

Research Article

A Sociolinguistic Perspective on Linguistic Exclusion, Racial Segregation and Status of African–American Vernacular English

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ABSTRACT

The African–Americans have time and again suffered a state of denial from the dominant class. The hegemonic mindset of the Whites had pushed the African–Americans on the periphery and given them a substandard status. Winant (2001). The world is a ghetto: Race and democracy since World War II. New York: Basic Books) says that to be ‘*white conferred a deserved advantage on those so identified while a dark skin properly signified inferiority*’. This racial discrimination and ‘white supremacy’ have suppressed the voices of the margins for a long time. Not only the African–Americans but their language was also tagged as being substandard by the White Americans. Where on one hand, it is considered to be language marred in its grammar by the non-speakers, on the other, is termed the ‘Language of the Soul’ by the native speakers, Claude Brown being one of them. It was a language that brought the African–Americans together. After the Great Migration, the African–Americans faced segregation at all fronts which included housing as well. This segregation brought severe economic, social and political hardships upon them and resulted in the emergence of ghettos. However, this Ghettoisation had a positive effect as it ‘*gave rise to vibrant culture, symbolized by Harlem Renaissance and it also gave rise to language and cultural segregation*’ (Massey DS and Denton NA, 1993. American apartheid: Segregation and the making of the underclass. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press). The blacks intentionally developed a language which was distinct from the Standard American English and followed a set grammatical pattern. This paper studies the plight of the African–Americans

during slavery; racial segregation post Civil War; the fight for respectable status for themselves and their language; and the problems they are still facing to gain that status. The paper shows that how even after facing constant rejections and marginalisation, the African-Americans take pride in their culture and language.

Keywords: African-American Vernacular English, Harlem renaissance, Slavery, Racial discrimination, Voices of the margins

African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) is a language that has emerged as a direct result of African-European contact on the shores of the then United States of America. It started with the arrival of the African slaves on the West African continent which is now known as the United States of America. The newly arrived slaves developed a language 'peculiar' to themselves, a confused version of Negro¹ and 'corrupt English'. Smitherman (1977) considers this onset from 1619 when a Dutch vessel brought 20 Africans in Jamestown which according to her marked the beginning of slavery in Colonial America. But if we are to believe Rickford and Rickford (2000) then its origin goes way back to 1526, when one hundred slaves were brought to form part of a Spanish expedition which attempted to settle in Virginia.

Historical discussions about the origin of AAVE often start at the point at which African slaves were thrust into a linguistic situation in which they had to learn English (Green, 2002). The new settlers were few in number, and thus, it is suggested that they would have learnt English comparatively quicker than the later slaves. They learnt English from the '*independent slaves and other colonials they met in Africa which suggests that there was unschooled second language learning everywhere.*' As the slaves acquired the language without any formal instruction (Rickford, 1999a,b), they simplified the features of the target language and at the same time inserted the words and features of their native language in this new developing variety.

There have been different types of views given apropos the history of AAVE. The two most famous hypotheses which are prevalent about the origin of the AAVE are the Creolist and the Anglicist hypothesis. The Creolist hypothesis, being the more dominant one believes that AAVE started as a Creole. Sutcliffe, Green, Rickford and Smitherman all have acknowledged adherence to this hypothesis. Rickford and Rickford (2000) and Smitherman (2006) both have given an elaborate account of the Creole origin of AAVE which started with the arrival of African slaves. The pattern of features that it shares with other English-based creoles, like

¹The terms like Negro, Slaves, Blacks, when addressing to African-Americans, have been used to refer to the then prevalent attitude. The authors of this paper do not intend addressing them likewise.

Jamaican Creole and Trinidad Creole and others is one of the reasons that validate the hypothesis. Smitherman (2006) further tells that as vocabulary and sound structure is comparatively easy to master than the syntactic rules '*they attempted to fit the words and sounds of new language into the basic idiomatic mould of their native tongue*'.

The other view supports the Anglicist hypothesis which is also known as the dialectologist frame. This hypothesis suggests that the patterns of AAVE are derived from other varieties of English brought from British Isles. Some features of AAVE are even similar to hypercorrections which are found in the language of second language learners. The third hypothesis discussed by Sutcliffe (1998) that overlaps the other two hypotheses is divergence/innovation hypothesis which proposes that 'the typical ways in which AAVE now differs from other dialects of English have emerged particularly over the last hundred years.'

