

AFRICAN AMERICAN STANDARD ENGLISH

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43.1 Introduction

It is essential to draw attention to the existence of African American Standard English (AASE) since many linguists, other scholars, and laypersons typically make a distinction between African American English (AAE) and Standard American English (SAE), erroneously implying that all AAE is vernacular (i.e., nonstandard). Taylor (1983) made this point, and it still holds. Earlier, for example in the 1950s to 1960s, AAE was sometimes referred to as “Black¹ dialect,” as opposed to SAE. This use of dialect implied that a dialect is somehow less than a standard language variety. Among linguists, dialect is used non-judgmentally. It refers merely to a different way of speaking the “same” language. Thus, AAE is a dialect of American English (composed of many subdialects), just as what Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain speaks is also a dialect of English. The term *language variety*, or just *variety*, is sometimes used instead of *dialect* to avoid any suspicion of evaluation, particularly among lay audiences.

AASE can be defined for introductory purposes as a standard variety (composed of many subvarieties) of American English that has distinctively Black (i.e., African American) grammatical features, hereinafter DBGFs.² DBGFs are found uniquely, or nearly so,³ in AAE varieties. An example of a DBGF is what linguists term stressed *BIN*, written with capital letters in AAE studies to indicate stress and spelled in this manner to emphasize that it is the AAE form (e.g., *She BIN married* “She has been married a long

time and still is married”). Overwhelmingly, the speakers of AAE are African American,⁴ though there are exceptions.

AASE is a group of varieties of AAE. AASE is a type of AAE: it has DBGFs, but none that are stigmatized or considered nonstandard (e.g., the use of *ain't*). For the most part, no one but an AAE specialist could detect the DBGFs in AASE because they are grammatically camouflaged, as explained below.

Pointing out the existence of AASE is not the only reason for writing about it. AASE is an excellent site for the study of language in society and culture. First, it contributes greatly to our understanding of linguistic accommodation (Coupland 2010), since within its grammar we see clearly the push-pull of the “two-ness” of African American culture (DuBois [1903] 1961), the simultaneous existence in the Black psyche of Eurocentric and African American-centric norms, often in conflict with each other. AASE provides accommodation research, in particular, a site for enriching its understanding of long-term accommodation processes, those involving *enregisterment*—the formation and maintenance of language varieties. Particularly useful in this regard is the notion of grammatical *camouflage* (Spears 1982, 2007, 2008; Spears and Hinton 2010) and especially camouflage as linked to *grammatical incommensurability* (Spears 2009), grammatical features in one language having no counterparts in certain other languages or dialects. Camouflage is a macro-pattern in AASE grammar, one making it difficult to detect DBGFs in AASE—and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as well. The disapproval marker and semi-auxiliary *come* is one example: *He came⁵ coming in my room, didn't even knock* “He had the nerve to come in my room. . . .” The

first *come* is the disapproval marker, expressing the speaker's strong disapproval; and the second, the familiar motion verb *come* (Spears 1982, 2008).

Second, and directly related to the first point, AASE provides insight into language contact (more importantly, dialect contact), in revealing how ethno-racially linked grammar features are retained but often modified in order for speakers to walk with equilibrium the fine line between community-external linguistic pressures and community-internal ones (Spears 2007, 2008).

Third, AASE is an endangered dialect (Spears and Hinton 2010). Two factors explain the endangerment: (1) the advanced age of the bulk of its speakers, over 60 with their formative years occurring during the last chapters of the US Reign of Terror⁶ against Blacks and other people of color (a.k.a. the Jim Crow Era) and (2) the end of the social conditions that fed this variety's genesis and maintenance.

Fourth, AASE speech provides a window into language use, notably how DBGFs are deployed stylistically and situationally in ways shaped by Eurocentric vs. African American-centric rules for the display of affect. Apposite here is the observation that some DBGFs have grammaticalized conversational stances and affect that are important in African American culture (Abrahams 1970, 1976; Spears 2001, 2009).

