

# English Language with Reference to African American Vernacular English and Creating Cultural Attitude in A Multicultural Setting

**Dr. Kirti Prakash Sangole**

Post Doctoral Research Fellow, Indian Council of Social Science and Research (ICSSR)  
New Delhi

## Abstract

Language is one of the crucial factors that have developed in humans since ancient times. It is one such source that enables one to communicate with another person and maintain once existence. This language gradually changed its pattern, and now it has become one of the most important factors for not only communication but also survival and English being one of them. The English language today is the language of development, as it is one of the major languages of commerce. In this part, one needs to understand and learn the English language according to the prescribed rules and regulations. But, then, could it be possible to make this language learning process better with more understanding and the inclusion of vernacular language? The paper tries to present the origin and cultural consequences of the use of African-American vernacular English. Also, the paper tries to present that AAVE is no different language than SAE.

**Keywords:** AAVE, SAE, Multiculturalism, Cultural Attitude, Ebonics

## Introduction

Language being a fundamental model plays a role in both culture and education. In educational contexts, the language that students speak has an impact on how they are perceived and evaluated. The standard English that is regarded and considered to be the "most correct" in educational systems is spoken by some pupils. It should come as no surprise that these pupils frequently have higher academic success rates. Many other students encounter language barriers that may hinder their chances of succeeding as they do not already know the standardized version.

To overcome this, we should focus on English language variety and how it relates to racial and cultural identity as an essential component. The fundamental tenets of multicultural and culturally sustainable approaches to education are that every student is unique, that each student's uniqueness is essential to their academic and social development, and that language is a crucial component of this uniqueness. Additionally, since language is an essential component of culture and identity, comprehension of language diversity and variation is essential to educational equity. Acknowledging and appreciating the language of diverse societies, recognising, and resolving linguistic difficulties, and promoting the intellectual, social, and emotional growth of all individuals require information and resources.

However, what occurs when the linguistic requirements are not as well defined, as in the case of dialects? Students who grow up in areas where a close variety of English is spoken naturally have an unfair edge

over their peers who speak a dialect that differs greatly from standard English. This is how it is for African American students who speak a distinct dialect English. Here segregation starts and cultural differences are created.

African American Vernacular English also termed as AAVE, is a widely spoken languages among African American working-class people. For years together, it has been one of the most widely spoken language in United States that has developed gradually. The process of development of the AAVE's is very widely studied, since its development and the process of understanding the language takes place in different manners. However, through study, we find that the origin and the development of AAVE is a debatable topic. The controversy about the language also occurs because many consider the language to be low in status and it is one of badly spoken languages. Because for the same reason, African American Vernacular English is entitled differently as-

“Black English, Ebonics, African American language, African American Vernacular language.” (Wolfram, 2021)

Through the paper, the attempt is made to understand African American vernacular English from historical and cultural point of view. The paper also focuses on understanding the AAVE role in cultural development and its importance with regards to current scenario.

To understand the African American vernacular English influence in United States and its cultural impact, one needs to understand the history or origin of the language in United States. The history of the emergence of the language can be dated back to the very basic idea of slavery. As it is very popularly known fact that colonisation took place in various countries during different time periods. The first British colony that settled with the intention of trade and gathering wealth was in 1607 in Virginia. Later, the English colony settled in Massachusetts, and some of them settled in Maryland. This settlement of the colony was so widespread that the colonies occupied the United States within a very small span of time. But with this colonisation, another important factor which took place in America was the emergence of the African people. The very first batch of Africans people who arrived in America was in 1619 in Virginia, who were brought into the country with the purpose of slavery. Even though the number of African brought to America during the period was very less, which was around 20 to 30 people, but it gradually increased to around 200 black slaves. The inclusion of the African people in the American Society was purely as slaves. This so-called slave then arrived to the whole new world from Caribbean and Barbados, with the purpose of work in tobacco and rice fields for the colonisers.

The central Capital for the emergence of Africa people in United States was then Virginia. Few Africans during that time also worked in the houses of the wealthy colonisers. During that period, the coloniser, even though did not treat the blacks equally, yet They were completely exposed to the language spoken by the colonised people. This process is natural learning of language. Later the Africans slaves who worked in the tobacco and rice plantations were settled on the southern coast, but with industrialisation in the 19th century, the Africans then moved on to the northern part as a result, we find the widespread of slaves within a short period of time throughout the country. However, we also find that the first slavery moment for their freedom and rights took place in North. History shows that with the amendment to the United States Constitution, the abolishment took place, and slavery was banned yet this could not come into complete force for many years. Here the natural growth in population of the African within the country, was there and now the blacks living in America are termed as African Americans.

