrases to children that do not have an enriched background with SAE. Like any language or dialect, creole, pidgin, whatever you want to call it, BVE has a rich history, and there is a reason it carries on today. Although it may not carry a meaning to the larger population, it does not mean that it should be discounted or treated as less of a language.
Works Cited