Fifth, in characterizing AASE speakers and their formative milieu, we also gain a much needed elaboration of our view of the African American community that is not attached in the main to the parade of Black images in the US popular imagination that prioritizes poverty and degradation.

There are many reasons for positing that there are standard varieties of AAE, especially once one realizes that there are many varieties of SE, which vary according to

region and social factors. Consider recent US presidents—Presidents Obama, George W. Bush, Clinton, and George H. W. Bush. Most people would agree they speak SE—and agree they all speak differently from one another. Furthermore, none of them speaks like Queen Elizabeth II, of Great Britain; yet, she clearly speaks Standard English also. We might go on to clarify that she speaks Standard British English, while the presidents speak Standard American English (SAE). Already we have two types of SE. President Clinton speaks Standard American English differently from each of the other presidents. The claim giving rise to this chapter is that some varieties of AAE are standard, in the same sense that the presidents' varieties are all standard—and different from one another. Those differences are clearly based on, minimally, regional differences in terms of where the presidents have spent portions of their lives and what their socioeconomic status is.

Since the notion of standard is critical for this chapter, I will begin with a discussion of it. Afterwards, I will discuss some scholars' previous views on standard African American English, which I label SAAE, in contradistinction to AASE, the focus of this chapter. Then I turn to how we characterize subvarieties of AAE such as AASE and AAVE. Next are observations on the social locus of AASE, followed by a grammatical characterization of AASE, in which the critical notion of camouflage is discussed.

The data used in this chapter are based on my native speaker knowledge of AAE, including AASE, which is a product of my lifelong experience living in multiclass African American communities. In some cases, I have drawn on information gained from notes and recordings.

In this chapter, I look at AASE from a structural (i.e., grammatical) standpoint, and I will engage the sociocultural context and variables affecting it. Since, as noted below, AASE is really a collection of very closely related language varieties, when I discuss it, I am really discussing a cluster of dialects (i.e., AASE), within which can be found varieties reflecting particulars relating to region, speakers' social position (especially their education), speech setting details, situational footings, language ideologies, and other factors.

43.2 The Notion of Standard Language or Dialect

Standard English is one dialect of English (Bex and Watts 1999; Trudgill 1999). More precisely, it is one collection of dialects that is distinguished from vernacular (or nonstandard) dialects (Trudgill 1999). For convenience, I will sometimes speak of it as if it were one dialect.

The most serviceable and brief characterization of SAE (and other Standard Englishes around the world) is that it is primarily identified by stigmatized grammatical features that it does not have. This is the view that I have presented in the past (e.g., Spears 1988, 2008; Spears and Hinton 2010) because it zeroes in on the crux of the matter in terms of grammar. Most of the features that are not standard are stigmatized: for example, the use of *ain't* and multiple negatives (as in “They *ain't never* here”; the italicized items are negatives). In other words, the description or attempted definition (see below) of SAE ends up being a list of grammatical features SAE does not have, but which vernaculars to varying degrees do. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes make a similar point in stating that “standard American English seems to be determined more by what it is *not* than by what it is” (2006, 12). They continue with an empirical observation: “To a

large extent, American English speech samples rated as standard English by a cross-section of listeners exhibit a range of regional variation in pronunciation and vocabulary items, but they do *not* contain grammatical structures that are socially stigmatized” (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006, 12).

Wolfram and Schilling-Estes address the question of who speaks SAE and what social context it is used in by stating that *standard⁷ dialect* is the “dialect associated with those socially favored in society; the dialect considered acceptable for mainstream, institutional purposes” (2006, 406). However, as they also stress in the same writing, the matter of what a standard is, more specifically SAE, is actually a difficult one. Thus, they usefully stress the distinction between formal SAE and informal SAE. The former is based on writing and is reflected in books on grammar and usage, dictionaries, and kindred works. Such reference works are prescriptive in that they assert what their authors believe people should write and say rather than describing how “standard” speakers actually speak. “[T]here are virtually no speakers who consistently speak formal standard English as prescribed in the grammar books . . . [and] it is not unusual for the same person who prescribes a formal standard English form to violate standard usage in ordinary conversation” (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006, 10–11). I cite the example of many middle-class, college-educated speakers, including some professors of English (Black, White, and other), who most hearers would label as speaking SAE but who use subjective case pronouns after prepositions (e.g., “between you and *I*”) instead of the objective case pronouns (e.g., “between you and *me*”) prescribed by grammar books and prescriptive authorities on SAE.

