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**African American Vernacular English: Origins,
Relevance, & Translation**

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Resum del TFG:

Aquest treball explora l'Anglès Vernacle Afroamericà (AAVE), també conegut com a Ebonics, com un dialecte únic i ric de l'anglès americà. S'hi examinen els orígens i la història de l'AAVE, incloent-hi les seves arrels culturals i geogràfiques, els parlants i l'ús actual. A més, el treball analitza les característiques gramaticals, fonològiques i lèxiques que distingeixen l'AAVE de l'anglès estàndard i d'altres dialectes o varietats de l'anglès. Mitjançant textos de referència, entrevistes i anàlisis comparatives, es contrasten exemples per destacar matisos i diferències importants. Finalment, es planteja si l'AAVE s'hauria de traduir, tenint en compte el seu valor cultural i el seu paper en la inclusió. En conjunt, aquest estudi pretén promoure una comprensió més profunda del valor i la rellevància de l'AAVE en els àmbits lingüístic i cultural.

Este trabajo explora el Inglés Vernáculo Afroamericano (AAVE), también conocido como Ebonics, como un dialecto único y rico del inglés estadounidense. Se analizan los orígenes y la historia del AAVE, incluyendo sus raíces culturales y geográficas, sus hablantes y su uso en la actualidad. Asimismo, el trabajo examina las características gramaticales, fonológicas y léxicas que distinguen al AAVE del inglés estándar y de otros dialectos o variedades del inglés. A través de textos fuente, entrevistas y análisis comparativos, se contrastan ejemplos para resaltar matices y diferencias significativas. Finalmente, el trabajo plantea la cuestión de si el AAVE debe ser traducido, considerando su importancia cultural y su papel en la inclusión. En conjunto, el estudio busca fomentar una comprensión más profunda del valor del AAVE y su relevancia tanto lingüística como cultural.

This paper explores African American Vernacular English (AAVE), also known as Ebonics, as a unique and rich dialect of American English. The origins and history of AAVE are examined, including cultural and geographical roots, speakers, and use in the present day. Furthermore, this paper will analyze the grammatical, phonological features, and vocabulary that distinguish AAVE from Standard American English and other dialects or variations of English. By using source texts, interviews and comparative analyses, examples of AAVE are contrasted to highlight nuances and major differences. Finally, the paper addresses a broader question of whether AAVE warrants translation, considering its significance in culture and inclusion. As a whole, this study aims to promote a deeper understanding of the value of AAVE and relevance in both linguistic and cultural contexts.

Table of Contents

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. Language, Dialect, and Accent**
 - 2.1. A Debate on Language
 - 2.2. Defining Accent
- 3. Defining African American Vernacular English (AAVE)**
- 4. Origins and History of African American Vernacular English (AAVE)**
 - 4.1. Historical Context
 - 4.2. The Transatlantic Slave Trade and Early Contact
 - 4.3. Anglicist and Creolist Hypotheses
 - 4.4. The Role of Indentured Servants
 - 4.5. Language Acquisition and the Critical Period
 - 4.6. Recognition and Use in Colonial America
- 5. Contemporary AAVE**
- 6. Characteristics of AAVE**
 - 6.1. Grammar & Vocabulary
 - 6.1.1. Zero Copula
 - 6.1.2. Habitual *be*, *stay*, and *steady*
 - 6.1.3. Lack of Subject-Verb Agreement
 - 6.1.4. Examples from Popular Media
 - 6.2. Phonology
- 7. Translation and Cultural Considerations**
- 8. Conclusions**
- 9. Bibliografia**

Introduction

African American Vernacular English (AAVE), also known as Ebonics, has been the subject of extensive linguistic research, particularly its grammar, phonology, and sociolinguistic role within the United States (Green, 2002; Rickford, 1999). This study builds on the foundation by examining not only the linguistic features of AAVE but also the extent to which they can or should be translated into other languages.

It is important to first address a common misconception stating that AAVE is a “broken” or “badly spoken” form of English (Mohn, 2025). Such characterizations are rather inaccurate and misleading. This study seeks to emphasize the uniqueness and value that AAVE holds. For instance, AAVE is not only commonly used across African American communities in various regions of the United States but is also prevalent in American culture, film, music, and literature (Widawski, 2015). A central objective of this study is to demonstrate that dialects, such as AAVE, are not incorrect forms of speaking but rather systematic linguistic variations that express cultural identity and heritage (Widawski, 2015). Accordingly, this paper will explore the origins of AAVE, its speakers, and the linguistic features that distinguish it from Standard American English (SAE) including its grammar, vocabulary, and phonology as well as consider the challenges and implications of translating AAVE into languages such as Spanish or Catalan.

Language, Dialect, and Accent

In order to better understand African American Vernacular English (AAVE), it is essential to distinguish various concepts such as language, dialect, and accent. Although in daily conversation, many use terms such as language, dialect, and accent interchangeably, linguists apply specific criteria to differentiate them. The boundaries between language and dialect, however, can be fluid, which can lead to debate, especially in the case of AAVE which has sparked controversy over whether it is a standalone language or rather a dialect of English.

In 1996, AAVE gained national attention when the Oakland Unified School District in California decided to officially recognize Ebonics (AAVE) as a separate linguistic system with its own grammatical rules (Woo, 1996). Much like bilingual education programs, the primary objective of this decision was to help students—the majority of whom were African American—improve their skills in Standard American English. The Oakland Unified School District also requested federal funding, claiming that speakers of AAVE faced academic challenges similar to those learning English as a second language, for example, the Latino

community. However, the resolution by the school district was met with widespread criticism. On the one hand, many—including some African American Leaders—believed that this decision would do more harm than good to the African American community. On the other hand, many linguists who formed part of the Linguistic Society of America, such as John Rickford, a linguistics professor at the prestigious University of Stanford, largely supported the idea that AAVE should be considered a dialect with distinct grammar rules (Rickford, 1999). In 1997, following the backlash, the school board decided to overturn their decision, clarifying the statement that their initiative was to support AAVE and its speakers, not to replace SAE in the schools. This debate raised awareness regarding linguistic diversity in schools which made way for key strategies to aid speakers of AAVE who had more difficulty learning.

A Debate on Language

This debate raises the question of what criteria must be met in order for something to be considered a language. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a language is: The system of spoken or written communication used by a particular country, people, community, etc., typically consisting of words used within a regular grammatical and syntactic structure; (also) a formal system of communication by gesture, esp. as used by deaf people (Language, 2024). Languages are typically unintelligible from one another. While some may share lexical similarities due to belonging to the same language family, they remain distinct. For example, Spanish and Portuguese, both Latin-derived languages from the Iberian Peninsula, differ in grammar and phonology to the extent that they are classified as separate languages.

Languages often consist of multiple dialects, which are regional or social varieties that may differ in grammar, vocabulary, and phonology but remain mutually intelligible by speakers of the same language. For example, British English and American English are two separate dialects that pertain to the same language system. Dialects are often associated with particular geographic regions, social class, or diverse ethnic groups. Furthermore, dialects can evolve over time and even become their own languages. For instance, historically, all romance languages were merely dialects of a slowly dying Latin. This process, known as language or linguistic divergence, explains how political, social, and geographic separation can transform dialects into independent languages (Mansfield et al., 2022).