Mufwene (2001) supports the Founder Principle in which he suggests that '*Africans who came to the colonies would have had the goal of adapting local norms of the area as opposed to establishing their own. This means the language used by the founders of the colonies had a huge impact on the language of the Africans and the coming generations*'. And since going back to Africa for help was obviously not possible for the slaves. So they established a connection with their culture and heritage through the language they spoke, and hence, they included the features of their native tongue and divergence from White Standard English (Rickford and Rickford, 2000). Rickford and Rickford further opine that when Africans came and settled in the United States, they were majorly bilinguals that is they spoke both their native language and the pidgin English developed by them. But as the slaves belonged to different linguistic backgrounds, a common African language was missing. Thus, the lack of people to talk to in their native tongue resulted in the death of their own languages in the new place and their coming generations started speaking Black English. There are some scholars who believe that the 'devastating slavery' was the reason behind the wiping out of most of the African linguistic and cultural features.

As African–Americans were smaller in number compared with the Whites, it had a huge impact on the language and culture of Blacks. Smitherman (1977) rightly puts it by saying that the '*influence of majority culture and language on its minority is powerful indeed, and there is a great pressure on minorities to assimilate and adopt the culture and language of the majority*'. By the mid-eighteenth century the number of African–Americans in the southern regions not only increased substantially but they also outnumbered the Whites in some regions. This had a side effect on their linguistic features as now they learnt English from other Black speakers and not from the Whites, and thus, they continued to learn the vernacular

form. The second effect on the language was the social impact. As Whites felt threatened and implemented harsher laws restricting the rights of the Black population, such laws further increased the barrier between the communities and pulled the African-Americans away from the White Americans. They did not want themselves to be identified as the speakers of the language of those people who ill-treated them so badly. Thus, they furthered their distance from the so-called Standard English and used more of their vernacular features. The black/white differences extended to the other aspects of culture as well, and the Africans-Americans consequently started communicating through music and art.

To describe the ambivalent conditions of Blacks in America, Dubois Du Bois (1903) used the term 'double consciousness'. This double consciousness was an outcome of long-suffered subordination and dominance experienced during slavery. The African-Americans were victims of 'push-pull' syndrome where at times they pushed themselves towards White American culture but at other times they pulled away from it. If we are to believe the Creole hypothesis, then the 'push' would lead to de-creolisation of the language while pull would bring back to re-creolisation. The advertisements of runaway slaves found in newspapers as evidence of Black speech show their competence in speaking English. It was true that Negroes who could speak better English were well off compared with their other Black counterparts. This forced them towards the language and culture of the Whites. Also the need to feel equal or be like the Whites was another motivating reason for them to push towards White Culture. In fact, even their survival as a freeman depended on the competence in White English. As we have learnt from the earlier discussions that many scholars do believe that BEV (Black English Vernacular) was initially more close to the SE, (Standard English) and is now drifting away from as oppression and slavery brought them back to their own culture.

Also, the policy of separating the families resulted in gradual decrease in the use of their native language. This separatist policy created hatred in the hearts of the African-Americans against the White Americans. Dillard (1972) firmly believed that at one time Blacks spoke Standard English and the reason for the spread of AAVE in whole America can partly be accounted to the domestic slave trade in which the slaves were migrated towards West from South. The reason for this Great Migration of 1916 could be attributed to another kind of push-pull factor that is fall in demand of farmers and rise in demand of unskilled labourers in northern cities. This population diffusion can be one of the strong reasons for the uniformity of the variety along with the breaking up of the black families. This traumatic separation was one of the pivotal reasons that resulted in the pull of African-Americans from SE. They did not want to speak the language of those

who were so cruel to them. The migration further aggravated the hatred among the African–Americans as there was maintenance of rigid colour line through violence and discrimination. Legal enforcement of racial segregation began in 1910 (Massey and Denton, 1993). African–Americans are more often than not accused of creating disturbances and looting was because of social isolation and economic deprivation. Barriers to their spatial mobility in a way became a barrier to social mobility as well. The high degree of segregation imposed on the blacks ensured their social and economic isolation from the rest of the American society.