We can get much further in attempting to define grammatically formal SE than informal SE because the former is codified in grammatical reference works. Nevertheless, as linguists often remind non-specialists, there exists no complete grammatical description of SE or any other dialect or language. Hence, ultimately we cannot provide a full grammatical definition of SE. The spoken, informal SE exists in the ears of hearers; and, as we might expect, those hearers judge differently depending on their regional and social origin, and the regional and social origin of the speakers.

Wolfram and Schilling-Estes's (2006) definition of *standard dialect* is unremarkable in terms of where they state the standard is spoken. The thorny issue concerns who speaks the standard and whether they are only "socially favored" people in society since, indeed, African Americans have not historically been socially favored. Moreover, in spite of remarkable improvements in the social status of the African American population in the last forty years, today they cannot reasonably be labeled as "socially favored" by any means. Yet, it is clear that historically and today there are some African Americans who hearers judge as speaking the standard. In spite of this, as Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006, 11–12) helpfully underline, the judgments of hearers as to who is speaking the standard on a given occasion are subjective and are obviously influenced by the race of the speaker. Thus, we can read Wolfram's and Schilling-Estes's statement as being on target about standard speakers being relatively socially favored, in general as compared to other members of their social group, and, in the case of African Americans, other members of their ethno-racial group.

I define AASE in an essentially negative way (in terms of what it does not have), as I would grammatically define standards generally. The definition applies to all

varieties of AASE, since AASE is itself a cluster of regional varieties. AASE is a cluster of AAE dialects having DAGFs but no stigmatized grammatical features that appear on lists of nonstandard grammatical features presented by prescriptive grammarians, educators, and others.

DBGFs are uniquely found, or nearly so, in dialects of AAE. However, AASE has none of the AAE grammatical features that are stigmatized, whether they are DBGFs or not. However, AAVE does have them (though not every variety of AAVE has all of the stigmatized DBGFs). Habitual *be* (e.g., “Ellen *be* studyin all the time”) is one of the stigmatized DBGFs obviously absent from AASE.

In AASE, DBGFs are found in all components of grammar (including phonology and lexicon, in the sense that I use *grammar*, in addition to morphology and syntax-semantics), but my focus below in remarks on AASE grammar will be on function word examples. It is important to clarify that the DBGFs in AASE are ones that have often passed under the radar of traditional grammarians, educators, prescriptivists of all kinds, and others who tend strongly to stigmatize features of Black languages, and Black culture more broadly, owing to their stigmatizing generally of (racial) blackness itself. The DBGFs of AASE are largely camouflaged (Spears 1982, 2008; Spears and Hinton 2010): their true grammatical nature as forms distinctive to AAE is usually not noticed by persons not specializing in AAE. (See more on grammatical camouflage below.) When such DBGFs occur in AASE, they appear to the non-AAE specialist to be no different from items found in non-African American dialects, and they are not stigmatized. One might conjecture that, if these grammarians and others knew about the DBGFs in AASE, they would put them on the nonstandard list. In this connection, I should observe that the

stigma that US society has historically attached to most things African American, and black in general, is nowadays changing noticeably. Features of African American language and culture generally are now more often accepted without stigma in at least some social contexts. Examples of this come from AAE vocabulary associated with, for example, hip-hop, jazz, rhythm and blues, and fashion.

43.3 Previous Research: Standard African American English

Some conceptualizations of what I label as SAAE, in contradistinction to AASE, are in circulation, positing that SAAE differs from the SE of Whites and other non-African Americans in regard to certain aspects of use (i.e., communicative practices) and grammar—mainly phonology (and prosody in particular) and lexicon, with few if any vernacular (i.e., nonstandard) features tied to morphology, syntax, and semantics. This variety, though conceptualized by some Black linguists along with non-linguists interested in language, has not been discussed at any length in the literature, except by Hoover (1978), but warrants mention and study. However, I should stress that SAAE cannot be precisely compared to AASE because the notion of DBGF was not conceptualized in writings dealing with SAAE.

