

African American Vernacular English and its presence in the American Education System



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Introduction

The United States is a melting pot of languages and cultures as a result of people coming from many parts of the world. Some of these languages come from other countries and some have been formed and developed in the USA. One of these languages is African American Vernacular English (AAVE). To be able to understand a language in all its depth, one must analyze the language's originating culture. In this paper AAVE's cultural development will first be studied by identifying the musical and literary riches that have arisen through this language. This analysis will provide the framework for an adequate assessment of the role AAVE has had in the USA education system and for the consideration of possible solutions to preserve this national treasure and support native speakers in accessing all the benefits associated with higher education.

AAVE is a communication system spoken primarily by African Americans in the United States. Linguists have posed that around 80-90% of African Americans speak AAVE in some context (Zienkiewicz, 2008). In 2003 it was estimated that 30 thousand people in the United States speak AAVE (Moreno Cabrera, p.154). There are many theories about the development and formation of AAVE. However, it is generally accepted that it served initially as a system of communication for the African slaves in America. Slavery in the United States started in the 17th century, when Africans were taken from their homeland and brought to America. In these inhumane environments AAVE and other forms of artistic expression began to arise. The cultural patrimony of AAVE started to take form through different mediums of literature and music; including but not limited to novels, poems, slave spirituals, blues and rap. The importance of AAVE can be seen through these artistic genres, which all contain some form of AAVE, and the effects that they have had on the world. In this paper the formation and history of these different genres will be analyzed in relation to AAVE, to properly identify its importance. Building from this framework, I will proceed to analyze the perspective that schools and universities take concerning AAVE and the disadvantages that many AAVE speakers experience in the academic system.

My interest in this subject initiated with the reading of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The literary dialect that the author uses sparked my interest in the actual AAVE language and led me to explore and investigate other sociocultural elements, including the formation of the language and how it has influence Standard American English (SAE). Unlike the

stereotype that classifies AAVE as a street slang, the research that I have done has brought me to a different conclusion. For this reason, I was inspired to write this paper to confirm the importance of the AAVE language in the framework of its cultural history. In conclusion, I will analyze possible ways that AAVE can be brought into the classroom to aid AAVE speakers, as well as the possibility to continue to promote the use of this language that has immensely enriched the American culture and the world.

Language, Dialect or Slang

Even though AAVE and SAE share many linguistic features, other characteristics exist that make these two systems of communication substantially different. Despite lexical, syntactical, morphological and phonological differences, many people continue to believe that AAVE is simply a type of slang used in very informal situations and not suitable for more formal interactions. The belief that AAVE is slang may be due to non-AAVE speakers' lack of knowledge or exposure with AAVE and, therefore, of its linguistic complexity. The majority of the people who hold this opinion have had limited exposure with AAVE, likely only through television shows, movies or advertisements. According to experts these mediums have "watered-down" versions of AAVE, and in most cases present unrealistic stereotypical versions written by non-AAVE speakers (Escalas, 1994). The first step to confirm or deny the claims that AAVE is slang, a dialect or a language, we must define these terms in a specific context. In different fields and situations these very common words can mean very different things and can have underlying negative connotations.

In general, the United States is not known for its extraordinary knowledge of or ability to speak other languages. This is truly a paradoxical reality, in view of the fact that the United States is a country founded on and composed of immigrants from around the world. Due to this reality, some people use the terms *dialect* and *language* interchangeably, without knowing the characteristics that define them or the negative connotations that they could have in a certain context. Perhaps the most easily definable and outlying term of the three is *slang*. However, it continues to be difficult to define, which can be easily seen in the different definitions of slang that exist. Dumas and Lighter (1978) discuss the imprecision of the many definitions of slang. They quote the great American poet Walt Whitman who said, "slang ... [is] an attempt of common humanity to escape from bald literalism, and express itself illimitably, which in highest walks produces poets and poems" (Dumas & Lighter, 1978, p. 5). Whitman exalts the use of slang, claiming it is a worthy form of creative human expression, and he compares it to poetry. Whitman is a poet that puts the creative element of slang on par with his own creative writing. But there are others who do not approve of this type of creative use of language. The praise of slang is not shared by all researchers who have taken an interest in this subject. In fact, following Whitman's quote, Dumas and Lighter include another quote from the 1967 Harbrace College Handbook that presents

slang in a less positive light, saying that it pertains and is used by the lazy and those who are simply not able to employ their words with precision (1978). This opinion of slang does not aid us in our search for a definition of the term; however, it does reveal the general opinion that many have regarding AAVE. There is a belief that AAVE is simply a communication system for the uneducated. As a result of their socioeconomic status and low SAE fluency, AAVE speakers that express themselves this way, are deemed to lack intelligence. Obviously, this is false. In fact, many cases show the opposite: many of the AAVE speakers are also SAE speakers, but they feel that they need to code-switch or use different speech in different situations. Therefore, most of the speakers who speak AAVE do so not because they are linguistically deficient, but because of sociological and cultural self-identification elements.

Having examined the two sides of the slang argument regarding AAVE, we will now examine a more adequate definition of the term slang that Dumas and Lighter proceed to quote from the *Webster's Third Dictionary*, which identifies slang as:

A nonstandard vocabulary composed of words and senses characterized primarily by connotations of extreme informality and usu. a currency not limited to a particular region and composed typically of coinages or arbitrarily changed words, clipped or shortened forms, extravagant, forced, or facetious figures of speech, or verbal novelties usu. experiencing quick popularity and relatively rapid decline into disuse. (1978, p. 9)

In light of these various definitions, it is difficult to define the term *slang* objectively. This is due to the utter subjectivity of the term. The definition of slang and the terms that are categorized as slang depend primarily on the linguistic preferences of the person who defines them. For example, if a survey was carried out looking for examples of “nonstandard vocabulary”, an 80-year-old person would provide completely different answers than a 40-year-old, or a 20-year-old. Moreover, one’s own linguistic preferences are not only a construction of personal experience, but due to the fact that language is a communal construction; one’s language is affected and influenced by those with which one is in contact. Analyzing the *Webster's Third Dictionary* definition, we can see how AAVE may, or may not, fall into the category of slang depending on the point of view of the researcher.

Throughout history, many have classified AAVE as simply Standard American English with a distinct phonological expression and nonstandard lexicon. However, if AAVE solely consisted of these differences, then we could simply consider AAVE slang. But, if AAVE is considered a different language, or a SAE dialect, we would be forced to look at this question

differently. It would not be possible to categorize AAVE as a slang of SAE, because for a nonstandard lexicon to exist the two variation of speech must be considered the same language. This leads us to the next question; the definition of language, and dialect and in what way they differ from one another.

Language and dialect are two terms that have caused much strife throughout history and specifically in Europe over the last 200 years. The differences in the definitions of language and dialect are not as clear as they should be and, in many cases, they change depending on the context and connotation of the speaker.