Gradually the economic growth and the development of African took place with two main migrations called the ‘Great Migration.’ During this period huge number of Africans were being relocated. The first

wave of migration took place from 1910 to 1940 where people were moved from South to North, and the second wave migration enabled the African Americans to be moved from westwards to California in addition to northwards. As the African American people settled in these parts, they gradually maintained their variety. W.F. Edward in African American Vernacular English: Phonology mentions the same as- “African American community settled in urban centres. Their racial segregation increased, which at the same time helped to better preserve their variety” (Edawrd, 2004)

We are very much aware with the idea that AAVE has its first concern with regards to language related to slavery. Based on the term slavery, it has been divided into two major hypothesis- 1. The Anglicist and 2. The Creolist.

### **Anglicist Hypothesis for African American Vernacular English**

The first term Anglicist mentions that the emergence of the AAVE took place because of the need for survival, as the minority class were in completely new world. This concept was proposed by Hand Kurath and Raven McDavid, which mentions that the English dialect, especially British English, was the major language found during the period of colonisation. With few, Africans the need for getting adjusted within the British English society was the major task for black people. The minority groups of Africans were majorly focused on the need to communicate with the coloniser and to get acculturated within the new world. Also, the natural growth of the African took place where African children played a major role in spreading the British English. The British English as a language was learned by African children on streets which gradually spread among the families. This is the reason why the earlier forms of AAVE have linguistic features of southern British dialects. (Winford, 2021)

### **Creolist Hypothesis for African American Vernacular English**

Another study, which discusses the spread of AAVE, is Creolist hypothesis put forward by Bill Stewart and Beryl Bailey. According to the theory proposed by both the philosophers, it mentions that AAVE is a combination of British English and African language, which is termed as ‘Pidgins.’ According to P. Muysken and N. Smith, who defined Pidgins as-

“A Pidgin is a simplified speech form of a fusion of one or more languages, which is used as a mean of communication among people who do not share a common language” (Muysken & Smith, 1994)

The concept of Pidgin starts with the idea when two different speakers come under a common, communicative circumstances where the need for communication becomes an important factor and as a result of same, the common language of communication develops. This mixture of varied languages for the purpose of communication was then passed on to their children, where it then became or turned out to be a naturally adapted language. This adaptation of language is then called ‘Creole.’ This creole was then socially and politically adapted as the language, and hence formed a complete linguistic pattern. In terms of African American, we find that Creoles developed because of segregation and this segregation was racial. The people here can be seen to have adopted English language with African language, which presents the idea of African American Vernacular English. Then the question again arises with regards to AAVE being the dominant of which language? Even though African Americans had a very typical language style, yet it was not limited. Rather, many philosophers in that case can be seen to be commenting that the slavery facilitated the language as the number of slaves compared to slaveholders gradually increased in number in the field areas. Also, during this time, many slaveholders accompanied the slaves in the plantation field because of this, the lexicon developed more. Lewis and his article in the New York

Times mention Charles Dickens who talks to his wife about the changing conditions of the society and regarding the constant development of the black language.

“All the women who have been bred in slave states speak more or less like from having been constantly in their childhood with black nurses.” (Lewis & Jackson, 1996)

But with the Jim Crow law that demanded separate public facilities for blacks and whites, the Black Society was ignored. It was then and later considered inferior, where blacks lived in the white society but were never a part of it. Here, through the study, we also found that the blacks had adopted variations in their language, where to converse with the white, it was one and to converse with their community (blacks) it was different. This can be linguistically termed as ‘Hypercreolization,’ where the AAVE is used to reinforce their feelings about the social identity.

With this, then one should come to know the exact difference in comparison to standard American English, as this will in turn result in cultural identification.

### **Features of African American Vernacular English/ Ebonics**

Ebonics is an altered term used for African American vernacular English. The term was first coined by Robert Williams in 1970s and is a combination of two words, ‘Ebony’ and ‘Phonics.’ This AAVE has certain grammatical and structural differences as compared to standard American English, which makes the language special and one of its kind. We find the language has complex inclusion of other tonal patterns, like Wolof, Igbo and Yoruba. The AAVE compared to SAE uses tenses and aspect markers, double negatives, which cannot be commonly found in SAE.

Certain words have the base in West African language, with its specified meaning. Example- Chillin’ means Relaxing, Finna means Fixing it, Naw means No, Muh means My etc...

AAVE also has unique set of verbs and adjectives in grammatical patterns. Example- finessed- to skilfully navigate a situation, flexin’ - to show off/ brag, Lit- fun, Wolce- conscious etc...

The most unique feature of AAVE is use of phrasal patterns, which is not a form of standard American English. Use of word ‘be’ to indicate continuous action. Example- She be family. While conjugated ‘be’ as eliminated from sentences especially when a sentence has compound verbal constructions. Example- I\_gonna’ fin’ it. ([eslbuzz.com](http://eslbuzz.com))

Third person singular markers are not usually used. Example- He live here.