Hoover (1978) states that the Black standard (what I label as SAAE) contains very few if any vernacular grammatical features (i.e., features relating to morphology and syntax-semantics, following the American Structuralist, pre-Chomskyan sense, in which she uses *grammar*). In Taylor's writings, at least two views of Standard Black English are presented. Taylor (1971) sees Standard Black English as including even such a feature as invariant, habitual *be* (e.g., *He always be studying after dinner* "He habitually studies after dinner"). It is not clear whether Taylor actually means to state that habitual *be*

occurs in the speech of Standard Black English speakers after they have switched to a vernacular Black English variety. However, Taylor (1983) sees Standard Black English as spoken by “Black speakers who use Standard English phonology and grammar when speaking informally, while simultaneously using Black rhetorical style, prosodic features, and idioms” (135). Taylor’s (1971) view does not fit within what I term SAAE, if indeed he actually wished to include habitual *be* in Standard Black English; Taylor’s (1983) view does, however, fit into what I term SAAE.

Varieties fitting Taylor’s (1983) characterization of (what I call) SAAE are, in my experience, those of younger (roughly under 60) Blacks from solidly middle-class backgrounds. This group controls an SAAE variety with no vernacular features, though on certain occasions they may use a variety with vernacular features. I believe that Hoover’s (1978) description of a Black standard was more person-based than language variety-based. That is, she probably conflated varieties of middle-class speakers, “light” vernacular and standard varieties, where the standard was autonomous in the sense that it was sometimes spoken with no admixture of vernacular features.

As noted, the term *AASE* explicitly references a variety including DBGFs, which Taylor and Hoover did not label. Keep in mind that some grammatical features associated with AAE (particularly AAVE) occur also in non-AAE varieties, e.g., *ain’t* and multiple negation. *AASE* is also a variety with no vernacular features, as noted above. The use of the term *AASE* is important since it makes explicit claims that Taylor and Hoover did not make.

In sum, SAAE is the cover term for the varieties characterized by Hoover (1978) and Taylor (1983). SAAE varieties, stated differently, are those that have no vernacular

features (cf. Taylor 1983) or have only a few—if any (cf. Hoover 1978). Hoover and Taylor did not explicitly characterize the notion DBGF, so the varieties that they describe cannot be fully distinguished from AASE, which is claimed to have DBGFs. AASE is a different conceptualization of a Black standard in that it explicitly includes a number of DBGFs in the Black standard. This view of AASE is in most details in accord with my earlier statements on the Black standard (Spears 1982, 1988, 2007; Spears and Hinton 2010, *inter alia*) though I have used terms other than AASE.

43.4 African American Standard English

To the extent that we can actually define language varieties, standard or vernacular, we do so based on their speakers and/or their grammatical traits. Sometimes we use sociohistorical information (e.g., in defining pidgin and creole languages as language categories and specific pidgin and creole languages). Defining on the basis of grammar, we normally use a collection of grammatical features whose co-occurrence defines the variety, whether or not those traits are unique to that variety. In the case of AAE, a definition can be usefully fashioned by a list of selected features unique to AAE, or what I labeled above as DBGFs.

AASE is a variety of AAE (and also SAE) that has no grammatical features usually considered nonstandard and no stigmatized ones but, nevertheless, has DBGFs. Among the nonstandard (or vernacular) features absent from it are the use of *ain't* and multiple negatives, as in *He don't never bring none* (negatives underscored). As noted, DBGFs are those uniquely found, or nearly so, in dialects of AAE. Definitions could take into account non-DBGFs, but definitions restricted to DBGFs are certainly adequate for a grammar-based definition that accurately identifies this language variety.

