Reaching Identity in African American Vernacular English – Origin and Development:

A Review of the Literature

Mark Miller
Abstract
In the last half-century, more research has been dedicated to the language of African American Vernacular English (AAVE or Ebonics) than any other creole in the United States. Because the language has influenced our modern culture within the spheres of literature, performing arts, and as a sociopolitical tool, understanding how the language developed is a primary concern for establishing its identity. In order to associate an identity for AAVE, researchers have performed studies on the syntax of similar creoles, pidgins, and dialects to suggest how AAVE may have emerged. Its unique tenses, syntax, and phonology are discussed as elements that allow the language to continue to develop in the United States. After reviewing how AAVE may have emerged and the elements that allowed it to evolve, an observation of its development beyond the United States is reviewed in order to illustrate a continuum in the evolution of the language. This examination of AAVE discusses the evolution of the language through its origins and continuing development.
Evolution in AAVE through Origin and Development:

A Review of the Literature

If an identity can be reached by analyzing the evolution of AAVE, a review of the aspects that contribute to that evolution is necessary. In concerning the identity of AAVE, the aspects of origin and development are reviewed. AAVE is a dialect that combines Standard American English (SAE) with the linguistic elements of African American speech. Even in America where AAVE has thrived, an understanding of the terms used to refer to AAVE and how they originated is necessary. Winford (2000) established that the general focus among scholars concerning AAVE is the issue of its “genesis” (p. 409). The origin of AAVE is dependent upon the particular theory used to explain how languages evolve. AAVE is often referred to as Ebonics in the United States. The term “Ebonics” was coined by Dr. Robert Williams in 1973 as a mixture of the two words “ebony” and “phonics.” Ebonics has been commonly used as a term that is synonymous with AAVE. Through this review of the literature, AAVE will be used to refer to the language of African Americans. The literature reviewed pertained to the following aspects of AAVE that contributed to the language’s evolution:

1. Theories on origin.
2. The Development of Pidgins and Creoles through migration.
3. The elements of AAVE that determined its development.
4. The development of AAVE beyond America

A comprehension of these aspects has illustrated an evolutionary process that exemplifies the identity of AAVE.
Theories on Origin

The issue of origin has had many aspects that make it difficult to pinpoint where and when AAVE first originated. Several theories on the genesis of AAVE exist. Wolfrom (2000) mentions “the Angllicict hypothesis – that the speech of African Americans essentially was derived directly from British-based dialects” (p. 39). Wolfrom also noted the “creolist hypothesis” and “the language contact situation.” The dilemmas of accepting any single theory pertaining to the origin for AAVE exists because written records of the language may not have been a reliable source. Circumstances like enslavement contributed to how the language developed and also how reliable records could have been suppressed. Wolfrom noted that there was a “prohibition against literacy imposed on slaves” and that any early African American formal writing would not likely consist of the phonological or vernacular expressions of AAVE since the education of literacy was considered a privilege (p. 40). Even though the language has been used in the United States for many years, there was simply not enough accurate information for scholars to confirm a true identity for it. Since these dilemmas exist, the focus of establishing origin has been difficult when taking a formal approach. Therefore, scholars have had to focus their attention to the creation of other creole languages that share similarities with AAVE.

The Development of Pidgins and Creoles through Migration.

Separate cultures have combined two different languages into a single dialect in order to communicate. The new dialect emerged as a result of migration. Scholars often refer to these newborn dialects as a creole or pidgin, depending on the dialect’s progress. A creole is a language defined as “a pidgin that has become the mother tongue of a speech community through a process of creolization” (Blackshire-Belay, 1996, p. 8). Blackshire-Belay also explained a pidgin as a speech method developed by a group of people that has a “reduced
structure” in order to be understood by another group (p. 8). When pidgin languages become widely used, they develop into a creole. The migrations of people from tribes in West Africa, the Caribbean, South America, Southeast Asia, and many others had often formed language contact situations where a pidgin and creole were created. Blackshire-Belay (1996) mentions that “one of the best known non-European pidgins is Chinook Jargon, once used for trading by American Indians in the northwest of the United States” (p. 13). In comparison, AAVE has been suggested as a product of migration, the necessity for communication between diverse groups, and as an evolved creole language. Winford (2000) mentioned that scholars believe that the most likely creole that AAVE descended from is Gullah. Clear evidence of a direct lineage to Gullah is not likely to present itself formally. Hackert and Huber (2007) mentioned that “Bermuda had first been settled in 1609” by a British religious organization and also, that “from the beginning, servants and slaves were part of shipments that arrived in the Bahamas” (p. 280). Whether or not Gullah is the exact creole originating from the Bahamas, from this British settlement in 1609, or if the creole had developed from an earlier established ancestry to the Bahamas is noted as undetermined with the research. As for AAVE as an established language in the United States, the creation of the language was no doubt a by-product of European colonialism and enslavement of African Americans, which forced their migration to a new world (Blackshire-Belay, 1996, p. 11).