Defining Accent

An accent is simply the manner in which a speaker pronounces words in a given language. Accents typically reflect a speaker's regional, social or foreign background. Unlike dialects, accents do not involve any changes to grammar. For example, a speaker of received pronunciation (RP) has a distinct accent compared to a speaker of General American English (GAE) in the United States.

Languages can be conceptualized as distinct “families” of communications—broader systems that are typically mutually unintelligible. Dialects function as individual members within each language family, representing regional and social variations within common linguistic systems. Accents, by contrast, may be the personality traits of each family member, unique but containing phonological variations that do not affect grammar or vocabulary (Green, 2002).

Defining African American Vernacular English (AAVE)

Now that the distinctions between languages, dialect, and accent have been clarified, it is appropriate to define African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Although some claim that AAVE constitutes as a language, many linguists would agree that AAVE is a dialect of the English (Rickford, 1999). To fully understand the classification, it is essential to consider the historical origins and sociolinguistic context of African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

Origins and History of African American Vernacular English (AAVE)

While there is ongoing scholarly debate regarding the precise origins of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), two primary hypotheses have emerged to explain its historical development. Both theories, however, require an understanding of the history of the United States, particularly the periods of colonization, the transatlantic slave trade, and the migrations of African-descended populations.

In 1619, shortly after the arrival of the British colonizers in the Americas, the first enslaved Africans arrived in Point Comfort, Virginia (Rickford, 1999). Notably, Virginia was the first permanent English colony, established in 1607. Over the following centuries, millions of Africans and Caribbeans were forcibly transported to the Americas as part of the Transatlantic Slave Trade—one of the most devastating systems of human exploitation in

modern history. It is estimated that between the 16th and 19th centuries, 12 million Africans were taken from regions of West and Central Africa and subjected to enslavement in the New World (Lewis, 2025).

Between the early 1600s and the abolition of slavery in 1865, the British colonies—later forming the United States—relied heavily on enslaved labor, particularly in the Southern colonies and States where the economy was predominantly agricultural. Large-scale slave plantations sustained the production and exportation such as tobacco, sugar, and cotton, the most economically valuable goods of the period (Rickford, 2015, 39).

Within this sociohistorical context, both Southern White American Vernacular English (SWAVE) and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) have close ties with one another. Both varieties were developed during the same historical period, the first century of the British Colonization period in both the Chesapeake Bay area, Virginia, Maryland, as well as the Carolinas. Due to their geographical proximity and shared social environment, AAVE and SWAVE exhibit numerous linguistic similarities (Winford, 2015, 86; Mufwene. *et al.*, 2022, 95).

Although the exact origins of the White population that settled in the Chesapeake area are unknown, experts suggest that the large majority of British settlers that set out on a voyage to the Americas were from southern England, mainly London or adjacent areas and counties. It was this linguistic input that would be the base for the evolution of various emerging dialects like AAVE or SWAVE (Winford, 2015, 94). There is also some research that involves Scottish-Irish influence on the evolution of AAVE in the 18th century (Winford, 2015).

As previously mentioned, there is ongoing debate surrounding the origins of AAVE. One theory—the Anglicist hypothesis—proposes that AAVE developed primarily from British dialects while another claims that AAVE is more influenced by Creole hypothesis argues that AAVE was significantly shaped by Creole languages (such as Gullah) and other West African languages (Mufwene *et al.*, 2022, 169). Although the Anglicist position is the most widely accepted there is some evidence to support the validity of both arguments.

In the early colonial period, many of the enslaved Africans who lived and worked on plantations were often in close contact with European settlers of the area, or many of them were indentured servants. Indentured servants, unlike African slaves, worked under a contractual agreement: in exchange for a specified number of years of service, they would eventually be

able to be provided with a piece of land or other compensation to make their living. In contrast, enslaved Africans were bought, sold, and denied any legal or social autonomy.

According to the census documents at the time, the population of white indentured servants far outnumbered the enslaved African population. As Winford notes, quoting Menard (1985, 117), “70 percent of the colonists who came to Maryland between 1634 and 1681 arrived as indentured servants” (Winford, 2015, 88). Enslaved individuals, at this early stage, were not yet central to the economy and thus, worked side-by-side with other European indentured servants. Given that language develops as a result of social interaction, many African Americans adapted to their circumstances and learned English in the best way they could. This contact likely played a significant role and shaped the foundations of what would later be known as AAVE.

It was not until the 1700s that the demand for African slaves increased. By this point, many slaves were no longer brought from other countries but rather native born. In fact, the African American population was mainly composed of local born slaves by the mid-1700s (Winford, 2015, 90). This demographic shift had profound impact on how language developed. Over time, African languages began to blend more consistently with local English varieties. This linguistic transition was not only generational but also cognitive. As more children of enslaved parents were born and raised in the United States, they were naturally exposed to English from an early age and as their primary means of communication.

During the period of slavery, African-born individuals arrived in the United States without having any prior knowledge of English, whereas those born in America were more likely to acquire the language from a young age. This distinction is significant because the most effective period for natural language acquisition is during early childhood. Noam Chomsky, a well-known linguist and political activist, refers to this window as the critical period—a developmental stage during which the human brain is more receptive to acquiring language (Hartshorne *et al.*, 2018). This inclusion of this concept is relevant here because many American-born slaves would have learned English during this phase, leading to a more fluent and native-like use, while African-born individuals typically acquired it later under other conditions. Such conditions may have influenced the emergence of AAVE.

The first recognition of what is now known as AAVE appeared in a South Carolina newspaper on March 30th, 1734. In the *South Carolina Gazette*, the term “Black English” appeared (Winford, 2015, 100). This early reference is not only a reflection of public awareness

of different speech patterns but also demonstrates the emergence of sociolect which may be tied to race and social class. Also, it can be assumed that African American Vernacular English has, since an early point in American history, influenced other variants of English through mere contact and interaction.

Contemporary AAVE

Although African American Vernacular English originated in a context of enslavement and inequality, it did not remain in the past. AAVE continued to evolve as it has been shaped by migration, social changes, and media. Contemporary AAVE is alive and present, not only in the United States but has also influenced other forms of English and even other languages, more notably in the music scene. In this next section of the paper, AAVE's characteristics will be explored and described to give insight to those who are unfamiliar with it or are interested in AAVE as a dialect.

Characteristics of AAVE

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) exhibits a series of grammatical and phonological features that differentiate it from Standard American English (SAE). This section of the paper will be divided into parts: Part 1: Grammar & Vocabulary and Part 2: Phonology.

Grammar & Vocab

In this section of the paper, the most important grammatical characteristics are described and supported by authentic examples which come from film, music, and interviews. AAVE has a distinct set of grammar rules which make it unique from other dialects or variants of English. These features are not random or mistaken usages, but rather a reflection of consistent internal grammar. Understanding these patterns are not solely for linguistic analysis but challenge the misconception that AAVE is incorrect or broken English.