As noted, DBGFs are found in the lexicon, phonology, and other parts of grammar. It is important to stress again that the DBGFs in AASE are ones that have escaped the attention of prescriptivists because they are largely camouflaged (Spears 1982, 2008, 2009; Spears and Hinton 2010). They are typically heard without attracting attention.

43.5 The Social Locus of AASE

AASE is very closely associated with a delimitable group of African American speakers: generally over 60; raised in all-Black, multiclass communities, under segregation and roughly twenty years thereafter; and members of the contemporary Black elite (for lack of a better term).⁸ This elite, which existed in all sizable cities, included the most educated, highest income, and wealthiest members of Black communities. Though they were overwhelmingly middle class,⁹ it would be misleading to state that all were. In analyzing Black communities, the notion of middle class, and class notions generally, have limited utility because they do not allow us to capture adequately the social strata and dynamics of such communities. The Black elite, thus, included members who in White communities might have been classified as working, middle, and upper class. The Black elite, however labeled, is a necessary notion for understanding many social patterns, even something as simple as who could appropriately eat in or even enter whose home.¹⁰

Based on income, wealth, and occupation alone, some were upper class. Some, not many, were working class in terms of wealth, education, and occupation. It is important to point out, however, that, as the term is typically used, there was no Black upper class per se. That is to say, that there was no such class as classes are normally

conceived: there was no largely endogamous upper class that, in terms of subculture—mores, tastes, attitudes, social life, lifestyle, usual dwelling type, etc.—was distinct from the more affluent sectors of the Black middle class. The Black elite was far and away the most highly educated group, though some (e.g., wealthy businessmen) had no more than a grade-school education. With regard to skin color, this group was mostly light skinned (though certainly not all were), and the wives of this group's men, who were often darker skinned, were for the most part (1) very light skinned or able to pass for white (*high yellow* in AAE); or (2) “looked like an Indian [Native American],” the AAE locution for those who were brown-skinned, but—the saving grace in colorist thinking (Spears 1999; Whyllie 1999; Walker 1998)—had *good hair*, straight or loosely wavy hair, often thinner lips and narrower noses—in other words, they looked like the Indian of the community's stereotype.

The terms “Black Bourgeoisie” (Frazier [1957] 1962) and Hare's ([1965] 1992) “Black Anglo-Saxons” attempt to describe the social behavior and psychological outlook of only one segment of what I refer to as the Black elite. The group they describe is primarily the subgroup referred to by Blacks of the era as “Colored Society” or “Negro Society.” Some members of the Black elite participated minimally in “society,” some of them, no doubt, sharing some of Frazier's and Hare's unbalanced and socioculturally unsophisticated views of them as self-absorbed, pretentious, largely not wealthy, non-civically minded, dysfunctional mimics of wealthy Whites. Hare's (1992) work is properly taken as a parody, with certain biting truths. Frazier's ([1957] 1962) book shows little if any understanding of Black entrepreneurship (Walker 1998) in its sociocultural and historical context and, more particularly, of Black behavior, events, tropes, and

language, often having similar forms to White ones, though frequently quite different in terms of meaning, function, and significance. Just as Black language is full of camouflage, in terms of grammar and use, so also is Black culture full of cultural camouflage, which Herskovits (1941) called “masking.” Frazier’s charge of dysfunction is actually an artifact of his Eurocentric lens, gained during his graduate training at the University of Chicago, which he never outgrew. Not surprisingly, Frazier exaggerated dysfunction in this group (Kilson 2002). Moreover, Frazier and Hare ignore the crucial fact that most key figures in the African American struggle for civil rights, before and after the civil rights movements (1950s–1970s) came from the Black elite (Bennett 1973), which subsumed “Negro society.” Perhaps most importantly, in criticizing the Black elite for its insignificant capital accumulation, Frazier seemed unaware that no capitalist class can develop in despotic regimes, in which significant accumulation of capital is confiscated by the despotic ruling group, thus preventing a capitalist class from forming.¹¹ The United States was such a despotic regime for Blacks, and most, if not all, who accumulated any wealth at all and kept it had White patrons (often kin) who protected them from confiscation.