Usually, double negatives are used and emphasized more which was the most traditional way of speaking and writing even in the Britian. Example- I ain’t got no money.

Present continuous verb ending ‘ing’ are usually pronounced as ‘in.’ The most interesting part in AAVE is the pronunciation as it has its own unique patterns of pronunciation. AAVE reduces the constant clusters, which means when two or more consonants occur together, simply the first consonant is being pronounced. Example- Children (SAE)- Chil’un (AAVE), ask (SAE)- aks or ax (AAVE), first (SAE)- fir or firs (AAVE).

Often the ‘th’ sound is replaced by ‘f’ sound. Example- nothing (SAE)- nofin (AAVE). Both (SAE)- boff (AAVE). Also, the ‘th’ can be replaced with ‘d’ and ‘v.’ example- this (SAE)- dis (AAVE), brother (SAE)- brover (AAVE), that (SAE)- dat (AAVE).

The sound ‘l’ and ‘r’ especially those appearing after the vowels are replaced or pronounced as ‘uh’. Example- nickel (SAE)- nick’uh (AAVE), sister (SAE)- sist’uh (AAVE). Lack of pronunciation of ‘r’ word. Example Ear (SAE) – Ea/Euh (AAVE).

This created a cultural difference among the communities where the blacks were critics based on their language, and was considered low in culture.

### **Cultural attitude towards African American Vernacular English**

Through the study, we have seen that AAVE is like other language systems that are currently predominant in the world. But also, we have mentioned that the emergence of AAVE historically mentions it as the language of slaves, even though it has its own specific rules and characteristic feature. L.M. Kock, A.M.Gross and R.Kolts through writing, have mentioned the negative attitude of society towards AAVE. “AAVE has always been considered as inferior language and it is known as ‘lazy’, ‘slang’ or ‘broken English’, among other labels” (Kock et al, 2001)

As the entire concept was related to slavery, the whites never considered blacks as human, and hence their language was also underestimated. On one hand, where African Americans considered the AAVE as prestigious many others do have negative attitude towards it. Due to this reason, even today, many African Americans have a prejudice and feel ashamed of the language. The result of this can even be seen in this survey study, where many African American parents insist their children use standard American English, with few times using AAVE. Even studies have shown that many students going for higher education, but belonging to the minority sections, prefer to not reveal their identity and hence, use SAE. With regards to language as a major factor, it also hampered the education system. Due to the language barrier and the imposition of Jim Crow law, which mentions segregation of blacks and whites, which continued for nearly 100 years, that drastically changed the education pattern and the use of AAVE. Later, many decisions were taken into consideration. The originality of the language. Academic decisions for the development of the children of all cultures means respecting the students mother tongue. The diverse use of AAVE to enable students to learn standard English was one fascinating finding that took place in the research. Yet there can be many problems seen when AAVE is applied in education system.

For decades, African Americans who had been transported to the country as slaves by the colonists were not regarded as citizens. History in Slavery in America mentions about education and slaves as- “They had no right to education since the owners believed that if slaves were educated their intelligence would develop and, therefore, they would rebel against their masters” (History, 2022)

Despite not having the same privileges as white Americans, African Americans were nevertheless citizens of the United States according to the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution which took place in 1868. The Amendment mentions-

“All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” ([constitution.congress.gov/browse/essay](http://constitution.congress.gov/browse/essay))

However, in 1849, the Massachusetts Supreme Court approved segregated schools, which came before this constitutional change. There were several segregated schools, particularly in the south, during and after the Reconstruction Era. As discussed early with the Jim Crow laws, that was imposed created racial segregation, particularly in the southern United States, that effected for centuries i.e. 1876–1965. The Supreme Court ruled in 1896 that it was lawful to separate Black and White students in schools, provided that equal facilities were provided. However, because they received less financing and resources than



white Americans, African Americans and other non-white individuals enjoyed distinct educational advantages.

The government took major steps on the racial discrimination within the schools and the black students. With regards to same the Supreme Court in the year 1954 passed a decision that mentioned segregation in the schools based on racial factor be considered as illegal. But it did little matter and the segregation continued for many years, on which the government later decided to pass the decision were the new methods were adapted for the development of the studnets within the schools. This meant the segregation was now decreasing and the blacks had equal rights in education to white.

Till the 20th century the blacks were not treated equally including the educational field regardless of the laws passed earlier. Consequently, in the 20th century, attempts were made to equalize the status of the black especially the black studnets with that of whites finding route for equal justice. The major resolution passed and programs undertaken created a turning point.

Pedagogical approaches that are similar to teaching English to non-native speakers were demonstrated to have potential for AAVE speakers at this time. Using text sets in both normal English and AAVE, William Stewart experimented with the usage of dialect readers. With later textbooks, students could switch to "Standard English" after learning to read in their native accent.