Zero Copula

In AAVE, there are key differences in how verbs are used. For example, one of the most important features is the partial omission of the verb *to be*, that is, the 2nd and 3rd person singular, *is* and *are*. This grammatical feature can be quite noticeable since the verb *to be* is what is considered to be a high-frequency verb in English language or any language for that matter. This feature, commonly referred to as zero copula, is not random but follows specific

rules. This partial omission can be noticed before locative phrases, nouns, adjectives and before the use of the gerund (Green, 2002).

Standard American English (SAE)	African American Vernacular English (AAVE)	Description:
Jon is in the office	Jon in the office	Locative Phrase
You are a funny dude	You a funny dude	Before a noun
James is kind of sad	James kinda sad	Before an adjective
He does not know what he is talking about.	He don't know what he talkin' 'bout.	Before the use of the gerund

However, there is an important exception: *is* and *are* cannot be omitted when occurring at the end of a sentence. In such cases, the verb must be retained, even in African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

I don't know what it is	I 'on know what it is	Use of the verb <i>to be</i> at the end of a sentence.
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In the film *Pulp Fiction* (1994), directed by Quentin Tarantino, renowned actors Samuel L. Jackson and John Travolta interpret the roles of Jules Winnfield and Vincent Vega, respectively. Jules and Vincent are henchmen, ordered by their boss, Marseullus Wallace, to retrieve a suitcase containing something of extreme value. When they finally retrieve the suitcase, after a confrontation with the current owners, John Travolta's character opens it and looks inside, to which Samuel L. Jackson's character, Jules asks: "We happy?", (Tarantino, 1994, 0:13:30). In this scene, there is an absence of the verb *to be* before the adjective "happy". Vincent, non-African American character, even responds to Jules, using AAVE: "Yeah, we happy!". This exchange is a clear example of zero copula, a key feature of AAVE

Habitual be, stay, and steady.

In other contexts, the word *be* is used before the gerund of a verb to express an action that is habitual. There are also other habitual markers such as the words *stay* and *steady* which, like the word *be*, are used before the gerund form of a verb (Green, 2002, 71). For instance, the sentence *she be working* means that working is something that is habitual or regular.

In addition to the habitual *be*, AAVE also contains other habitual markers such as *stay* or *steady*. When used before the gerund, *stay* expresses a consistent behavior that may be considered bothersome; for instance, in the sentence *he stay runnin' late for work*, (he is always running late for work) might be said in a tone that expresses frustration.

Similarly, *steady* has an implication of an ongoing action that has a negative connotation that could be related to being reckless. These markers are not interchangeable because they carry diverse meanings and nuances (Green, 2002; Rickford 1999). These markers are frequently used in everyday speech and are contributors to the richness of African American Vernacular English. Said markers do not exist in Standard American English which make AAVE unique.

Standard American English (SAE)	African American Vernacular English (AAVE)
Kendrick usually eats every day	Kendrick be eatin' erryday.
He is always running late for work	He stay runnin' late for work.
You never listen. I already told you to stop but you are always playing/messing around.	You never listen. I been told you to stop but you steady playin'

Lack of subject-verb agreement

Another key grammatical feature in AAVE is the absence of subject-verb agreement (Green, 2002). In many cases, AAVE speakers use verb forms that differ from the standard forms of English. Standard English require subject-verb agreement in order to be considered grammatically correct. In contrast, AAVE permits constructions in which subject-verb agreement is not present or respected. The examples below are an illustration of how negation and past tense forms such as *was* and *were* have different functions in African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

Standard American English (SAE)	African American Vernacular English (AAVE)	Description
He does not understand Spanish	He <i>don't</i> understand Spanish	<i>Don't</i> is the contraction of "do not", reserved for the 1 st person singular, <i>I</i> .
They were having lunch together	They <i>was</i> having lunch together	In AAVE, <i>was</i> is often used across all subjects in the past

		tense (you <i>was</i> , we <i>was</i> , they <i>was</i>), whereas SAE distinguishes between <i>was</i> and <i>were</i> .
We were studying for the AP History exam.	We <i>was</i> studyin' for the AP history exam.	Similarly, <i>was</i> replaces <i>were</i> regardless of subject in AAVE.

Past tense: Unstressed vs Stressed Been

In African American Vernacular English (AAVE), the past participle form of the verb *to be* is used in two distinct ways: unstressed and stressed. In sentences used as linguistic examples, BIN is capitalized to show that it is stressed (Harris, 2013).

On one hand, the unstressed *been*, is used like *have been* or *has been* in Standard American English (SAE). On the other hand, the stressed BIN (pronounced ['bɪn]), unique to AAVE, is used to express something happened a long time ago, known as the remote past. Additionally, when BIN is used, it is used to emphasize that the information remains relevant or is presumed to be known by the listener (Mufwene, *et al.*, 2022).

Standard American English (SAE)	African American Vernacular English (AAVE)	Description:
He <i>has been</i> retired for a while now.	He <i>been</i> retired for a while now.	Unstressed <i>been</i> equivalent to <i>has been</i> , indicates a continuing state.
James retired a long time ago.	James <i>BIN</i> retired	Stressed <i>BIN</i> : remote past; James has been retired for a long time.
I saw that film a long time ago.	I <i>BIN</i> seen that film.	Stressed <i>BIN</i> : emphasizes that the action occurred in the distant past.

Future Tense

AAVE has several distinct forms to express future actions. One of the most common ways is the use of *gon'* or *gonna*—reduced forms of *going to*—which serve as future auxiliaries. Additionally, AAVE permits the contraction of *I'm gonna*—*I'ma*. Another construction of the future comes from *fixing to* or what would be *going to* in SAE; the word *finna* is used (Green, 2002, 71).

Standard American English (SAE)	African American Vernacular English (AAVE)	Description
We are going to see a movie	We <i>gon'</i> see a movie	<i>Gon/Gonna</i> is a reduced form of going to, marking the future.
I am going to listen to some music	<i>I'ma</i> listen to some music	<i>I'ma</i> is a contraction of I'm gonna, used to express intent.
He is going to eat a burger	He <i>finna</i> eat a burger	<i>Finna</i> comes from <i>fixing to</i> and also expresses future action.

Rap and Hip-Hop are forms of music that are deeply rooted in African American culture and expression. Naturally, the use of AAVE in Rap and Hip-Hop is quite extensive. These genres not only reflect identity but also serve as a space in which AAVE is used in an authentic and creative way. For example, in *Party Up (Up in Here)* by DMX, the artist uses the line *Y'all gon' make me lose my mind* to convey the future tense. This construction illustrates the AAVE use of *gon'* (DMX, 1999).

Similarly, Kendrick Lamar uses the same future construction in his track *Alright* with the phrase *we gon' be alright*. In this line, *gon'* again is used as a future auxiliary (Lamar, 2015).

Standard American English (SAE)	African American Vernacular English (AAVE)	Description
You are going to make me lose my mind.	Y'all <i>gon'</i> make me lose my mind	Use of <i>gon'</i> (future tense) and <i>y'all</i> (2 nd person plural subject).