Language is an essential aspect of our everyday life. The ability to communicate, to express oneself, to convey information, is truly an astonishing feat that many times is taken for granted. Practically every aspect of our lives is saturated with language, from the social media posts that we read to the intimate talks we have with our loved ones. Without some form of language, without some system of communication, this would be very difficult and, in many cases, impossible. Cambridge Dictionary gives the following definition of language: “a system of communication consisting of sounds, words, and grammar, or the system of communication used by people in a particular country or type of work” (n.d.). This definition of language is very inclusive, showing the essential elements that make up a language. Does AAVE have the characteristics required to be considered a language according to this definition? In the first place, a language is a system of communication. The speech of the African American people is a system of communication because it is used for just that. Secondly, the definition identifies specific requirements of a language, which includes vocabulary and grammar. Therefore, a way of speaking must have these two requirements to be considered a language. To distinguish AAVE from SAE as a language, AAVE must consist of a particular lexicon or syntax that Standard English does not possess. The review of many studies on AAVE leads to a conclusion that AAVE does share many of the lexical and syntactic aspects of SAE; however, there are characteristics that differentiate AAVE from SAE in both a lexical and syntactic perspective. We will present only a few examples of unique AAVE characteristics: the features known as habitual *be* form, remote past marker and habitual *stay* form. These characteristics are not found in SAE and, therefore, could be difficult for SAE speakers to understand in a social interaction.

The first of these characteristics is what linguists have named the “habitual *be* form”. This consists in the insertion of the verbal marker “be”, preceded by the subject and followed by the

verb in the continuous form. In AAVE it denotes that the action that the subject carries out is of a habitual nature. An example of this AAVE characteristic and a possible translation into SAE can be found in Zienkiewicz (2008) “Jess be talking on the phone.” This sentence translated into SAE would be “Jess usually talks on the phone.” Zienkiewicz (2008) cites a study from 2005 by Jackson and Green in which they tested the understanding of the habitual *be* form among young AAVE speakers (who in this case were African American), and non-AAVE speakers (Caucasian). Both groups were shown a picture from Sesame Street. In the picture the Cookie Monster was sick in bed and did not have any cookies, while Elmo was next to him eating a cookie. The children were asked who was eating the cookies. All of the children pointed at Elmo. However, when asked “who be eating cookies?” the non-AAVE speakers pointed to Elmo, while the AAVE speakers pointed to the Cookie Monster (Zienkiewicz, 2008). This study shows that the habitual *be* form and most likely many other aspects of AAVE can be misunderstood by SAE speakers.

Another feature unique to AAVE is the Remote Past Marker. This feature is the use of a stressed “been” to represent an action in the past. In AAVE the stressed “been” can be differentiated phonetically from the unstressed “been”. The unstressed “been” in AAVE and SAE has the same meaning and is the past participle of the verb “to be”. The stressed “been”, pronounced as “BIN”, is meant to represent an action that started in the remote past and that continues into the present. For example, “She BIN running” in SAE would be “She has been running for a long time” (Zienkiewicz, 2008). Another example of this feature could be “I BIN got that part. I’m confused by the last part.” This in SAE would be expressed as “I understood that part a long time ago.” (Harris, A. & Wood, J., 2013).

The last AAVE feature that I will mention is the “habitual *stay* form” followed by a verb in the continuous form. The habitual *stay* form means “to always be” or “to usually be” (Scott, 2016, p.39). An example of this feature would be “They stay arguing about something.” The translation into SAE would be “They are always arguing about something.” (Blake & Buchstaller, 2019, Table 13.1). This feature is very similar to the habitual *be* form, however, some investigators pose that the habitual *stay* form is used in AAVE specifically to express a speaker’s frustration (Scott, 2016, p.41) while the habitual *be* form has more of a neutral connotation.

These are just some examples of grammatical differences found in AAVE that do not exist in SAE. There are also lexical differences unique to AAVE, like “kitchen”, which refers to the curly hair at the nape of the neck, “siditty”, which means snobbish, and “bougie”, which means an

“elitist African American” (Zienkiewicz, 2008). Yet other lexical creations in the AAVE community have been adopted by SAE speakers due to the close proximity and contact the two variations experience in the American culture. Some examples of these are “chill out”, “main squeeze” and “diss”. All of these terms, though they have been adopted by many SAE speakers, still pertain to a very familiar, nonstandard form of the language.

According to the definition of the Cambridge Dictionary, AAVE could be considered an entirely different language since it has all the requirements presented in the definition. However, many people continue to call the variation a dialect. The etymological root of the term *dialect* can be found in Haugen (1966). Haugen explains that the word *dialect* has ancient Greek roots that refer to the different literary dialects of ancient Greece, which were thought to be reflections of different spoken variations of Greek. However, later on the different Greek dialects were replaced by one uniform Greek norm, that of Athens. In the history of the term *dialect*, one can see the foundation of Haugen’s definition of dialect, which is “any one of the related norms comprised under the general name ‘language,’ historically the result of either divergence or convergence.” (Haugen, 1966, p. 923). Haugen has several definitions of language. However, in analyzing his definition of language we will focus on the definition that most concerns us: “In a historical, diachronic sense ‘language’ can either be a common language on its way to dissolution, or a common language resulting from unification.” (Haugen, 1966, p. 923). The definitions of dialect and language are extremely similar. Both *dialect* and *language* reference a convergence or divergence of systems of communication as being a critical factor. The definitions of these two terms are almost identical, however, the difference between them is a result of one’s point of view. From a linguistical perspective a dialect and a language are practically one and the same, but being looked at from different points in history. Every language comes from the fusion or dissolution of another language. Linguistically any language that comes from another language is to be considered a dialect, for example what Spanish would be to Latin or Latin to Indo-European. However, there is also a different way to use the term dialect, which is evident in the Cambridge Dictionary’s definition of dialect, “a form of a language that people speak in a particular part of a country, containing some different words and grammar, etc.” (Dialect, 2020). In this case, a code is defined as a dialect simply because it is spoken in a small region of a country and is not considered the national language. As a result, this has led to the negative connotation surrounding

the term dialect, which is used as if to categorize a system of communication as less important or less valuable than the national language.

It is difficult to determine whether AAVE is a dialect. This is due to conflicting information. Using the more nationalistic definition of dialect, we are challenged in concluding that AAVE is a dialect, because even though AAVE is not a national language, a conclusion that it is a dialect would imply that AAVE has less worth than the national language. Using the linguistic definition, i.e. a dialect is any language in the process of convergence or divergence, we are reluctant to say AAVE is an English dialect. This is due to the controversy and uncertainty surrounding the origins of AAVE. Many researchers and linguists have extensively discussed the possible historical origins of AAVE. Some, Edgar Schneider, Shana Poplack, David Sankoff, Michael Montgomery and Traute Ewers, claim that AAVE is a dialect of SAE, a statement which implies that AAVE in its essence stemmed from the English spoken in the 17th and 18th century in the United States (Rickford, 1997). Other investigators, Salikoko Mufwene, John Singler and Elizabeth Closs Traugott, claim that AAVE is not a SAE dialect, which implies that AAVE in its essence was a formation of creole languages, but later was influenced by SAE (Rickford, 1997).