43.6 Grammatical Camouflage

As I observed above, the DBGFs that appear in AASE are camouflaged. It is practically impossible for anyone not a specialist in AAE grammar to detect them. Since most AASE speakers are sensitive to the stigma still attached to things Black, they would probably try to rid their speech of these features if they knew what they were. AAE specialists, for their part, are sometimes reluctant to discuss camouflaged, distinctively Black grammatical features for fear that speakers’ knowledge of them might inadvertently

promote the attrition and perhaps eventual disappearance of these features and AASE itself. Because every language variety is precious in that it carries the history and culture of a people, linguists often act to preserve language varieties, trying not to do anything that might hasten their demise.

Note also that this chapter focuses on only one AASE DBGF, one that is easy to explain to non-linguists: stressed *BIN*. *BIN* is pronounced with more emphasis (stress) and, in most varieties, always with high pitch. Consider the following sentences, which most hearers would assume to be the same sentence:

(1) They've *BIN* living in Chicago. (AASE)

'They've been living in Chicago a long time and still are living there.'

(2) They've been living in Chicago. (other non-African American dialects, henceforth OAD)

'They've been living in Chicago (no length of time implied) and still are.'¹²

The two sentences are grammatically different, however. *BIN* is a type of auxiliary that occurs only in AAE. It is distinct from the past participle of *be* (*been*), which occurs in all American English dialects and has a different meaning, as indicated by the glosses. (This, as other AAE features, has spread outside Black communities and outside of AAE into some other communities and language varieties, for example, Puerto Rican and Dominican English in many parts of New York City.) This feature has never been classified as nonstandard by prescriptivist grammarians, as noted above, probably because they did not know of its existence.

Note the following AAVE sentence:

(3) They *BIN* living in Chicago. (AAVE)

This sentence has a nonstandard grammatical feature: the absence of any form, contracted ('ve) or not, of the auxiliary verb *have*. These examples are useful because they offer a good example of how AAVE, AASE, and other varieties of American English differ.

Remember that some nonstandard grammatical features that occur in AAVE also occur in vernacular varieties of American English, for example, Appalachian English, Ozark English, and indeed in varieties spoken by the great majority of the English-speaking American population. (Many Americans erroneously believe that the great majority of American English speakers speak standard varieties.) For example,

(4) She done ate all of it. VERNACULAR (NONSTANDARD)

'She has eaten all of it' = 'She's eaten all of it' STANDARD

This example has the nonstandard auxiliary verb *done* and a nonstandard past participle of *eat*. The standard past participle is *eaten*.

The foregoing treatment of stressed BIN demonstrates, with the example of one grammatical feature, how camouflage works. Before concluding, it should be pointed out that camouflage is an artifact of a more fundamental process in AASE grammar, what we might term a *macrogrammatical principle*. The principle is segmental conformity: an AASE utterance must segmentally conform, basically, to non-Black varieties of SAE. Again note that the AASE sentence in (2) includes the auxiliary (-ve < *have*), while the AAVE counterpart does not. Stated differently, the AASE sentence segmentally conforms to other SAE dialects, while the AAVE sentence does not. (*Segmental* refers to vowel and consonant quality, without taking into consideration prosody, i.e., intonation, pitch, tempo, rhythm, stress, etc. In transcriptions of speech, segmentals are written on the line, while suprasegmentals, prosodic indicators, are written above consonant and

vowel symbols. *Segment* is the cover term for consonants, vowels—and, of course, glides.)

Segmental conformity is opposed to suprasegmental, or prosodic, conformity. Prosody includes stress. The AASE sentence, then, segmentally conforms but does not suprasegmentally conform to its counterpart sentence in non-AASE. The AAVE sentence does not conform in both ways, neither segmentally (e.g., having no auxiliary as in the example) nor suprasegmentally. Segmental conformity is one of a few wide-ranging processes that produce grammatical camouflage, the grammatical result of historical assimilationist pressures on African Americans, pressures that constrain AASE grammar. There remains a great deal to state concerning details of how segmental conformity works in AASE; however, this discussion explains the basic idea and, most important, demonstrates how AASE can retain DBGFs by making them essentially undetectable. In cases of DBGFs that cannot be camouflaged (e.g., habitual *be*) those features are excluded.