The White Americans always believed that the African–Americans were born to serve them. Being white conferred a certain kind of supremacy which the coloured people obviously didn't deserve. Such attitudes are evidenced even in fictional works of various authors. For example, in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936), the slaves and their masters live in absolute harmony and even after being freed they crave for guidance. Mitchell, in her work portrays an '*idealised antebellum South in which the Blacks as slaves and the Whites as masters lived harmoniously*' (Burks, 2004). As we see later in the novel, even after the end of the civil war, one of the slaves at Tara remains faithful to Scarlett and wants to serve his master as he doesn't know what else to do. A typical anti-slave attitude is visible at the time when even if free, the slaves want to go back to their masters for security and are happy to get commands from them. In the novel, we find Sam, Scarlett's freed slave, pleased to come back and follow her commands. An example from the text validates a typical White having the attitude of – '*Sams face glowed with relief at once more having someone to tell him what to do*'. This situation reminds us of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1980), where Sophia's character tells about the White people's mentality by saying that '*they have the nerve to try to make us think that slavery fell through because of us (blacks). Like us don't have sense enough to handle it*'. The two novels portray typical attitudes of an outsider verses insider. Walker being an African–American reflects the thoughts of the working class. But Mitchell's attitude portrays a typical white mentality who could never imagine that African–Americans could lead a life of themselves or would want independence.

Aptheker (1944) tries to go against this general belief that the Negroes were content with their situation and that they were too docile and devoted as slaves to revolt against their masters. In his work, he tried to show that they were full of discontent and revolts kept on occurring from time to time. Aptheker criticised the common belief that is prevalent that Negroes were stupid, dumb and inherently inept to do any kind of uprising. He points out that rather than being mere victims they often revolted against the ill treatment done towards them.

The Whites, thus, dominated both politically and economically for a long time. Many economists sight economic deprivation as one of the major causes of the poor condition but the present study tries to make it clear that race dominated over economic class as no matter to what income group the Blacks belonged, they remained segregated. In fact, even class division was a result of segregation (Massey and Denton, 1993). This segregation gave birth to different classes where African-Americans belonged to the lowest stratum.

Since languages are not divorced from people, the language of African-Americans was also labelled as being substandard. The linguistic prejudice of various authors and other speakers of Standard English was a result of the social prestige attached not with the variety but its speakers. The explanation lies in the fact that languages are used by individuals and groups and are not detached from the people who use it. As the language has its origins in slave cultures, therefore it was not regarded in high esteem by many writers and scholars and was considered to be a mark of laziness, both mental and physical. People, who think in deprecating terms for this variety of English, believe it to be simply incorrect and ungrammatical with unnecessary modifications and elisions of verbs and syllables. Rickford and Rickford (2000) argue against the pre-conceived notions and say that every human language and dialect whether they are hated or loved, prestigious or not, has regularities or rules of its own type. If it wasn't for the regular pattern of rules, the language could not have been acquired by the people and their coming generations which prove that the features of AAVE are not random.

Claude Brown as cited in Smitherman (2000) calls it the 'Language of the Soul' while Norman Mailer who was a white writer named it as 'language of the hip'. This very nomenclature is a proof enough for the attitude of white speakers over Black English. But the negative attitude towards the variety is sometimes reflected not only by White American writers but also by Black American writers and most of the times even the African-Americans use this variety as the language of the unprivileged slaves or the uneducated or undereducated and the stigma attached to language is not on the vernacular but on its speakers. The early representation of AAVE was to add humour (Minnick, 2004). Earlier, it was the language of the slaves and post-slavery, it became the language of the working class. It was in the later years when African-American writers emerged and started representing their language and culture through literary texts that the language got its due attention.

The underclass of the United States which majorly comprised of the black population was formed because of segregation. Although the word segregation seemed to have disappeared from the American vocabulary, but its practice was still prevalent in the United States (Massey and Denton, 1993). They show in

their work show that there was hardly any segregation prior to the American Civil War. It was majorly after the beginning of the twentieth or particularly the World War II that high degree of residential segregation started and Blacks were forced to go into social and racial isolation. This gave rise to ghettos. A ghetto can be described not simply as a black residential area but as '*a neighbourhood which is exclusively inhabited by members of a particular group within which virtually all members of that group live*'.

The emergence of the ghettos, however, had a positive effect as it 'gave rise to vibrant culture', symbolised by Harlem Renaissance and its New Negroes who glorified the culture of southern Blacks. Ghettoisation also gave rise to language and cultural segregation too. The Blacks developed a language which was distinct from the Standard American English and followed a set grammatical pattern. As already said in addition to the segregation of language, black individuals also underwent a segregation of culture which was indeed a rejection. Massey and Denton opine that the rejection was and is to the values, the aspirations and techniques of the society by which they have been previously rejected.