But if God has us, then we are going to be alright.	But if God <i>got</i> us, then we <i>gon</i> 'be alright	Use of <i>got</i> for possession and <i>gon</i> ' for future tense.
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Negation

Usually, the negative in AAVE is expressed with the word *ain't*, which is common in other dialects of English as well. Depending on the tense, however, the negative can be expressed in different ways. For example, in the present tense, *don't* is used rather than *ain't*. For the rest of the tenses, the present continuous, the past and present perfect, *ain't* is used.

Standard American English (SAE)	African American Vernacular English (AAVE)	Description
She doesn't work here anymore	She <i>don't</i> work here no' mo'	Present tense with <i>don't</i> used for all subject; double negative.
We are not thinking about losing	We <i>ain't</i> thinkin' 'bout losin'	<i>Ain't</i> replaces <i>are not</i> in present continuous tense.
He did not do anything	He <i>ain't</i> do nuthin'.	<i>Ain't</i> used for past tense negation, double negative.
He hasn't done anything	He <i>ain't</i> done nuthin'.	<i>Ain't</i> replaces <i>hasn't</i> in present perfect; double negative.

As illustrated in the table above, AAVE often employs multiple negation (also known as negative concord), which more than one negative element appears. For example, *anything* becomes *nuthin'* alongside negators such as *ain't* or *don't*. In fact, according to Lisa Green, author of *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*, there is no limit on the number of negators that can be used in AAVE (Green, 2002, 77).

Negative Inversion

In addition to multiple negation, AAVE also exhibits a feature known as negative inversion (Green, 2002, 79) Negative inversion includes the moving of the auxiliary verb to the beginning of a phrase in order to form a negative grammatical structure (Matyiku, 2011).

Standard American English (SAE)	African American Vernacular English (AAVE)	Description
Nobody can cook like my grandma.	<i>Can't</i> nobody cook like my grandma.	The auxiliary <i>can</i> is moved to the front of the sentence to mark negation, an example of negative inversion.
Nobody is leaving class until the bell rings.	<i>Ain't</i> nobody leavin' class til' the bell rings.	The auxiliary <i>ain't</i> appears at the front of the clause as part of negative inversion.

In 2012, a news clip of a woman by the name of Kimberly “Sweet Brown” Wilkins, went viral after she gave a spontaneous interview about escaping an apartment fire. During the interview, Wilkins uses several features of AAVE, including the well-known expression “*Ain't nobody got time for that!*”, which is an example of negative inversion (KFOR Oklahoma’s News 4, 2012). Because of the virality of this news clip, AAVE gained visibility through media and internet meme culture.

Possessives

Possession in AAVE generally follows the same rules as in Standard American English (SAE), but there are key distinctions in the use of possessive markers and pronouns. Specifically, AAVE may omit the possessive *'s* after nouns and use alternative forms of possessive adjectives, such as *he* for *his* or *they* for *their*.

Standard American English (SAE)	African American Vernacular English (AAVE)	Description
Yesterday, I slept at my grandma’s house.	Yesterday, I slept at my grandma house.	Omission of possessive after the noun.
Jamie left his house to play football.	Jamie left <i>he</i> house to play football.	Use of <i>he</i> as a possessive pronoun instead of <i>his</i> .
They were eating with their friends.	They <i>was</i> eatin’ with they friends.	Use of <i>they</i> instead of <i>their</i> as a possessive adjective.

AAVE Features in Film

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) plays a key role in cultural authenticity in film. This section examines two films—*Boyz n the Hood* (1991) and *Fences* (2016)—where AAVE is used by characters that are central to the story in order to reflect identity, emotion and realism.

In *Boyz n the Hood*, directed by John Singleton, AAVE appears throughout the entirety of the film’s dialogue in order to portray the realities of young kids growing up in South Central Los Angeles, a community that is predominantly African American. In one scene, a mother of one of the main characters exhibits multiple AAVE features such as double negation. For example, she says *Y’all must think I’m the maid,*” and later: *How come yo’ daddy don’t come over and play card no’mo’?* These lines from the film demonstrate AAVE features such as zero copula and double negation (Singleton, 1991).

Standard American English (SAE)	African American Vernacular English (AAVE)	Description of Feature
You must think I’m the maid	<i>Y’all</i> must think I’m the maid	Use of y’all as 2 nd person plural pronoun
Your dad doesn’t come over anymore	Yo’ daddy <i>don’t</i> come over <i>no mo’</i> .	Double negation

In *Fences* (2016), adapted from August Wilson’s play and directed by Denzel Washington, the character Troy Maxson frequently speaks in AAVE, expressing his working-class identity. For example, he says, *“I done seen him, done wrestled with him,”* demonstrating the AAVE past tense construction with done. He also says, *“It got real cold, just like it be winter,”* which showcases the habitual be, marking recurring or regular states in AAVE grammar (Washington, 2016).

Standard American English (SAE)	African American Vernacular English (AAVE)	Description of Feature
I leave it alone. I cut it loose.	I <i>leaves</i> it alone. I <i>cuts</i> it loose.	Lack of verb-subject agreement
So, you don’t have to worry about me drinking myself to	So, you <i>ain’t</i> got to worry about me drinking myself to	Use of <i>ain’t</i> for negation

death because I am not worried about death.	death ‘cause I <i>ain’t</i> worryin’ about death.	
I have seen him, I have wrestled with him.	I <i>done</i> seen him, done wrestled with him.	<i>Done</i> as a past marker
And it got really cold, just as if it were winter.	And it got real cold, just like it be winter.	Use of habitual <i>be</i> for recurring or typical states
He touches me like I touch you.	He <i>touch</i> me like I touch you now.	Lack of verb-subject agreement
Death was standing there, grinning at me.	Death standing there, grinning at me.	Omission of the copula (was)

These films demonstrate how AAVE is not only a linguistic tool but also marks cultural identity. The use of AAVE in these narratives show authenticity and places the characters within specific historical, racial and social contexts.

Slang

In *African American Slang: A Linguistic Description*, Maciej Widański, a professor of linguistics, analyzes African American Vernacular English, more precisely its slang. Slang is an essential piece of AAVE and as Widański states, it is “rule-governed, innovative and culturally revealing vernacular” (Widański, 2015). African American Vernacular English slang has more than 1,500 slang expressions which can be categorized into common themes such as drugs, alcohol, or sexuality as well as specific themes such as racism, violence, luxury, and geography. African American Vernacular Slang also serves multiple functions, whether they be social, psychological, rhetorical, or cultural (Widański, 2015). Widański also analyzes the various ways in which slang is created, categorizing them into different forms such as combining, shortening, blending, etc., (Widański, 2015).

This section contains examples of slang expressions which include explicit language regarding sexuality, violence, and other culturally sensitive topics. These terms are analyzed solely for academic and linguistic purposes. The inclusion of such content is essential to accurately represent the form, function, and social reality of African American slang. As with all varieties of language, taboo and provocative expressions often reveal deeper cultural, emotional, and social meanings that are critical to understanding how language functions in the real world.