In summary, we cannot declare AAVE a different language than SAE. But neither can we consider AAVE to be a variation or a dialect just because of its similarity to SAE. Overall, the linguistic factors are just one part of the argument, and other cultural and social factors must be taken into account.

Origins of AAVE

The linguistic origins of AAVE have been a point of controversy for many years among experts, due to the multiple origin theories that exist. One of the reasons so many discussions exist concerning the origins of AAVE is the lack of reliable texts and historically reliable samples of AAVE during the time of its development. Many of the AAVE texts during this time were written by non-native AAVE speakers because the majority of slaves were illiterate.

In this section we will examine different theories surrounding the origin of this language, specifically the three most popular theories: the Creolist hypothesis, the Dialectologist hypothesis and the Divergence hypothesis.

Creolist Hypothesis

The creolist hypothesis seems to be the earliest hypothesis that appeared regarding the linguistic roots and origins of AAVE. This hypothesis poses that AAVE was derived mainly from pidgin or creole roots. Theorists have been supporting this hypothesis since 1914. First, we need to clarify what these linguistic terms mean. A pidgin is a very basic language created out of a necessity to communicate between speakers of two or more languages (Rickford, 1997). Since the slaves from Africa did not speak English and normally would not speak each other's languages, they developed a basic communication system to be able to communicate with their captors and other slaves. The linguists that support this theory believe that the slaves combined "English expressions with grammar and vocabulary typical of various African languages, and thus created a pidgin." (Magnusson, 2008, p. 2). John R. Rickford defines a creole language as a pidgin language which is learned by a second generation of speakers as their native language and they naturally contribute to its development. Consequently, the creole languages usually have a larger vocabulary and more complex grammatical structures (Rickford, 1997). In general, this hypothesis supports the idea that AAVE originally was created as a pidgin language. This would also mean the AAVE was based on creole grammar, hence the name "Creolist". However, the advocates for this theory do accept SAE influence, which explains the amount of SAE characteristics in AAVE.

Dialectologist Hypothesis

Another theory is the Dialectologist hypothesis. This theory suggests that the linguistic roots of AAVE come from British English and other English dialects spoken by the colonials at the time when AAVE first developed (Rickford, 1997). This means that the African and African American slaves began to speak AAVE by partially learning the English dialects that the colonials spoke. The first theorists began to support this hypothesis in 1924. The researchers who support this theory claim that British English and other English dialects developed into what is known as Non-Standard American English or NSAE. These researchers point to the similarities between NSAE and AAVE claiming there are no substantial differences between the two codes. One of the grammatical structures to support their theory is the negative concord grammar structure, present in both AAVE and NSAE (Obiajulu, 2012). An example of this would be “I ain’t never said that.” (Obiajulu, 2012, p.11).

Even though there are grammar structures that both AAVE and NSAE share, there are some grammar structures uniquely specific to AAVE. One of these grammar structures is the habitual *be* form.

Divergence Hypothesis

In the field of AAVE linguistics, the most recent theory is the Divergence hypothesis. Rickford (1997) says that many researchers were not as polarized to one of the two theories as was believed. The researcher Mufwene said “neither the dialectologist nor the creolist positions account adequately for all the facts of AAE” (Rickford, 1997). Therefore, the Divergence Hypothesis emerged using as a fundamental base the Dialectologist Hypothesis. The Divergence hypothesis was put forth in an article written by Labov and Harris in 1983, based on different types of evidence collected from AAVE speakers in Philadelphia (Rickford, 1997). This theory proposes that even though AAVE is essentially derived from the early-English dialects, AAVE separated itself early on from Standard English and developed the uniquely AAVE features that make it what it is today. This theory claims that AAVE is based on Standard English grammar, however, it does not discount the influence of creole languages (Obiajulu, 2012, p. 12).

AAVE in Literature

Due to the fact that a language and culture are so intertwined, to adequately understand AAVE we must first analyze the culture AAVE arose from. With this aim we will look at the literary creations that have used AAVE as its expressive medium.

We know that African Americans had a different way speaking from the very beginning. We know this because historical writings, many court records and journalistic extracts, have been analyzed and show the presence of AAVE characteristics. “By the mid-1700s, there was already an established literary convention representing African American English in plays, written sermons, and other written texts.” (Wolfram, 2000 , p. 41). There are many historical writings from this time that contain AAVE characteristics. However, researchers have determined that most of these texts are not acceptable for linguistic analyses due to the identity of the author. The majority of these texts, although representing African American English, were not written by AAVE native speakers. During this time in US history, only a very small portion of AAVE speakers knew how to write, so Caucasian Americans would usually serve as amanuensis. “Writing was a rare, specialized skill for early African Americans in the United States given the prohibition against literacy imposed on slaves.” (Wolfram, 2000 , p. 40). A very large portion if not all African Americans spoke AAVE. It is interesting to note that some of the slaves that were literate did not write in AAVE, however, this is to be expected as they would have only been taught to write in SAE. The identity of SAE authors of texts that contain AAVE characteristics impedes any historical linguistic analysis. No linguist can be confident that the author has successfully and accurately reproduced the phonetics of AAVE existing at the time or simply mimicking the AAVE speech. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this essay we are examining the use of AAVE in literary texts and these texts are the first accounts of AAVE characteristics in literature.

The researchers Walt Wolfram and Marianne Cooley carried out an analysis of historical writings containing AAVE features. The documents analyzed, included a dictated conversation with Jeremy, the slave of George Washington’s brother. This document dates back to the early 1800s. They also studied literary sermons directed to slaves, also dating from the early 1800s. Cooley also examined a late eighteenth-century play called *Padlock* in 1997. Additionally, they analyzed two letters written by African American slaves. One was anonymous and was written in 1723, and the other was written by a slave named James Carter. Lastly, there are court records and minute books that include quotes from African Americans from the beginning of the 1800s in

Petersburg, Virginia (Wolfram, 2000). The researchers examined a list of grammatical characteristics common in AAVE and analyzed those found in each text.

Table 1.

Comparison of AAVE characteristics found in texts.