43.7 Conclusion

We can understand clearly that AASE is the result of a social regime of racial subordination in which what were fundamentally White-controlled language norms regimented Black speech but did not stamp out language behavior—with respect to use or grammatical structure—that gave Black language and culture its distinctiveness.

Grammatical camouflage is most easily seen with morphology and syntax, but it is also manifest in other areas of grammar. In vocabulary, *evil* serves as an example, often taking the meaning of grouchy, cantankerous, and/or difficult to get along with, instead of the meaning assigned by non-AAE dialects: “wicked, depraved, sinful.”

We cannot leave this subject without stressing that language regimentation has not been due solely to the imposition of external norms imposed on the Black community, primarily via the educational system and mainstream media. The externally imposed language (and general cultural) norms were infused with Blackness, so to speak, with the result that Black community-internal norms emerged. These norms were in turn hierarchically imposed by Blacks in the higher echelons of the Black world upon those in the lower ones. Thus, members of the Black elite, many of whom were educators, strictly imposed the standard language ideology and grammatical norms specifically of the elite on lower status members of the elite and those outside the elite. We have to keep in mind that education generally in the pre-1970s was more oriented toward grammar instruction and the policing of students' language and the language of community members. The same occurred outside of schools, for example, in churches and other sites where norm-upholding adults were present.

In the all-Black schools I attended, for example, stigmatized vernacular language features elicited reprimand and sometimes punitive measures. Even students, during all-student gatherings, regimented the language of other students to conform to the student "standard," which tolerated a small set of vernacular forms (e.g., *ain't* and multiple negatives). Even students, who today might be labeled thugs or gang members,¹³ participated in language policing, upbraiding or ridiculing peers for using habitual *be*, *aks* (cp. *ask*), or pronunciations considered to diverge too far from the standard norm.

Educators in my family and their friendship circles never used vernacular forms, not even during their stays at vacation resorts or at lively parties and other informal occasions. The adults in my extended family (mostly teachers, ministers, school

administrators, and business owners) and their social peers used AASE even when they were furious. Occasionally, they said something that was clearly AAVE but for a particular effect or, as was typical, to mock someone else's speech. However, I would assume that those in my relatives' friendship circles who came from backgrounds where AAVE was normally used, did indeed switch to AAVE on social occasions that were not in the social repertoire of those who were raised in elite families.

It would not be incorrect to state that standard language was a key focus in the regimentation of behavior in the AASE-speaking milieu and that its role as an extreme object of desire—indeed, its fetishization and the sometimes extreme grammatical hypercorrection that it caused¹⁴—was due to its serving as an index of social status. AASE was intimately tied to being a “college man” or a woman college graduate.¹⁵ In the absence of wealth or affluence, which was usually the case with individuals and families in the Black community, AASE and what it indexed became all the more important in securing social status. With wealth and affluence, fluency in AASE was still required for significant participation in elite institutions. Lack of fluency in AASE was (and is) also a notable, but not publicly discussed and sometimes not even privately admitted, deal breaker for marriages. AASE was a form of cultural capital unhinged from financial capital and thus almost served as a substitute for it, in a zone where capital accumulation was systematically repressed by community-external forces.