Compounding

One of the most common forms of how slang is created through a process referred to as compounding, in other words, combining two or more whole words to form a single new word. The most common form of compounding is with two nouns; however, a noun and an adjective, a noun and a verb, etc., can also be combined to form slang. For instance, some examples of slang that is a result of compounding are *boom box*, a large portable stereo player, or *road dog* which means a close friend or someone who spends much time with you. *Boom box* and *road dog* are examples of noun-noun compounds. (Widawski, 2015).

The second most common compound pattern in AAVE slang is noun-adjective. Some examples of this compound pattern are *grown folk*, (adults) or *white nigga*; a white person who assumes the behavior or values of African American culture. Furthermore, it is worth noting that adjective-noun word order may be reversed or switched, which is the opposite of what is expected in Standard American English (SAE) (Widawski, 2015). The term *ghetto rich*, in other words, to show signs of wealth without actually being wealthy, is an example of this reversal (Widawski, 2015).

Shortening

Slang in African American Vernacular English (AAVE), as in many other linguistic varieties, is often created through shortening, a process that reflects a natural tendency to be briefer and more efficient in casual speech (Widawski, 2015). In African American Vernacular English, monosyllabic words are quite common. Prime examples of monosyllabic slang words are *dig* (meaning to like or enjoy), *dis* (short for disrespect), and *mad* which is an intensifier, used as an adjective (Widawski, 2015). For example, *mad tired* means *very tired*.

Within the method of shortening, there are three main forms: clipping, initialism and acronyms. Clipping involves the abbreviation of longer words in order to produce a shorter word. It is important to note that doing so does not cause a change in meaning but simply word length in order to facilitate faster speech. This is a phenomenon that happens in Standard English as well as other languages. For example, the city of Barcelona is often referred to as *Barna* in Catalan or Spanish; three syllables are reduced to two (Widawski, 2015). In African American Slang, *Cali*, (in reference to California), *Benzo*, (*Mercedes-Benz* automobile) or *Timbs*, (Timberland boots) are all pieces of slang that result from clipping (Widawski, 2015).

Furthermore, initialism, also known as alphabetism, is another form of abbreviation. Slang that comes through means of initialism is created by using the first letters of a phrase, pronounced individually, such as O.G., meaning Original Gangster, a term that reflects the high status or respect of someone in a specific cultural group such as that of an African American community. Another popular example of AAVE initialism slang is M.C. or the performer of a rap song (Widawski, 2015). These two particular terms appear frequently in music dominated by African American Vernacular speakers such as rap and R&B.

Lastly, the final form of shortening is acronyms; words made using the first letters of a series of words but pronounced as one word such as NATO or UNESCO (Widawski, 2015). AAVE, despite being the least common form of slang that comes from shortening, is relevant. Popular acronyms in AAVE include *deejay* (DJ) or *CREAM* (money), popularized by the rap group *Wu-Tang Clan* (Widawski, 2015).

Conversion

Lexical conversion or grammatical shifting, in simple terms, is when a word changes its role, for example, when a noun becomes a verb without a change in spelling or appearance. (Widawski, 2015). This is common in Standard English because words in English do not use forms or endings to reflect a word's grammatical role such as in a Latin-based language like Catalan or Spanish. In African American slang, conversion is also a popular method used to create slang.

Conversion in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) can be divided into two main types: verbification and nominalization. Verbification, the process of turning nouns into verbs, is especially common in AAVE slang (Widawski, 2015). For example, the noun *clown* has been converted into a verb meaning “to joke, tease, or make fun of,” while *jam* has been used to mean “to play music,” especially jazz, a music genre rooted in African American culture (Widawski, 2015).

Moreover, nominalization is the opposite of verbification, that is, the process of turning verbs into nouns. Widawski uses examples such as *shout-outs*, meaning to acknowledge someone, usually through media, or *rip-offs* for products that are not genuine or even considered illegal (Widawski, 2015).

Blending

Blending, a fusion of compounding and shortening, is yet another form of slang creation as there are countless possibilities to do so. In simple terms, blending involves taking two words and mixing them together to form one (Widawski, 2015). In English, the combination of breakfast and lunch to make *brunch* is quite popular. Blending, as will be exemplified below, can result in quite creative and catchy forms of slang that can be attractive to use by speakers of AAVE as non-habitual speakers of AAVE. Some examples of blending are: *mugly*, a combination of mug, meaning face, and ugly, or *Motown*; the combination of motor and town, in reference to the city of Detroit, Michigan (Widawski, 2015).

Borrowing

Borrowing is a mechanism that can be used to expand the lexicality of a language. As Widawski mentions, English has been shaped in many ways by taking loanwords from former lingua francas such as Latin or Greek (Widawski, 2015). Despite being limited, African American Slang also contains a corpus of loanwords such as *ganja* (from Hindi), meaning marijuana, or *boocoo* (from French; beaucoup) which conveys the same meaning, *a lot* or *plenty* (Widawski, 2015).

Loan Translations (Calques) are literal, word-for-word expressions that are taken from other languages and used in another. In the case of AAVE, some calques come from Western African Languages, reflecting the history and origins of AAVE (Widawski, 2015). Some examples of African loan translations come from Mandinka, such as *fat-mouthing* or *give/slap me some skin*, meaning talking too much and shaking hands or greeting someone using hands, respectively (Widawski, 2015).

Neologisms

Furthermore, Lexical items can be created, also referred to as neologisms. The three methods of forming neologisms are through coinage, onomatopoeia, and respelling.

Firstly, coinage is the process of inventing entirely new words without any identifiable etymological roots. Naturally, this makes it one of the rarest word-formation processes in the English language (Widawski, 2015). Despite the close association between slang and linguistic creativity, coinage is also quite uncommon in African American slang. Additionally, rather than creating new words from complete scratch, African American slang words are morphed or repurposed (Widawski, 2015). Some examples of coinage terms are *ofay* meaning *white*

person, *skrilla*, which is slang for money, or *bozack* which refers to the male reproductive system. These elements of slang, lacking etymological roots, are an example that words are simply just the meaning we give to them as language is fluid or malleable, shaped by use, context, and cultural interpretation.

Secondly, Onomatopoeia is another form of neologism that refers to words that imitate natural sounds, such as *sizzle*, *quack*, or *buzz*. Onomatopoeia that is directly tied to African American slang can often be tied to music such as rap and tends to be expressive and rhythmic in nature. Perhaps the most well-known onomatopoeia is *bling* or *bling-bling*, referring the jewelry that is flashy or luxurious. Other less common examples include *woofing* or using strong or boastful language to come off as threatening as well as *zooted*, meaning intoxication by means of alcohol consumption (Widawski, 2015).

Lastly, respelling is another method used to create new lexical items. It involves altering the standard spelling of words for expressive, stylistic, or rhetorical effect. Neologisms produced through respelling are often seen in advertising, such as in the brand name *Krispy Kreme*, where unconventional spelling adds a playful twist. Respelling is also common in digital communication, where internet shorthand aims to enhance efficiency—examples include *l8r* (later) and *R u ok?* (Widawski, 2015).