Feature	Amanuensis	Literary (sermons)	* <i>The Padlock</i>	Letters	Court record
Grammatical					
Subject concord of finite main verbs					
• 3rd sg. -s absence (e.g. <i>she go</i>)	✓	✓		✓	✓
• 3rd pl. -s concord (e.g. <i>the dogs goes</i>)	✓			✓	
• 1st sg./pl. -s (e.g. <i>I/we talks</i>)	✓				
<i>Be</i> variants					
• copula absence (e.g. <i>she nice</i>)	✓	✓	✓		✓
• past tense <i>been</i> marker (e.g. <i>soon been see</i>)		✓			
• perfective <i>be</i> (e.g. <i>I am come for you</i>)		✓			
• finite <i>be</i> (e.g. <i>be hard as a bull</i>)	✓	✓	✓		
Formation of past tense					
• unmarked past (e.g. <i>yesterday she go</i>)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
• regularized past (e.g. <i>they knowed</i>)	✓	✓		✓	
• leveling to <i>was</i> (e.g. <i>the dogs was there</i>)	✓			✓	
• leveling to <i>weren't</i> (e.g. <i>worn't no great house</i>)	✓				
<i>A</i> -prefixing	✓	✓	✓		
Negation					
• multiple negation (e.g. <i>he didn't do nothing</i>)	✓	✓	✓		
• <i>ain't</i>	✓				
• bare negative particle <i>no</i> (e.g. <i>I no like them</i>)	✓	✓	✓		✓
Undifferentiated pronoun forms					
	✓	✓	✓		✓
Prepositions					
• absence	✓	✓	✓		
• complementizer <i>for</i> for <i>to</i>		✓	✓		✓
• locative <i>to</i> (e.g. <i>to Dumfries to breakfast</i>)	✓				

Phonological					
<i>t</i> clipping (e.g. <i>t'other</i>)	✓				
<i>Ere</i> lowering (e.g. <i>dare</i> for <i>there</i>)	✓				
Unstressed final schwa raising (e.g. <i>Alexandry</i>)	✓				
Consonant cluster reduction (e.g. <i>mus</i>)	✓	✓		✓	
Unstressed syllable absence (e.g. <i>rishute</i> , <i>'xactly</i>)	✓	✓		✓	
Final unstressed <i>ng</i> → <i>n</i> (e.g. <i>goin'</i>)	✓				
Auxiliary 've deletion	✓	✓			
<i>d</i> for voiced <i>th</i>	✓	✓		✓	
<i>t</i> for voiceless <i>th</i>	✓			✓	
<i>b</i> for <i>v</i>	✓				✓
<i>Um</i> for <i>them</i>					✓
<i>Fur</i> for <i>far</i>	✓				
<i>Skeered</i> for <i>scared</i>	✓				
Final <i>er</i> for <i>ow</i> (e.g. <i>winder</i>)	✓				
<i>b</i> for <i>f</i> (e.g. <i>ob</i>)	✓				
Lexical					
<i>Rarée</i>					✓
<i>I cod</i> (by <i>gog</i>)	✓			✓	
<i>Um</i> for <i>it</i>	✓				
<i>Full</i> for <i>fill</i>	✓				
<i>Make trial</i> for <i>try</i>		✓			
<i>Pranktious</i>	✓				
<i>Intensifier heap</i> (<i>heap big things</i>)		✓			
<i>For true</i>		✓			
<i>Massa</i>				✓	✓
<i>Ax</i> for <i>ask</i>	✓			✓	
<i>Gying</i> for <i>going</i>	✓				
<i>Arter</i> for <i>after</i>	✓	✓			

Note. Data for historical comparison of AAVE characteristics from Walt Wolfram (2000).

Although many of the AAVE characteristics differ over the different pieces written by SAE speakers and AAVE native speakers, there are some characteristics that are consistent throughout. For example, the unmarked past tense, “yesterday she go”, and the zero third person, “she go” (Wolfram, 2000). This could be due to the fact that this was one of the most significant and easily identifiable characteristics that writers or amanuensis used in order to represent AAVE speakers.

The first novel written by an African American is *Clotel, or the President’s Daughter* by William Wells Brown in 1853. It is also thought to be the first novel with AAVE features written by a native speaker (Huber, 2019). This novel represents a historic milestone for AAVE literary expression. However, even though Brown used AAVE, he mainly used Standard English in his

novel, allowing only certain characters to express themselves in AAVE. This approach was common among African American authors when using AAVE as a literary element. While allowing some characters to express themselves in AAVE, the majority of their works was written in Standard English (Huber, 2019). This tendency changed in the nineteenth century due to the African Americans' increased education and literacy which led to the production of many more writings in AAVE. "One finds it in novels, short stories, travelers' accounts, descriptions of minstrel shows, slave and ex-slave narratives, semitechnical studies, dialect sermons, music, and poetry." (Rickford & Rickford, 2000, p. 141). Even though every piece of writing must be examined to determine its authenticity, the volume of writing solidified AAVE as a language open to artistic expression, contrary to popular belief at the time. However, African Americans did not start to embrace AAVE as a literary form until the Harlem Renaissance. During this artistic revolution in the 1920s the African American artists accepted their cultural heritage and "asserted pride in black life and identity." (National Gallery of Art, n.d.). In a culture of inequality and discrimination, it was an opportunity for many African Americans to experience "a freedom of expression through the arts for the first time." (National Gallery of Art, n.d.). The Harlem Renaissance was a time in which African American artists took great pride in their culture; this artistic revolution took shape in many ways. One of the benefits of the Harlem Renaissance was the works of Zora Neale Hurston. Born in Alabama in 1891, Hurston was an award-winning writer and a central figure for both the Harlem Renaissance and also for AAVE artistic expression (Boyd, 2019). She embraced the AAVE language and was credited with "having written some of, if not *the* finest, folklore in African American literary history." (Huber, 2019, p. 40). She not only used AAVE to represent African American tradition, but also incorporated other African American customs to turn the tables on the negative connotations that had developed. "Writers like her revived the African American oral tradition, including trickster tales, spirituals, gospels, and blues, and brought it to paper for everyone to embrace." (Huber, 2019, p. 40) One of her master pieces was the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The AAVE language characteristics can be seen in this excerpt of the novel:

What she doin coming back here in dem overhalls? Can't she find no dress to put on? —
Where's dat blue satin dress she left here in?—Where all dat money her husband took and
died and left her?—What dat ole forty year ole 'omen doin' wid her hair swingin' down
her back lak some young gal? (Hurston, 1937, p. 12)

This excerpt provides some of the AAVE characteristics in Hurston's novel. After Hurston published her works, many other authors followed in her footsteps showing their pride in their culture by using AAVE. Another prominent figure who promoted the use of AAVE was June Jordan. This widely published and highly acclaimed author used AAVE in her writings and also talked about a diverse array of topics including racial inequality, political oppression and racial identity (Poetry Foundation, n.d.).

These and many other authors revealed the potential AAVE has as a literary language. In doing so, they rightly consolidated AAVE as a language with a rich cultural heritage. When a language is written down, it is easier for later generations to follow in the artistic tradition and develop new traditions. Previously, this form of writing was only used as a form of ridicule. "The general observation is that dialect or dialectal features have long been used in literature to indicate the lower social status of the speaker and/or for humorous effects." (Huber, 2019, p. 39). But this is no longer true. These writers can use AAVE to more fully express their lives and history. Furthermore, the effects these works have had, not only nationally but also internationally, are astounding. This literary tradition has been able to add equally to the richness of Western and European literature (Huber, 2019). As these works become more well known, many readers around the world are interested in these literary creations. However, many translators are finding it very difficult to translate this work, resulting in a multitude of essays focuses on the issues of translating AAVE into other languages. For example, Marianne Kraai explains in her master's thesis the difficulties of translating AAVE into Dutch. She talks about the meaning of AAVE for the African American people and the different options for trying to translate this language into Dutch (Kraai, 2013).