The same content was presented in three distinct dialects in a comprehensive set of dialect readers called bridge readers, which Simpkins, Holt & Simpkins (1977) developed: AAVE, a "bridge" version that was more like "Standard American English" without being unduly formal, and a Standard English version. Research on "Standard English as a Second Dialect" (SESD) programmes was encouraging, but the public's response was negative. Stewart's study and the Bridge Programme were disapproved. Many critics do consider the programme to be cancelled due to political reasons.

The 1979 "Ann Arbour Decision" marked a more official change in the acceptance of AAVE. In it, a federal judge for the Eastern District of Michigan decided that when it comes to teaching black children to read, the school board should adapt to their dialect, not the students themselves, and that by failing to take the students' language into account, teachers were making it more difficult for these students to read and use mainstream English effectively ([en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org))

Further controversial Oakland school board resolution on December 18, 1996, demanded that "Ebonics" be acknowledged as an African American language, brought AAVE back into the national spotlight. One could classify Ebonics as a "second language". Implementing a programme that would use techniques from the previously mentioned SESD programmes would be like the Language Development Programme for African American Students in Los Angeles, which was started in 1988.

The Oakland resolution, like previous programmes of a similar nature, was misinterpreted as aiming to instruct AAVE and "elevate it to the status of a written language." (Coulmas, 2005). It attracted national notice and was ridiculed and attacked. Most of them thought it was an attempt to teach children lingo. The claim that African Language Systems are genetic also sparked controversy since it was widely believed that the word "genetically" meant that African Americans tended to speak a certain language due to their biology. This sentence was taken out of an amended resolution and replaced with the statement that African American language systems "have origins in West [sic] and Niger–Congo languages and are not merely dialects of English..." (Golden, 1997). The Oakland plan argued that if textbooks and teachers used AAVE to teach black children to speak Standard English instead of wrongly speaking African American vernacular, black children would perform better in school and acquire it more readily.

With the study we find that although there are several advantages to adopting AAVE when studying SAE, there are certain barriers that prevent its adoption. On the one hand, many white Americans, along with most of the American society, harbour a great deal of prejudice and hostility towards African Americans, their language, and their culture. There exist a considerable number of parents that would rather focus exclusively on SAE rather than AAVE, as they have the negative feelings that the language as well as its low prestige. Also, the attitude of some faculty creates a barrier while applying AAVE, in teaching system as they believe that AAVE is ungrammatical and inappropriate while SAE is superior. Also, there are certain movements which only enhance the idea of standard English, yet there are also chance for the development and use of AAVE with changing political, social, educational agendas.

### Conclusion

With today's changed scenario we also find that many changes have taken place and the citizens do value the language and culture of AAVE. With diversified language many speeches have been prepared since ages in AAVE to make people feel comfortable and of course that would enable them to learn standard American English in better way. Hence, we can comment that learning English language is an important agenda in today's period but, also at the same time the vernacular language taken into consideration for better understanding makes the learning process simple.

### References

1. African-American Vernacular English and education. [www.en.wikipedia.org](http://www.en.wikipedia.org)
2. Coulmas, F. (2005). *Sociolinguistics: The Study of Speakers' Choices*, Cambridge)
3. Edawrd, W.F. (2004). *African American Vernacular English: Phonology*. In B. Kortmann, K. Burrige, R. Mesthrie, E.W. Schneider and C. Upton (Eds), *A Handbook of Varieties of English*. Mouton De Gruyter.
4. Golden, T. (1997). *Oakland Scratches plan to teach black English*. New York Times
5. *History* (2022). *Slavery in America*. <https://www.history.com/topics/blackhistory/slavery>
6. *Historical Background on Citizenship Clause*. [www.constitution.congress.gov/browse/essay/amdt14-S1-1-1](http://www.constitution.congress.gov/browse/essay/amdt14-S1-1-1)
7. Kock, L.M et al. (2001). *Attitude Towards Black English and Code Switching*. Journal of Black Psychology.
8. Lewis. N & A. Jackson. (1996). *Blacks English Isn't a separate Language*. The New York Times. [www.mbhs.bergtraum.k12.ny.us/cybereng](http://www.mbhs.bergtraum.k12.ny.us/cybereng)
9. Muysken, P & Smith, N. (1994). *The Study of Pidgin and Creole Languages*. In J. Arends, P. Muysken and N. Smiths (Eds.), *Pidgins and Creoles: An Introduction*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
10. Winford, D. (2021). *The Origins of African American Vernacular English: Beginnings*. In Olatz Urigatia Mendia, *African American Vernacular English: Language, Attitude and Education*.
11. Wolfram, W. (2021). *African American English*. In Olatz Urigatia Mendia, *African American Vernacular English: Language, Attitude and Education*.
12. [www.eslbuzz.com](http://www.eslbuzz.com)