Although respelling is relatively rare in standard English due to its potential to hinder comprehension, it is notably more frequent in African American slang. This increased frequency of use can be attributed to various factors such as phonology or even politics and culture. For instance, features such as the reduction of diphthongs, /r/-lessness, /g/-dropping, and consonant cluster reduction lead AAVE speakers to respell words such as *brutha* or *bidness* (business) (Widawski, 2015).

More importantly, political and cultural factors significantly shape the development of slang in African American Vernacular English (AAVE). The African American community has endured a long history of racism, oppression, and systemic marginalization, dating back to the transatlantic slave trade and the colonization of the Americas. Within this context, the deliberate respelling of standard English words in AAVE can be interpreted as an act of linguistic resistance—a way of reclaiming language and asserting cultural autonomy. By transforming established forms into ones that reflect their own speech patterns and cultural values, speakers of AAVE engage in a symbolic fight for linguistic freedom and identity, something that was regained in recent history, relatively.

However, the struggle still continues today, as African American Vernacular English remains widely stigmatized. It is frequently mistaken or mischaracterized as “broken” or “incorrect English” rather than recognized as a legitimate linguistic system with its own grammar and lexical systems.

One of the most controversial and culturally significant examples of this process is the respelling and reappropriation of the racial slur *nigger* into *nigga*. The original term was used to dehumanize and degrade; the newly respelled variant, when used among African Americans, has an opposite function: it is a marker of solidarity, identity, and resistance. Phonologically speaking, the racial slur *nigger* transformed into *nigga* is a prime example of the postvocalic /r/-lessness or /r/-dropping and, most importantly, is a reclaiming of a word that once symbolized extreme racial hate and violence. *Nigga* can be heard in common day speech, music, film, and popular culture. However, its usage still remains highly sensitive and context-dependent, particularly across racial or generational lines.

Overall, this chapter on word-formation processes, such as compounding, abbreviations, respelling, etc., demonstrate that African American slang is not much more diverse from that of standard English in terms of structure.

Common Themes

Widawski writes, the lexicon of any language can be divided into thematic categories, technically labeled semantic or lexical fields (Widawski, 2015). Semantic fields can be grouped and analyzed into what may be considered socially and culturally important. This section will cover the common themes that are present in virtually all forms of slang in any language since they are reflections of core human experience and desire; such themes include the body, physiology, sex, alcohol, drugs, and human emotions (Widawski, 2015).

The human body is one of the most prominent themes in African American slang (Widawski, 2015). In fact, slang and expressions that reference the body are common across many cultures and languages. Because it is the one thing that humans use to experience the world around them. Body slang can also be broken down into other subcategories such as slang that regards how natural human bodily functions, natural sexual desires, or human emotions (Widawski, 2015). Slang of this nature can be quite vulgar, taboo, or considered socially inappropriate but is also an honest reflection of what it means to be human; in an evolutionary or biological sense, humans have a natural instinct or drive to reproduce. Regarding

physiological slang in AAVE, there are plenty of ways to say excrements such as *shiznit*, *ish*, or *dookie* (Widawski, 2015). Additionally, frequently used terms that relate to hair are *conk*, meaning straight hair, and *naps*, meaning curly or unstraightened African American hair (Widawski, 2015, 85).

Furthermore, alcohol and drugs are also recurring themes in African American Slang. As Widawski explains, much like talk on sex, discussions on intoxication are also often considered socially taboo—yet both reflect behaviors that are natural or human (Widawski, 2015, 86). African American slang has plenty of terms that refer to alcoholic beverages such as *bub* or *pimp juice*, meaning champagne as well as *Kong* or *juke* meaning liquor (Widawski, 2015, 87). Drugs and expressions related to them are also very relevant in African American Slang. The terms referring to marijuana are nearly infinite: *blaze*, *dank*, *skunk*, *tea*, *ganja*, and the list continues (Widawski, 2015, 88).

Specific Themes

In reference to a study carried out by Eble, Widawski highlights that most semantic fields of AAVE slang are similar to those of general American slang, there are also themes that are closely related and specific to that of African Americans (Widawski, 2015, 90). Categorized by Widawski himself, such themes include African Americans, Africana, racism, whites, violence, entertainment, luxury, and geography (Widawski, 2015, 90).

There are plenty of terms that are related to and revolve around African Americans. Said terms are used by AAVE speakers to refer to other African Americans whether that be in a positive, neutral, or negative light. For instance, *blood*, *brother/brotha'*, and *boots* are all slang terms that refer to other African Americans (Widawski, 2015, 91).

Unfortunately, as Widawski signals, racism is still a relevant topic for many African Americans and experiences that pertain to them. Therefore, there exist various elements of slang used by AAVE speakers in reference to moments where discrimination or racism may occur such as being stopped by traffic for no particular reason (Driving While Black/DWB) or not being admitted into a club or organization for having darker skin (brown paper bag test) (Widawski, 2015, 92).

Naturally, there is also a semantic field or theme relating to *Whites* or white people which according to history have been the group that, from the African American point of view and experience, have always been seen as the oppressors or responsible for the enslavement,

racial discrimination or even bloodshed (Widawski, 2015, 93). As Kowalczyk points out, many terms associate or equate white people to animals or devils; examples include *blue-eyed devil*, *maggots*, *silks*, or *whitey*, all of which would be used in a negative light or context.

There is also a large semantic field related to violence and crime; this is not only due to the fact that delinquency may be a common occurrence in African American predominant communities, mainly resulting from socioeconomic disadvantages that they have suffered historically but also due to the constant mentions of violence and crime in hip-hop, more specifically gangsta rap, as well as literature, film, radio and TV (Widawski, 2015, 94). For instance, slang related to violence include: *gank*, meaning steal, *fo-fo*, meaning handgun, or *gangbanger*, meaning to be a member of a gang (Widawski, 2015, 94).

As discussed, African American slang can be divided into two major types: common themes, which share general themes that exist in general American slang as well as specific themes that have unique cultural and historical roots based on African American experiences (Widawski, 2015, 97).

Functions and Global Influence of African American Slang

Lastly, this section will focus on the functions of African American Slang and its influence on non-AAVE speakers. African American slang has a variety of functions that reflect AAVE as a linguistic system, said functions can be social, psychological, rhetorical, or cultural (Widawski, 2015, 122). African American Slang has a social function as it gives speakers a way of expressing themselves within a group. Additionally, it may be a method of rebellion and not be understood by a common enemy or oppressor (Widawski, 2015, 123).

Another common function of African American Slang may be psychological, meaning the expression of emotional states or especially humor and verbal toughness (Widawski, 2015, 123).

Additionally, while rhetorical and cultural functions are central to African American slang, they are also a way of explaining why such a variety of language has been so widely adopted or spread to speakers outside of the AAVE community (Widawski, 2015, 123). Borrowing AAVE expressions can be recognized as a way of putting on a linguistic performance, in order to appear knowledgeable, fashionable, or even humorous. There are plenty of terms that come from African American slang and are now mainstream such as: *woke*, *vibe*, *lit*, or *no cap*. Also, using such language also may be cool or connect with the youth

culture (Widawski, 2015, 123). This phenomenon is called assimilation or appropriation, meaning the use of AAVE slang by other ethnic groups or the complete cross-over into other variants of slang such as general American slang (Widawski, 2015, 123).