Language and culture are intertwined, language expresses the culture it is from. AAVE literary expression conveys the identity of its speakers like no other language. It expresses a past, a culture and a history unique and particular to those who use it. AAVE used by native speakers in the literary world is a relatively new phenomenon and will hopefully continue to flourish and develop.

Music and AAVE

However, another form of artistic expression is even more dominant in the African American culture: musical expression. Scholars who have examined music in the African American culture find that it is a center piece for expression and creativity. For example, the scholar of music in African American culture Obiajulu said, “I looked at music because it is a centerpiece of black culture and has been a constant vehicle of expression, unlike other forms of more traditionally used data.” (Obiajulu, 2012, p. 1). This has been true since the very beginning of African American history.

Slave Spirituals

One of the earliest signs of musical creation in the African American culture was slave spirituals. Slave spirituals normally consisted of “spontaneous sessions called ‘shouts’. Shouts derive directly from West African culture.” (Obiajulu, 2012, p. 17). These sessions normally took place outside of a church where a group of slaves would gather in a circle and shout out phrases and sounds while playing music (Obiajulu, 2012). The spirituals were usually centered around Biblical stories. Even though the slaves were not Christian in Africa, the sociologist Franklin Frazier believes that they converted to Christianity quickly after their arrival (Backfish, 2012). Most of the Africans brought to America were young men who were not experts in their own traditions, and consequently “this loss of social cohesion created a vacuum that was easily filled by Christianity.” (Backfish, 2012, pp. 12-13). Since slaves came from many different tribes, they were not familiar with each other’s traditions even though there may have been some similarities. There are sociologists who hold the contrary claim: that the slaves were converted slowly. According to these researchers, it is more likely that they went through a process of *syncretism* (Backfish, 2012, p. 13), the merging of the two cultures, which in this case signifies two distinct forms of worship. This would also make sense because even though the stories of worship –mainly found in the Bible– were the same for Caucasian Americans, Africans and African Americans, their mode of worship was very distinct. “They would stomp their feet, slap their thighs, and clap their hands in rhythm with the music, and they even used tones, sounds, and meter completely unknown to white Americans.” (Backfish, 2012, p. 13). This was one of the reasons that before 1865, the year slavery was abolished in the USA, the majority of these sessions took place outside

the churches because they seemed very strange to the Caucasian Americans (Obiajulu, *Lyrical Insight: Looking at Changes in AAVE through Slave Spirituals, Blues and Rap*, 2012). Sometimes the African Americans were even forced to worship in secret because these sessions were thought of as “barbarous” and “idolatrous” (Backfish, 2012, p. 13). Since the slaves’ arrival, this form of worship was very significant to the African American culture. “African American slaves used their spirituals to provide themselves with a rhetorical self-definition that served to refute limiting definitions pressed on them by whites.” (Sanger, 1995, p. 177). African Americans were able to use this form of musical expression to retain their own identity against a hostile culture that tried to take away their humanity. In this artistic expression it is clear that the mode of transmission was AAVE. “Slave spirituals are arguably the earliest form of Black American music in the United States, so it makes sense to consider slave spirituals as representative of early AAVE.” (Obiajulu, 2012). Slave spirituals were the cry of an oppressed culture and AAVE was the language they used.

Obiajulu researched slave spirituals and analyzed in her thesis the amount of AAVE characteristics present in slave spirituals. She focuses mainly on three AAVE characteristics; double negatives, copula absence and verbal -s omission. In the 15 spirituals that she examined only 10 contained evidence of double negatives. In the 11 she examined for copula absence, none of them showed signs of this feature. In the 10 she examined for verbal -s omission, she found eight with this characteristic (Obiajulu, 2012). Even though her pool of analysis was rather small, these findings provide us with a limited idea of the AAVE characteristics that existed during the time of slave spirituals. However, it is accepted that those who served as amanuenses for the spirituals were most likely Caucasian Americans and it is unknown if they accurately documented the linguistic characteristics in their writings. But if we do take these data into account, this would mean that the copula absence is a newer characteristic to AAVE and even though it did not exist at the time of slave spirituals, it was a characteristic developed later in the AAVE community.

Blues and Jazz

Another very popular and significant musical tradition in the African American community is the blues, believed to have derived directly from slave spirituals. The blues have their origin in the “Deep South” in the late 1800s and were “centered on sad gloomy themes, which often articulated social and economic difficulties.” (Obiajulu, 2012, p. 19). However, this definition does not adequately encompass all that blues music is. As James H. Cone says in his book *The Spirituals and the Blues*, “The power of song in the struggle for black survival— that is what the spirituals and blues are about.” (1992, p. 1). Cone’s book describes from a firsthand experience the importance of the blues for the African American. After working “long hours during the week in sawmills and factories; by Saturday night they were tired and weary. They needed to express their moods and feelings, their joys and sorrows.” (Cone, 1992, p. 1). At this time in the United States African Americans by law were not slaves, but within the court system and in everyday life, they continued to have less rights than Caucasians. This injustice made the blues even more significant because they pertained specifically to the African American people. “The blues, rather than being a hybrid of European aesthetic forms, constitute an expressive matrix that reflects the complexities of African American culture.” (Plum, 1993, p. 561). However, the blues were not the only form of musical expression in the African American culture, contrasts Cone. He writes that there were some African Americans that did not respond as positively to the blues. “These latter preferred the other musical expression of black people, called ‘church music’ or the spirituals, and Sunday was their time to unleash the pent-up emotions of their being.” (1992, p. 2). However, we can see both forms of musical expression, the blues and “church music” had the same purposes: to express the injustice and hardships that they experienced as a people.

Many AAVE characteristics can be identified in the lyrics of the blues. Christina Obiajulu (2012) examined the lyrics of three popular blues singers of the early 20th century to analyze the amount of AAVE features used. The three blues singers she examined were Bessie Smith, Clara Smith and Ma Rainey. She specifically examined the uses of double negatives, copula absences and verbal-s omissions consistent with her analysis of the spirituals. Surprisingly, she found very few instances of copula absences and verbal-s omissions in the lyrics of these three women. Only 7% of the lyrics examined contained copula absence and only 6.3% of the lyrics contained verbal -s omission. On the contrary, there were 51.4% cases of double negatives in the lyrics. This is a

very surprising difference in comparison to slave spirituals. Specifically looking at the verbal -s omission which was found in 80% of the spirituals, only a small fraction was found in the blues.

Jazz was also an incredibly important musical tradition within the African American culture; a mix of so many different musical styles into one incredibly complex and beautiful tradition. “It is generally believed that jazz developed from a fusion of West African, black Creole and Euro-American cultures.” (Conyers, 2001, p. 55). However, jazz traditionally does not contain lyrics for the transmission of AAVE aspects, but is mainly composed of instrumental improvisation. For this reason, jazz was not a means of transmitting AAVE characteristics, but it was an aspect of the African American culture that changed the world of music forever.

