



A Socio-Linguistic Analysis of African-American Vernacular English at UF

Researching Non-Standard Language at the University of Florida

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Introduction

Can African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) be used as a tool for power in the African-American community at UF to claim identity and cultural relevance? Language is an important method in gaining social and cultural capital in communities where people are otherwise excluded or marginalized due to cultural differences. AAVE creates a collective identity that represents the African-American community at UF both culturally and linguistically. I am drawing attention to the legitimacy of AAVE as a dialect in the African-American community at UF.

Methods

The methods employed in this study included semi-structured interviews and online surveys. The interviews aided in understanding the cultural backgrounds of African-American students using AAVE. They also aided in providing a first person narrative on students' experiences. Online surveys were also distributed to gain a holistic understanding of students that may not be as actively involved in groups or organizations on campus. This also aided in reaching online and study abroad students.

INTERVIEWS

- Gained a holistic understanding of students' experiences through semi-structured interviews that allowed students to express themselves freely
- Got to know individuals and establish a rapport necessary for in depth analysis
- Established of a key cultural consultant that aided in getting as many solid interviews as possible

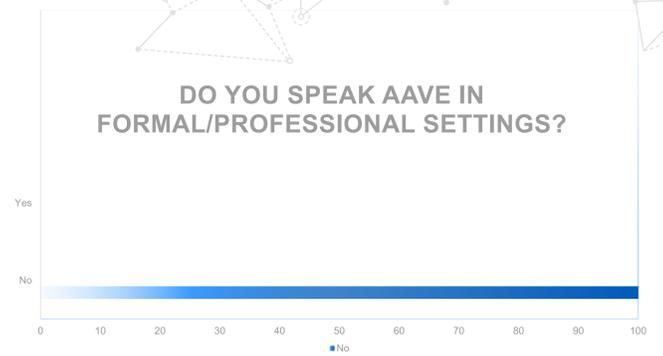
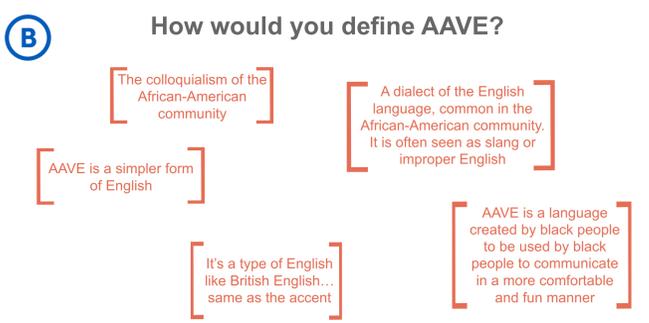
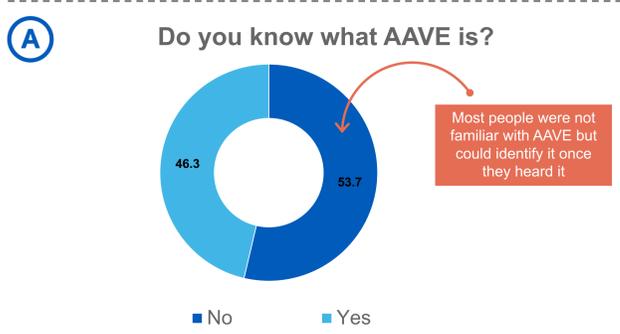
ONLINE SURVEY

- Allowed me to reach a wider array of students that may have otherwise been excluded from the study
- Allowed me to reach individuals who may speak AAVE but are not actively involved on campus

Preliminary Analysis

In the US, Academic Standard English (ASE) is considered to have higher linguistic status than other languages and dialects. This leads to the stratification of language and the creation of a linguistic hierarchy where the word "standard" creates dilemmas when compared to other languages. This can be seen in the graphics below – many students seemed unable to differentiate between a dialect and a language. Additionally, many students perceived AAVE as "improper" or "simpler."

- A. A pie chart showing the disparity between students who know what AAVE is and who do not
- B. Quotations from students on what AAVE is
- C. A chart showing how students defined AAVE



Preliminary Results

Organizations and clubs serve as a platform for African-American students to foster a collective cultural identity, tied together through the use of AAVE (Abrahams, 1972). In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of AAVE at UF, snowball sampling was employed. This method of collecting data allowed me to reach individuals, whose voices may have otherwise been excluded, through an online survey. The snowball sample revealed that students within organizations, created for minorities, have developed intimate cultural connections through overlapping linguistic communities.

Preliminary results indicate there is a perception of a cultural stigma surrounding the use of AAVE in formal settings (i.e. within the collegiate level, job interviews, and others) as seen in the graphic above. Although the survey indicated a large majority of students thought AAVE was a dialect, as seen in graphic C many still referred to it in a negative light through describing AAVE as "slang," "unconventional grammar rules," "improper" and more. This shows the deep seated social perception that dominates the narrative on AAVE. A majority of students did not view AAVE in a positive light, this included speakers of the vernacular itself as well.

There seems to be a recognition by students that AAVE is seen in a negative light. This is further reinforced by the students themselves referring to the vernacular negatively.

Conclusion

The results show a deep misunderstanding of what a language and dialect are. AAVE is a set of grammatical rules just as complex and systematic as Standard American English (SAE). The perception that AAVE is simply the "wrong way of speaking English" permeated much of the data collected. This recurring theme shows a deep misunderstanding of languages and dialects that are not used in academic settings. Moving forward, it is important to change individuals' perception of AAVE. There is a recognition by the students that AAVE is seen negatively. Universities should work to create and foster a safe and conducive environment for learning by not discarding languages and dialects that are not SAE but rather celebrating linguistic diversity. In this way, different linguistic identities can coexist in a leveled playing field where all languages and dialects are treated equally. Moving forward we must:

- Recognize no language is 'right' or 'wrong'
- Work to dismantle the linguistic hierarchy
- Remain open to new ideas of language development: language is ever-changing

References

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