Phonology of African American Vernacular English

Phonology refers to the systematic organization of sounds within a language. Phonological features are often the most noticeable and distinctive aspects of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). These features mark AAVE speakers linguistically and play a role in shaping identity and community. While some of these phonological features appear in other dialects, AAVE has many features that distinguish it from Standard American English (Green, 2002). Below are some of the primary phonological characteristics of AAVE.

Consonant Cluster Reduction

Consonant cluster reduction is a notable phonological feature in AAVE that involves the simplification or omission of consonants in groups (or clusters), at the end of words. Precisely, this reduction is most common when the clusters end in /t/ or /d/. For example, in AAVE, words such as *contest*, *hand*, and *desk* can be pronounced as *contes'*, *han'*, and *des'*, respectively. Other factors that influence consonant cluster reduction is the initial sound of the next word in a name or sentence. For instance, *west side* can be notably pronounced as a *wes' side*; the /t/ is omitted due to the fact that *side* starts with a consonant (Mufwene, et al., 2022).

A good example of this appears in the intro of Tupac Shakur's famous rap diss track, *Hit 'Em Up*, which references the East Coast—West Coast hip-hop rivalry. One can hear the cluster reduction in how “West Coast” is pronounced (Shakur, 1996). While cluster reduction is not unique to AAVE, as it also appears in other English dialects such as Southern American English, it remains as one of the most important markers that separates African American Vernacular English from Standard American English (SAE).

Reduction of Diphthongs

Another key phonological feature of AAVE is the reduction of diphthongs, a process that is also known as monophthongization. In phonology, a diphthong is a sound resulting from the combination of two vowel sounds in the same syllable.

Word	SAE Pronunciation (IPA)	AAVE Pronunciation (IPA)	Feature

Ride	/raid/	/ra:d/	/aɪ/ → /a:/
Time	/taɪm/	/ta:m/	/aɪ/ → /a:/
Mine	/maɪn/	/ma:n/	/aɪ/ → /a:/

In each of these examples, there is a reduction of the diphthong /aɪ/ to a monophthong /a:/. In Standard American English, words like *ride*, *time*, and *mine* are pronounced with a transition between two vowel sounds. However, in African American Vernacular English, this transition or glide is omitted and the vowel is held longer, creating a singular sound or monophthong (Green, 2002). As shown in the chart, there is a systematic and regular shift from /aɪ/ to /a:/ that is present across similar-sounding words. This phonologic feature can be heard frequently from AAVE users, from everyday conversation to popular culture—especially in film and music.

R-Lessness

R-lessness, which is also known as postvocalic /r/ deletion, is the omission of the /r/ sound when it appears after a vowel. This particular feature is highly present in African American Vernacular English and makes it a non-rhotic variety of English. This means that words such as *door*, *floor*, and *your*, become *do'*, *flo'*, and *yo'*. A common expression to express agreement or to say “yes” is *fo' sho'* which marks the r-lessness feature that is present in AAVE (Green, 2002).

Word	SAE Pronunciation (IPA)	AAVE Pronunciation (IPA)	Feature
Door	/dɔɪ/	/dɔ:/ or /do:/	/ɪ/ → ∅
Floor	floɪ/	/flo:/ or /flo:/	/ɪ/ → ∅
Your	/jɔɪ/ or /jʊɪ/	/jo:/	/ɪ/ → ∅
Sure	/ʃʊɪ/	/fo:/	/ɪ/ → ∅

In Kendrick Lamar’s famous track, *Alright*, in the lines *Wouldn’t you know / We been hurt, been down before*, there is a clear example of the deletion of the /r/ in words *hurt* and *before*. Later, in the same song, Kendrick uses *for sure*, shortened and pronounced as *fo' sho'* or /fəʊ ʃʊ/ (Lamar, 2015). For in *for sure* pronounced non-rhotically, an expression that signifies agreement or to say “yes” is not only common in AAVE but other varieties of English.

This just reinforces how expansive AAVE has become, especially through hip-hop, and how common certain phrases, sounds, or patterns of speech have become mainstream.

Substitution of “th” sounds

Another key phonological feature in AAVE is the replacement of the “th” sounds, /θ/ or /ð/ in words like *think* or *this*, respectively. As for the voiceless “th” or /θ/, it may be replaced with a /t/ or [f]. As for the voiced “th” or the /ð/ it may be replaced with a /d/ or /v/ (Mufwene *et al.*, 2022).

SAE	IPA	AAVE	Example
Voiceless “th”	/θ/	[t] or [f]	Think → tink, fink
Voiced “th”	/ð/	[d] or [v]	this, them → dis, dem

This process is known as fricative stopping or fronting, and it’s also found in other English dialects. In AAVE, though, it’s used consistently and often serves a practical purpose: these substituted sounds are faster and easier to pronounce, especially in rhythmic or expressive speech like hip-hop. You can hear this in Will Smith’s 1997 hit *Gettin’ Jiggy Wit It* (Smith, 1997). In the title alone, there are two clear phonological features: the voiceless “th” in *with* is replaced by a [d] or [t], becoming *wit*, and there’s also an example of G-dropping—*getting* becomes *gettin’*. Both are common and natural features of AAVE that contribute to its sound and flow, especially in music.

G-dropping

G-dropping is another noticeable feature of, but not limited to, AAVE. G-dropping involves the dropping or omission of the final “g” in words that end in “-ing”, typically the gerund in verbs such as running, talking or getting. These words become *runnin’*, *talkin’* or *gettin’*. G-dropping is a reflection of a natural speech pattern and also appears in informal Standard American English or Southern American English (Mufwene *et al.* 2022). Similar to the substitution of the “th”, these features help with the flow of speech and could add to the musicality of the language.

Stress Shift and Intonation / Front-Stressing of Words

The shift in word stress is a defining feature of AAVE and is one that sets it apart from Standard American English (SAE). In AAVE, the stress of the word is moved from the end toward the beginning of the word, adding a more forceful or rhythmic sound (Green, 2002). One of the clearest examples of this is in how speakers of AAVE pronounce words like *Police* or *Detroit*. In SAE, the stress falls on the final syllable, po-LICE and de-TROIT. However, in AAVE, this stress is shifted to the front: PO-lice and DEE-troit.

Word	SAE	AAVE
Police	/pə'lis/	/'pʊolis/
Detroit	/'diːtɔɪt/	/dɪ'tɔɪt/

Unstressed Syllable Deletion

Another feature that is related to stress and that pertains to African American Vernacular is called Unstressed syllable deletion, in other words, dropping the weaker or less emphasized elements of a word—usually at the beginning (Green, 2002). For instance, an AAVE speaker may say ‘bout or ‘cause instead of about or because.