Rap

Rap is a popular music genre that emerged in New York and, specifically, the Bronx neighborhood around the 1980s and 90s. This type of music was specifically popular among the African American youth (Jones, 1994). Rap was only one part of a cultural movement called hip-hop. Other elements of this movement were graffiti and breakdancing (Magnusson, 2008). Rap music in itself can be defined as “a musical form that makes use of rhyme, rhythmic speech, and street vernacular, which is recited or loosely chanted over a musical soundtrack” (Keyes, 2004, p. 1). A more profound definition of rap can be found in Maurice K. Jones’ book *Say it Loud! The Story of Rap Music*. He defines rap as:

A creation of young African American culture... The roots of the music are seen as part of the African-American oral and musical traditions that encompass the hidden messages of slave folktales, the call and response of the Black church, the joy and pain of the blues, the jive talk and slang of disc jockeys and jazz musicians, the boasting of street talk, the wit of comedians, and the eloquence of Black activists. (Jones, 1994)

As a compilation of all the historical musical traditions, rap plays a significant role for members of the African American community and for those who participate in its creation. However, similar to the blues, not everyone in the African American community was in favor of this type of musical expression. This distaste was not due to a difference in musical taste, but to the degrading messages sometimes sent by the authors of these songs. The distaste for rap was prevalent in the 1990s when the chair of the Congress of Black Women called for a trial against rap (Magnusson, 2008).

Rap music, created and developed mainly by African American youth, contains many elements of AAVE characteristics. In comparison to other musical traditions like slave spirituals and the blues, rap has been more thoroughly examined.

Scholar Madeleine Magnusson quotes Sofia Andersson's thesis, *y'all niggas be scramblin, gamblin...: on the use of African American vernacular English in rap lyrics*, and identifies many AAVE characteristics in rap. For example, Andersson cites double negation, many AAVE uses of the verb *to be*, and -s omission (Magnusson, 2008). Quoting the researcher Samy Alim in the article *Roc the Mic: The Language of Hip-Hop Culture*, Magnusson explains that the "habitual *be*, copula absence, stressed *been*, the future tense marker *gon*, and the use of *they* for possessive were common grammatical features." (Magnusson, 2008, p. 10).

In the thesis *Lyrical Insight: Looking at Changes in AAVE through Slave Spirituals, Blues and Rap* a study was carried out that examined the frequency of AAVE characteristics in different rap lyrics (Obiajulu, 2012). The lyrics of three different rappers were analyzed, those of Jay-Z, Kanye West and Biggie. Three common AAVE characteristics were focused on: double negatives, copula absence, -s omission. 31.6% of the lyrics examined contained double negatives, 50.3% of the lyrics contained instances of copula absence, and 52.3% of the lyrics contained instances of verbal -s omission. In comparison to the other musical mediums that have been examined, the number of AAVE features in the lyrical texts are significant.

AAVE is becoming more and more present both in the literary and musical fields. Just over 200 years ago, this language was used as a literary form to make fun of African Americans, and now it shapes lyrics, novels and poetry. AAVE was very present in slave spirituals, but according to the analysis done by Obiajulu, the number of African American Vernacular English characteristics decreased during the time of the blues (2011). However, they are on the rise again in the musical genre rap, a variety that has profoundly impacted the global music scene. What does all this mean for its speakers in the education system? If there are more of them, or AAVE itself looks more dignified, what can the school system do help these students?

AAVE in the Academic Field

African Americans have been in the United States for over 300 years, but during most of that time their artistic and cultural expressions have been shunned. Nowadays, AAVE is associated with a certain environment, mainly city or urban situations. This could be due to the stereotypes seen in movies and films concerning AAVE and African Americans. This stereotype has led to the belief that this language is mainly used in familiar or colloquial situations, and AAVE has less worth than the vernacular used in academic settings. In 2010 one University professor, while correcting an essay, went so far as to consider it, “sloppy slang writing.” (Williams, 2012, p. 179). This is due to the fact that it does not conform to academic standards, like SAE. However, the fact that the professor described AAVE in such a negative manner shows the professor’s ignorance of the matter. This professor, and countless other teachers and professors, are ignorant of the complexity of AAVE and simply classify it as street slang. The linguist William Labov dedicated many years of his life to studying AAVE and to proving that AAVE is not a “poor” language and in no way should be considered inferior to SAE. Many educators believe that AAVE is an incohesive system and that the ability of the African Americans to express themselves is hindered by this language, but Labov actually suggests that in some ways the manner in which AAVE speakers express themselves is more logical than that of non-AAVE speakers (Rickford & Rickford, *Dialect readers revisited*, 1995). Through rigorous analysis, we can see that it is a complex language with its own grammatical structures and complexities. It is true that for cohesion of a nation, a national language needs to exist for communication purposes between the citizens. However, AAVE is a language that did form in the United States and is a preferred system of communication for a large minority of the population. What can Schools and Universities do to promote this language, with such a rich cultural heritage, while maintaining an understanding for the need of a national language of the majority?

These are complex questions for which there are no simple answers. However, there are kids who are in disadvantaged situations simply because of the language they speak and the pressure that the academic system places on them. This is a situation experienced by many young African Americans. In many cases they are automatically at a disadvantage, even before they start school. “Even before formal school begins, African American children tend to perform less well on assessments of early reading, writing, basic vocabulary, and decoding skills than their White

counterparts.” (Matthews, Cortina, Kizzie, & Rowley, 2010, p. 757). The fact that these children speak a language other than SAE means they are starting their academic lives speaking a foreign language. It is understandable that these children typically show lower test scores in literacy since they use AAVE when talking with their family and friends, while in the school they are tested on their SAE proficiency. The learning-gap that these AAVE speakers face is quite large at the beginning and would explain their lower literacy capabilities in SAE. Some researchers argue that this situation is similar to that of the many Spanish speakers who come to the United States and must learn SAE through exposure in the classroom (Rickford & Rickford, *Dialect readers revisited*, 1995). Many AAVE speakers, just like many immigrant Spanish speakers, speak a different language than the one that they are tested on in school. Something must be done so all children have an equal chance at becoming educated and succeeding in their academic lives.

Nonetheless, the literacy-gap between AAVE and non-AAVE speakers cannot be explained simply by their language differences. Other factors also come into play, specifically the students’ Socioeconomic Status (SES). A low SES has a tremendous impact on the general academic success of a student. “Scholars have documented for years, and continue to do so, the association between low SES and poorer academic and social achievement.” (Harris & Schroeder, 2013, p. 195). This is yet another factor that impedes African Americans from achieving a fulfilling academic life. However, it is very difficult to discover if AAVE is the cause of the lower academic results for African American children or if it is low SES. The more probable answer is that both a low SES and a partial or full lack of SAE fluency go hand in hand and negatively affect the academic success of the children (Harris & Schroeder, 2013). In any case, many experts blame AAVE as a contributor to the students’ lower literacy assessments. “According to these experts, the comparatively low performance of African American children on standardized literacy activities is due in part to their deficient speech and language pattern.” (Harris & Schroeder, 2013, p. 194).

It could be advantageous for schools to learn to assess AAVE speakers on their linguistic capabilities, whatever their language. This would allow the school system to realistically assess the state of the child’s development. The teaching of lexicon and syntax of AAVE in the classroom could facilitate the linguistic acquisition of SAE for AAVE speakers. Furthermore, explaining the AAVE language in the classroom could very well be beneficial for both kinds of speakers, giving them a more diverse perspective on what a language is.