**The Elements of AAVE that Can Determine Its Development.**

Since there was an enslavement that forced a migration of Africans into America, the language of African Americans has continued to develop due to its unique elements. The elements are based on simplicity and influenced by contact between dialects. Besides the element of syntax, the linguistic variations in the phonetic sound of the language are unique because the
speaker can adopt the atmosphere or environment within the languages’ pronunciation. The migration of African Americans into the United States effected how some elements of AAVE derived. Labov (2010) noted how AAVE speakers may have inherited phonological elements in forward dialect shifting or reverse shifting to differentiate themselves from their environment. How African Americans adopted their environment or were perceived in a particular way has contributed to the development of AAVE. In some areas in the North, African Americans participated in the common dialect shift of English, and AAVE speakers simply inherited the new sound for simplification (Labov, p. 2). The phonology of AAVE dialect favors the effect of pause for simplicity, where other dialects show a disfavoring effect (Labov, 2010; Guy, 1980). The concept that AAVE is based on simplicity allows for its development to be manipulated by its speaker’s mood. Labov noticed that “the ways in which AAVE is expanding and flourishing appear most clearly in the semantics of mood and aspect” (p. 3). Since multiple aspects like frequency, tense variation, and establishing pause could affect the overall meaning of AAVE, these aspects allow it to be malleable in an array of circumstances. When African Americans migrated North in the United States, these circumstances were provided. AAVE has evolved because of its ability to adopt new cultures in America along with America’s already diverse phonetic mixture of SAE dialects. The sounds of AAVE in American culture might have relied on the migration of African Americans prior to the millennia, but the language has continued to develop between cultures beyond America as well. AAVE has originated from simplicity with the element to express the attitude of the speaker, which may have played a role in its ability to influence and evolve in cultures outside America.
The Development of AAVE beyond America

AAVE continued to develop and influence multiple cultures across the globe. One contributor is rap music which had an appeal to youth because of its vocalization of common hardships some youth experience. Also, it has an appeal to male youth through its association with masculinity. The use of AAVE in rap, hip hop, or in pop-culture is not limited to any one single ethnic group (Lee, 2011). In more depth, the use of AAVE in these cultures and their performing arts is not mutually exclusive to America. The influence of AAVE on Korean pop-culture, in particular, Korean hip hop is seen in Korean youth. They were immediately attracted to hip hop when it was first revealed in South Korea (Lee, 2011). Lee noted that Korean hip hop was known as “K-hip hop” (p. 5). The emergence of AAVE among culturally diverse groups is an indicator that the language is developing a “cross-national” (p. 6) influence. Since the migration of the language is not isolated to African Americans, the term “cross-racial AAVE” or “CRAAVE” is explained by Bucholtz (1999)

CRAAVE is not a unified speech style; different speakers draw on different features of AAVE phonology, syntax, and morphology, and their speech does not correspond to most African Americans' linguistic patterns. Yet CRAAVE is understood as an emblematic use of AAVE by both African Americans and by other European Americans (pp. 445-6).

Rap music in America has been heavily structured with the use of AAVE vernacular elements and style. The use of AAVE’s unique style in the hip hop cultures of other nations outside of America, as in Korea, are partly connected to the ability for the language of English to rhyme. Besides Korea, a study indicated that Swedish and Danish DJ’s also rap in English because of the English language’s ability to formulate the style of rap music better than their
native tongue (Lee, 2011; George, 1998). The elements that AAVE are developed from enable the user to manipulate English into a harmonic and rhythmic language that cultures around the world have utilized for their own needs. Its appeal to these diverse groups of people consists of a common culture undefined by language alone. These aspects have helped AAVE emerge and evolve as a language.

The evolution of AAVE has been reviewed by looking at the most common aspects that languages utilize in order to be sufficient for their respected populations. Realizing how AAVE has the ability to manipulate a dialect and shift the sounds of its environment can help us understand that it is more than a language. AAVE has evolved from a method of simplification between dialects which means that it has an identity similar to the characteristics of a chameleon. Research is able to point out these changing elements of the language by the examples of dialect shifting. A review of the literature explains the possibilities that AAVE is not limited to African Americans or even to America. From one culture to another, the true identity of AAVE may only be restricted to the fundamental elements that characterize the aspects of the language.
References