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Notes

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- ¹ *Black* and other forms of this word (e.g., *Blackness*) are capitalized when referring specifically to African Americans. Lower case *black* refers to those who are labeled black as a racial classification.
- ² See Spears (2007, 2008, 2009) for discussions of additional DBGFs.
- ³ Some of these features we know are not 100 percent exclusive to AAE, but they are much more robust in the speech of African Americans and have a vastly wider geographical distribution, e.g., habitual, invariant *be* (Bailey and Bassett 1986). Also, it can reasonably be supposed that this form was diffused from AAE to English dialects of southern Whites, pace Bailey and Bassett.
- ⁴ See Spears and Hinton (2010) for an extended discussion of who African American refers to.
- ⁵ Most AAE speakers would use *come*, but one certainly hears *came*.
- ⁶ It was indeed a reign of terror. For a useful overview, see Blackmon (2008). For an update on the post–civil rights movement period, see Alexander (2010).
- ⁷ There is not agreement on whether *standard* in *standard English* should be capitalized. In this chapter, it is capitalized.
- ⁸ Tracey Weldon’s research on middle-class AAE (in this volume) and my conversations with her have helped me clarify the social locus of AASE. My extended family (that I had contact with growing up) belonged to the group I describe. I still have difficulty talking about it because we were trained not to say anything indicating that we belonged to it to anyone who was not clearly also a member—even though most other Blacks already knew or found out quickly. Knowledge of one’s

membership in the group was not infrequently inconvenient. This inconvenience was perhaps greater for darker-skinned members like me, who, once uncovered, were often seen as willful deceivers, having used dark-skin to “infiltrate” another group. (Both of my parents were light skinned, my mother more so; my father appeared brown skinned clothed, having been permanently tanned by the southern sun of his youth. My grandmothers were dark skinned. My grandfathers had White fathers; and, as was not uncommon for rural men like them of that era, the second half of the nineteenth century, they married dark-skinned women, seemingly to remove the stigma of their parentage and reinforce their connection to the Black community.

⁹ This is in regard to income and wealth, but not at all education. Some earned middle-class level salaries from, strictly speaking, working-class jobs. Some persons, who did not meet all the normal criteria for membership in the elite, were nevertheless accepted as “full” members because of their look (*high yellow* “light-skinned enough or almost to pass for White”) and their style (clothes, cars, homes, social circuit, demeanor, etc.). Landry (1987) and Frazier ([1957] 1962) approach some of the social differences I discuss by using the notions of Old Black Middle Class and New Black Middle Class. Landry makes much clearer that the former were incorporated into the latter. “Working-class” members of what I call the Black elite were overwhelming like the Old Black Middle Class with regard to manners, lifestyle, demeanor, skin color, etc.

¹⁰ All of the neighbors on our side of the short block I grew up on had similar salaries, though there were significant wealth differences. The parents in the elite households were quite friendly with all the neighbors, and some of the neighbors (non-elite and elite) belonged to the same church (the “yella” church, with the largest concentration of elite members and “yellow” ones). However, non-elite parents never entered elite homes and vice-versa.

¹¹ The confiscation of Black assets by Whites was rampant during the Reign of Terror and before. All of my parents’ close friends who came from elite families had tales of asset confiscation, sometimes called “whitecapping” by historians. There was also asset infringement, the illegal exploitation by Whites of Black assets. For example, Whites would farm Black farmland and log Black-owned timberland without permission and with impunity. These historical currents are hardly discussed in US histories, thereby fueling blame-the-victim discourses, which seek to trivialize, if not to nullify, Black grievances. All groups of color (e.g., Latino/as and Asians) have suffered the same fate. In regard to Latina/os, perhaps the best known cases are those involving Tejanos and Californianos in the nineteenth century.

¹² Observe that there are other, rare readings of this sentence that I do not include here, but none of them are equivalent to the readings of the AASE example here.

¹³ Those students did indeed belong to gangs, but they styled themselves as members of “social clubs” and reasonably so. The social clubs, if you will, did not engage in any really illegal or violent behavior, although their behavior sometimes may

have skirted the boundaries of such. For example, the clubs did organize fights, one group against another; but, I know of no cases where anyone was seriously hurt. These fights were mainly occasions for members and prospective members to demonstrate toughness, courage, and masculinity. In addition, as the gangs of today (e.g., the Crips and the Bloods), they were involved in charitable activities for the benefit of specific individuals or the community.

¹⁴ This grammatical hypercorrection occurred in the speech of both those fluent in AASE (e.g., teachers; normally phonology only) and those not.

¹⁵ The term *college woman* was seldom used.