AAVE in School

AAVE and the academic field are two concepts that do not see eye to eye. However, there have been certain steps towards including AAVE in the educational space in the last thirty years. In fact, these proposed measures would have been quite inclusive. One of the first steps taken towards helping students concerning their linguistic differences occurred in 1996 when the Oakland, California School Board planned to implement a program which was named the Ebonics Resolution; Ebonics being the name used for AAVE in that moment. This was a program aimed at “imparting instruction to African American students in their primary language for the combined purposes of maintaining the legitimacy and richness of such language... and to facilitate their acquisition and mastery of English language skills.” (Harris & Schroeder, 2013, p. 201). Many saw the proposition to change the language in the classroom to AAVE as a step towards the solidification of AAVE as an official language and at the same time aiding children in their acquisition of SAE. Furthermore, this action would have aided many African Americans who have struggled with the education system. However, this proposition caused an uproar among many experts in regard to topics of linguistic capabilities and these African American students (Harris & Schroeder, 2013). As a result of this uproar, the School decided to reassess their decision:

The School board amended the resolution in 1997, deemphasizing AAVE as a separate and distinct language, and changed the primary focus of the resolution to focus on educating teachers about AAVE and equipping them with methods to assist children to transition from AAVE to Standard American English. (Harris & Schroeder, 2013, p. 210)

This was a radical change from what the Oakland School Board had planned in their original program. In the end, the Board altered the program to focus specifically on the linguistic acquisition and transition of students. This means that the teachers will be taught more in-depth the characteristics of AAVE in order to be able to identify this form of speech in the academic environment. The surprising aspect is that many of the social leaders who promoted the resolution’s amendment were African American. These leaders even said that this would be a “disgrace” and due to the resolution they would be “teaching down to children” (DiOrio, 2011, p. 5). Even though many linguists argued in defense of the legitimacy of AAVE as a respectable language, many social activists, African Americans included, believe that this type of language is not fit for the academic field.

It is understandable that, to rise the social ladder, one must speak the language of the rich. It is possible that the African Americans who called for the amendment of the Ebonics Resolution see the acquisition of SAE fluency as a key to rise in their socioeconomic status. This is supported by a study done by William Labov that found that many African Americans who wish to rise in social status adapt to the standard way of speaking. “[AAVE speakers] who use language to get out of uncomfortable situations had all moved grammatically in the direction of standard dialect. The group with no contact had moved dramatically away” (DiOrio, 2011, p. 4), quoting Jacquelyn Quinn in her paper *Linguistic Segregation*. This is a very common sociocultural tendency that occurred in most of the United States throughout its history. When citizens in a lower social class, usually immigrants, relocated to the United States, there was a trend to leave behind most cultural aspects that separated them from the American society and, in the end, from achieving the “American Dream”. This implied assimilating into the American culture and leaving behind the majority of cultural aspects from the immigrants’ native land. Many immigrants to the country learned English and encouraged their children to do as well. Some immigrants took more drastic measures and stopped speaking their language completely, refusing to teach their children. These actions came from the belief that this would allow them to acquire the “American Dream” (wealth and high social standing) quicker.

However, since the amendment of the school resolution a certain position towards AAVE has been adopted by the American education system; they focus on aiding the students transition to SAE fluency through AAVE. This means trying to use AAVE grammar as a springboard to teach children SAE. If we analyze other AAVE reforms that schools have tried to implement, we can see that all the reforms were oriented towards this trend of building SAE fluency. One measure in a school district was an idea called *dialect readers*. A dialect reader is a book written in a dialect. In this case books were written in AAVE in order to facilitate the process of learning to read for children. This idea was first set out by the linguist William Alexander Stewart back in 1969. He noted that in other countries, specifically in West Africa where students are demanded to learn French or English at a very young age, the system usually taught the students to read first in their native African language and then taught them to read in their second language (Rickford & Rickford, 1995). The effort for a child to become literate in a foreign language could hinder their learning, and the dialect reader program could aid them. This idea was supported by two cases, one carried out by Tore Österberg and the second carried out by Stewart himself. In the first case

Österberg discovered that, “teaching of basic reading skills in the non-standard dialect of the school children in a particular district (Pitea) increased proficiency, not only in beginning reading in the nonstandard dialect, but also in later reading of the standard language.” (Rickford & Rickford, 1995, p. 111). This shows that for AAVE speakers some type of dialect reader program could be a possible step towards literacy development among these students. Furthermore, the dialect readers could provide a more positive experience for AAVE speakers, instead of the difficulty they have trying to learn to read in a foreign language. The second case carried out by Stewart was an experience that Stewart had when he wrote a Christmas card in AAVE; the Christmas card was as follows:

It’s the night before Christmas, and here in our house,
It ain’t nothing moving, not even no mouse.
There go we-all stockings, hanging high up off the floor,
So Santa Claus can full them up, if he walk in through our door (Rickford & Rickford, 1995, p. 111)

Stewart found that when a 12-year-old native AAVE speaker, who normally had difficulty reading, read the version of *The Night before Christmas*, she had a steady voice, high accuracy and normal sentence intonation (Rickford & Rickford, 1995). This girl was then asked to read the same passage written in SAE and her diagnosed reading problems returned. This experiment was then replicated in different inner-city schools with AAVE speakers and the results were the same.

Another AAVE measure in the school system was the *Bridge* Program, created in the 90s. This program was an attempt to use dialect readers to aid African American students in their literacy acquisition, but with the final aim being SAE literacy. This program consisted in the creation of two versions of the class reading material, one version in SAE and the other in AAVE. The program was designed so that the AAVE students would first read the AAVE version and subsequently the SAE version. This would allow the kids to isolate the differences in the two languages and to identify them in the classroom. A study was done with 540 students from 27 classes across the United States to see the possible results of the *Bridge* Program. The outcome was that 417 students who were taught with the *Bridge* material scored significantly higher on their Reading Comprehension Test than those 123 students who were taught with the customary reading program (Rickford & Rickford, 1995). If implemented across the United States, the *Bridge* Program could have a positive impact for the AAVE speakers and their Reading Comprehension Tests. However, the development of the program was never allowed to take root. The idea of

bringing AAVE into the classroom, even if only to orient towards SAE fluency, was not welcomed by many parents and teachers:

Most parents that I have interviewed feel that their children's education would be excessively retarded if they were taught with dialect readers. All of the Black adults that I have interviewed over the past nine years concur with this opinion. As a group, they have expressed the categorical feeling that Black children should be serious about getting an education, and in America that is a traditional education in Standard English. (Rickford & Rickford, 1995, p. 14)

This shows a very practical view of the parents and teachers. The upper crest of American culture today speaks SAE, therefore, to rise in social class and SES would imply acquiring SAE fluency. However, this program could have been very beneficial for many AAVE speakers, concerning the acquisition of SAE fluency and solidifying AAVE grammar. Nonetheless, due to many complaints, the *Bridge* Program was canceled in the 1990s.