Segregation in housing, jobs, rights ownership of arms and ammunitions, in short, the nature of dual treatment was a major factor which resulted in resentment among the African–Americans. And as such, they wanted to create their own peculiar variety/style which would bring in solidarity and to achieve it they created a language typical to themselves. '*The fact that Spoken Soul often marks the oppositional identity of Blacks vis-à-vis whites and mainstream culture is undoubtedly part of the reason for its vibrant existence to this day*'.

Separate linguistic evolution stemmed from the high degree of segregation imposed on Blacks in the United States. It resulted in a cultural and artistic explosion which is famously termed as the Harlem Renaissance. Harlem, a district of New York City became the centre of intellectual outburst. The period between 1918 and 1937 was a period of blossoming African–American culture and it saw the most important movement in the African–American literary history. It reconceptualised 'the Negro' and set them apart from the White Stereotypes (Hutchison, 2016). Up till now, the African–Americans, their culture and their language was represented mostly by White authors but this period saw the emergence of a considerable number of African–American authors and thinkers like W.E.B Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston and many others. The African–Americans now started taking pride in their culture, their history and their language.

This language which got its label of being substandard because of the people who spoke it and not just their language was not fighting for a respectable status. The

label given to the variety is often related to the social climate (Green, 2002), and since the climate was negative earlier, the variety was termed as Negro English. The period of Harlem Renaissance developed a sense of pride in their race and culture, and thus, AAVE started its fight for a respectable status where it could get its due recognition.

Marcyliena (2002) describes AAVE as a ‘counter language’ which ‘began as a conscious attempt on the part enslaved Americans and their descendants to represent an alternative reality through a communication system based on ambiguity, irony and satire.’ In recent times, it can be seen that they are proud of being Black and mark their language as a mark of their identity and solidarity as it is one thing that brings all the African–Americans together. AAVE referred to a variety *which was ‘an ethnic and social dialect spoken by African–Americans who (were) members of working class obviously it also served to give a general description of the linguistic features of the variety’*.

CONCLUSION

Thus ‘the roots of African America speech lie in the counter language, the resistance discourse that was created as a communication system to speakers of the dominant master class. Enslaved Africans and their descendants assigned alternate and sometimes oppositional semantics to English words’ (Smitherman, 2006). It was a language born in the crucible of Black economic oppression. This language served as a mark of social identity and a linguistic bond. During the early years, this bond brought the enslaved African of disparate ethnicities together, and in later years, it served as a bond between the now African Americans of disparate socio-educational classes. Today, it is all over the nation. From enslavement to present day, Africans in America continue to push the linguistic envelop.

However, there are still considerable hindrances in pushing this envelop and doing completely away with the linguistic stereotype. This barrier is because of the never ending fight for a respectable social status of the African–Americans. Winant (2001) believes that the world is still a ghetto where the white-skinned people considered themselves superior to the ‘underprivileged’ dark-skinned. He identified with Du Bois’ problem of the racial world. Du Bois believed *that the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line*. And Winant believes that dual racism prevails in this world which is similar to Dubois’ double consciousness. The present world is trying to portray that it is colour blind but segregationist attitudes are still present in them. There are stereotypes, exclusion, which still imposes the superiority of the Whites. The biggest problem is that, there is a growing tendency to think this task as largely accomplished and this prevents the developed white class to make efforts to improve and change. Alexander (2010)

state that in this era of colour blindness (at least the United States claims to be so) the political system is clever enough to still have a separatist attitude towards the African–Americans. But they try to cover this attitude under the veil of the charges of criminal offence, and thus, label the people of colour as criminals. She says that ‘*we have not ended racial caste we have just redesigned it.*’

The people of colour have got a second class status as a person who comes out of prison is denied of many rights like right to vote, job options, getting house and others and how hard or rather impossible it becomes for them to find a respectable place in the society. Alexander wants us to do away with the prevalent stereotypes that Blacks commit crime because it’s a part of their personality and how they grow. She calls for a change in attitude not only in the White Americans but also in African–Americans who should not try to be aloof from their group but rather take pride in their identity. For dismantling this ghetto and ending the long reign of racial segregation, it requires a moral commitment but unfortunately White America has historically lacked such a commitment.

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