Metathesis

Metathesis is a phonological process in AAVE in which the order of sounds within a word is reversed (Green, 2002). A recognized example of Metathesis in AAVE regards the word *ask*, which is pronounced frequently as *aks*: the change in sounds occurs between the /s/ and the /k/. Other examples may include words such as *grasp* or *wasp*.

Word	SAE	SAE (IPA)	AAVE	AAVE (IPA)
Ask	Ask	/æsk/	aks	/æks/
Asked	Asked	/æskt/	aksed	/ækst/
Grasp	Grasp	/græsp/	graps	/græps/
Wasp	Wasp	/wɒsp/	waps	/wɒps/

Metathesis in AAVE is sometimes perceived as a mistake, but in reality, it reflects long-standing usage patterns and highlights the deep historical roots of the variety as it appears in older forms of English as well as other varieties of English (Mufwene, 2022).

To conclude the section on phonetics, these phonological features demonstrate that once again, AAVE is neither random nor incorrect, but rather an expressive and consistent variety of English that has its own rules and patterns. From historical roots to modern-day usage in music, film, and everyday use, AAVE phonology continues to change and evolve while also maintaining key features that reflect a unique sound (Green, 2002).

AAVE and Translation

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is not just a way of speaking—it reflects culture, identity, and history. When AAVE is present in music, literature, or film, translators face the challenge of not only conveying the message but the voice behind it. Unlike Standard English, AAVE contains grammar structures, phonology, and slang or expressions that can be hard to translate and convey in other languages like Spanish or Catalan; translation is linguistic but also cultural. This section is not on whether AAVE *can* be translated, but how to do so in a responsible way due to the various challenges that may arise.

Challenges with AAVE Grammar

First of all, one of the main challenges in translating AAVE is grammar. There are many features like zero copula or the use of BIN that do not exist in Romance languages such as Spanish or Catalan. For example, “He BIN seen that movie”, which uses the AAVE-specific marker *BIN* to indicate that an action happened a long time ago and is still relevant or known to the speaker. If translated literally, this nuance may be lost. In Spanish, one might translate this phrase as *Él ya vio esa película* or *Él la vio hace mucho tiempo*. While these phrases both contain time elements, *ya* and *hace mucho tiempo*, they fail to meet the pragmatics and expressiveness that come from the speaker; when BIN is used, the speaker assumes familiarity or shared knowledge, and that the information should not come as a surprise. Therefore, to add more emotion or attitude to meet the tone of BIN, perhaps a better translation would be *¡Claro que ya la ha visto!*

Similarly, phrases that contain zero copula pose challenges in translation. In AAVE, speakers may omit forms of the verb *to be*, for example, *She tired* or *they at home*. In Spanish and Catalan, the verb *ser/estar* cannot be omitted in this way and requires the copula for grammatical correctness.

Challenges with AAVE Slang

Slang and vocabulary in AAVE also may pose challenges to translators. One major issue is that some slang in AAVE has no functional equivalent in other languages, such as Spanish and Catalan. As taken from Widawski, slang can be categorized into common themes such as the body or sex that are universal. However, there are specific themes that are related to race, identity, or even resistance that are unique to African American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Widawski, 2015). Therefore, by using Peninsular Spanish slang or Catalan slang there is a risk of depriving African American slang of its identity and cultural context. A term such as “O.G”, which is short for Original Gangster, is related to African American street culture. O.G may be translated as *veterano* or *respetado* which may convey a fraction of its essence but may lack density regarding culture.

Challenges with Code-Switching

Furthermore, African American Vernacular English speakers often code-switch between African American Vernacular English and Standard American English depending on context. This being said, translators must be attentive not only to words and grammar but to shifts in register that reflect tone and identity.

Strategies for Translating AAVE

In some cases, AAVE terms have entered popular usage, not only in American English but also in other languages such as Spanish. For example, *woke* or *wokeism* are terms that originate from African American Vernacular English but have gone global or mainstream. This said, as a translator, I would try to retain and preserve where possible. By maintaining terms such as *woke* or *O.G*, cultural authenticity and speakers’ identity remain intact, working well in literary texts or audiovisual content.

In some instances, a translator may need to add footnotes or glosses to clarify meanings for readers or spectators who are not familiar with AAVE. This strategy aligns with what translator, Lawrence Venuti calls foreignization; in other words, retaining the features of the source culture and language (Venuti, 2018). By applying the strategy of foreignization, there is a preservation of the rich cultural differences of African American Vernacular English, even if it results in confusion for the reader.

By contrast, domestication—adapting the source material to match the target culture—may make the text feel more accessible but can erase cultural and linguistic identity (Venuti,

2018). When dealing with a culturally rich variety like AAVE, I believe that foreignization is a more responsible approach whenever possible, even if the reader is completely unfamiliar with AAVE. In part, it may be a way of demonstrating that the speaker has lived completely different experiences and comes from a different background—something that I believe is worth preserving.

As translators, we have an ethical responsibility to understand and recognize when language carries deeper meanings, whether they be historical, racial, or social. Translating AAVE should not only be about finding a linguistic equivalence but also about conveying and reflecting one's identity and culture. In contexts such as film, music, and literature where the voices of AAVE speakers matter, the translation should convey its nuances when possible. By replacing AAVE with standard form in the target language, much more than words are lost.

Conclusions

This paper has examined African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a distinct linguistic variety with particular attention to the challenges posed when translating into other languages, notably Spanish and Catalan. AAVE is not random but rather a meaningful linguistic system of communication that has been shaped by history and African American communities across time. From its emergence during the era of slavery to its evolution in contemporary popular culture, AAVE has transformed and developed into a complex, rule-governed variety of English that is worth analyzing.

The first section of the paper explored the grammatical, lexical, and phonological features of AAVE. Such features include the zero copula, the use of the stressed BIN to mark the remote past, the habitual “be”, consonant cluster reduction, g-dropping, r-lessness, and metathesis.

Another significant focus of the study was the analysis of AAVE vocabulary and slang. As demonstrated through the work of Widawski, AAVE slang arises from culturally grounded contexts and conveys themes such as resistance, racial identity, and community.

The final section of the paper considered the implications of translating. As discussed, AAVE not only contains grammatical differences that do not exist in other languages such as Spanish and Catalan but are also charged with cultural nuances, tone, and identity. The option to do a literal translation, in many cases, will fail to capture the expressive and cultural functions of AAVE. For us translators, the translation of AAVE is not only a lexical task but

also an interpretive one. However, this study does not claim to offer a definitive methodology for translating AAVE but rather aims to encourage awareness among translators regarding the complexity of this task. Although there are no perfect equivalents for specific grammar structures or slang, meaning that much will get lost in translation, it is important for the translator approaching such a task to be informed and apply strategies such as foreignization to maintain voice and authenticity.

In conclusion, African American Vernacular English is a rich and legitimate form of expression that may pose unique challenges to translators. Such challenges are rooted in grammar, slang, and phonology. Translators must use both linguistic skills and cultural awareness when deciding when to preserve, adapt, and explain. Such work is complex, but necessary, especially in an increasingly multilingual and multicultural world.

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