Since the unfortunate termination of this program, other programs have been created to aid AAVE natives in their struggle to learn SAE in an education system that does not empathize with them. One program called the Academic English Mastery Program (AEMP) developed originally in 1989, assists all students who are not fluent in SAE. The AEMP particularly focuses on helping African America students. In these programs, one important element is constructing the student's grammatical knowledge of AAVE and teaching SAE from that base. This education framework is very similar to that of teaching a foreign language (Harris & Schroeder, 2013). The goal, as always, is for the student to achieve a proficient level of SAE. This is done by assigning a student with AAVE characteristics in his/her writing to one of three programs. The first program consists of exposing students to stories containing basic SAE elements. The second program would be the presentation of SAE elements with an explanation of how to form these grammatical structures so the student may employ them in the future. The last program would be exposure to SAE elements, an adequate explanation of these elements and techniques on how to change AAVE elements into SAE elements. Depending on the level of SAE fluency of the student, he/she would be placed into one of these programs. However, research shows that the children in the last program showed much more improvement in SAE writing than the children placed in the other programs (Harris & Schroeder, 2013). This program was an initiative of the Los Angeles Unified School District. Many ask: are these measures strictly necessary? From their results we can see that they are. It is very difficult to help these students when the language that they speak is stigmatized as a slang and for

this reason no other measures are taken to aid the students in their journey towards SAE acquisition. Especially when one is witness to the improvement that these programs provide for the AAVE students in their academic future one can see that they are necessary.

The secondary education system needs to prioritize aiding these children to learn SAE through AAVE. This would allow the solidification of AAVE as a culturally rich language and help the children to have a successful academic life.

AAVE in Higher Education

Secondary education system in the United States is more accepting of AAVE speakers due to the fact that the students are young and there is sufficient time to help these speakers acquire SAE fluency. However, the higher education system provides little leniency for these speakers. A student at Georgetown University carried out a study examining the faculty of two colleges in the USA and their opinion on AAVE. This study analyzes the changes that the University faculty made when correcting AAVE characteristics of some of their students.

The majority of the instructors gave negative feedback when correcting student's AAVE characteristics. One instructor that had almost no linguistic variation knowledge, described the AAVE characteristics as "poor language". The instructor referred to the AAVE writing as "sloppy slang writing", "just so poor" and insisted that the students needed to "clean-up their language" (Williams, 2012, p. 321). It is clear that the instructor considered it unacceptable for the student to write in AAVE in an academic setting. Two other instructors corrected the AAVE characteristics in their students writing; however, unlike their fellow faculty member, they abstained from using pejorative terms when referring to AAVE characteristics. These two instructors were more informed of the linguistic reality of AAVE and could easily identify it as such in the writings of the students. Nonetheless, they recognized that AAVE is not accepted in the secondary education system.

This and other studies demonstrate a common trend in the education system. These analyses unveil that, in general, "negative attitudes toward language variation persist in U.S. educational institutions." (Williams, 2012, p. 320). This is especially pertinent for purely academic writing, as one of the instructors of the study said, AAVE could be acceptable in more artistic fields or marketing, but not in the academic field.

Currently, AAVE is not accepted in the United States educational system. However, if its speakers wish to solidify their language even more, they could start to explore new fields, like the academic field. If AAVE writers and academics started to write more scientific documents, this could possibly change its negative connotation. Furthermore, this could solidify the language nationally. Unifying AAVE and recreating the perspective that it has in the United States could be a possible way to continue the development of this language in the making.

Conclusion

AAVE, which began as a simple means of communication, has become so much more today. It contains lexical and syntactical aspects which distinguish it from SAE, and this may only be the beginning. Alongside its linguistical development, it has also been the medium for many artistic creations in music and literature, some of which have changed the world of music forever. AAVE and these artistic creations are interconnected, as the Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan says, “The medium is the message.” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 1). Throughout history music has been a cornerstone for the African American culture, and AAVE has been its lyrics. An example of this can be seen in the possible correlation between advocacy for AAVE in the education system and the rise in popularity of African American artistic creations. The development of the hip-hop culture, and specifically rap, may have augmented already-existing pride in the African American culture and this in turn can be seen in the Ebonics Resolution of the Oakland School Board. The rise in global popularity of this musical genre and the advocacy to include African American Vernacular English in the education system coincide in the same period. Extensive research would be necessary to confirm this theory; however, it is possible that the musical genre and the language are entwined to the extent that pride in one inadvertently instilled pride in the other.

The implementation of AAVE in American schools could have many advantageous results for all people. On a social level, it would start changing the negative and colloquial connotation which it continues to bear in society. If this language was implemented with a focus on aiding students’ acquisition of SAE-fluency, this would allow for two things. First, this would lend towards the development of the AAVE language, making its unique lexicon and grammatical structures known, and help its continued formation through literature and other academic fields. Secondly, its implementation would help many kids in the education system that have difficulties learning SAE, because they are AAVE natives. Working towards changing its connotation as a “street slang” could also help many social activists and parents see that these children are not simply speaking “poor” English, but rather they are speaking a different language entirely. The identification of AAVE as a different language would facilitate the development of educational programs, like those mentioned in this paper, and include them in the study plans to aid those students that need help.

Another positive aspect of AAVE implementation in schools would be the multiple benefits of bilingualism. However, in the USA, bilingualism is not always seen as something positive. “Much public opinion in the USA has been influenced by expectations that there are straightforward negative effects.” (Ollers & Eilers, 2002, p. 5). This is greatly due to the fact that many Americans have a strong pride in the English language and the fear that another language may usurp its status as the national language (Ollers & Eilers, 2002).

Nevertheless, many countries around the world have two or more national languages, and researchers have found that being bilingual or even multilingual has many social and cognitive benefits. Okal shows that multilingualism “enhances cross cultural communication strategies and cross-cultural communication skills...creation and appreciation of cultural awareness... enhances creativity, adjustment in society and appreciation of local languages.” (Okal, 2014, p. 223)

Students in America could benefit immensely from the results of being bilingual. If AAVE was implemented, this would allow its speakers to acquire SAE quicker and allow SAE speakers the chance to learn the grammatical differences of AAVE. This would give all students a more diverse perspective towards languages, something very necessary in America.

This research could be the basis for many other studies in a variety of different fields. Mainly, this could be of great use to the education system, to know that programs exist that could aid children toward SAE-fluency. Also, additional studies may develop as a result of these existing studies, for example studying the influence of the hip-hop genre in the Ebonics Resolution. Furthermore, the possible integration of bilingualism into schools in the USA could be analyzed, along with its possible benefits. All of these investigations would be interesting for the scientific community and could prove very beneficial for itself as well as the students in the USA.

The African American community in the United States has been the seed of incredible artistic creations possessing a potency that has affected musical and literary genres worldwide. But how will the US proceed in the integration of this culture? The USA must decide how to, first, help the AAVE speakers to have a fair education, and, second, how to maintain in unity the diverse cultural aspects that the country contains.

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