

African American Vernacular English and the White Weaponization of Speech

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“Ar’n’t I a woman?” Sojourner Truth famously demanded at the 1851 Woman’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio (“Compare”).

Or did she?

This famous line from freedwoman, author, and activist Sojourner Truth was published by Frances Gage in the *New York Independent* in 1863, based on Gage’s recollection of Truth’s speech at the Woman’s Rights Convention. Historians have since doubted the accuracy of Gage’s rendering, which differs greatly from a version by Marius Robinson, released within a month of the speech, which renders Truth’s words in standard English (“Compare”). Both versions of the speech were laid down by white abolitionists, yet it is Gage’s dialect rendering, published twelve years after the fact, which has become the national memory of Truth’s words. And so perhaps the most famous question asked by a Black abolitionist in American history may not be her own.

In her 1994 book *Teaching to Transgress*, author and activist bell hooks examines the intersections of language with ownership and power, focusing on the dangers of standard English’s reign in American academia. Citing the suppression of her childhood Southern Black vernacular, Hooks argues that standard English’s hegemony in American classrooms, which excludes many students’ first languages, is an act of political repression (173). She wrestles with the academy’s required use of standard English, citing poet Adrienne Rich: “This is the oppressor’s language yet I need it to talk to you” (Rich qtd. in hooks 167). Reinforcing this tension, hooks writes in an academic style devoid of her vernacular. Despite this apparent linguistic trap, hooks remains hopeful as she recounts the historical roots and power of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). hooks describes AAVE as a descendant of the vernacular that enslaved Africans derived from the language of their enslavers – a “counter-language” (170). By “ruptur[ing] standard usage and meaning,” hooks writes, enslaved Africans claimed transforming “English into more than the oppressor’s language,” claiming it for their own (170). In antebellum America, alternative dialects embodied political rebellion both metaphorically, as resistance to the dominant American culture,

and literally, as people communicated in words white slave owners could not understand. AAVE, hooks suggests, possesses this “revolutionary power,” necessitating its inclusion in all spaces of American life (171).

Given AAVE’s academic exclusion, hooks’ solution resides in the classroom. She asks her students to use and then translate their first languages, in order to dispel the fear “that seeking higher education will necessarily estrange [them] from that language and culture they know most intimately” (172). “Not surprisingly,” she recounts, “white students often complained,” because AAVE was recognizable and yet not entirely comprehensible to them (172). Hooks writes that this pedagogical practice both encourages self-expression from non-English speakers and allows standard English speakers “to listen without ‘mastery,’ without owning or possessing speech through interpretation” (172). Even so, a language that is misunderstood can still be exploited.

With the advent of social media, historically Black language is being used in more multicultural contexts, presenting the risk of exploitation. In her article “Black English Is Being Misidentified as Gen Z Lingo, Speakers Say,” Samantha Chery examines the dangers of AAVE’s uptake in young generations, noting that many words used universally as slang, like “slay,” “tea,” and “period,” are actually rooted in Black English (Chery). Chery writes that misuse of these words and their attribution to non-black teens “can be viewed as ignorant by Black communities” at best and, at their worst, can “appropriat[e] Black culture and perpetuat[e] racism as they take on Black speech without assuming Black Americans’ struggle.” Chery argues that this culturally appropriative, commodifying use of AAVE undermines its cultural and political value. Indeed, Kyla Jenée Lacey, a Black student and subject of Chery’s article, describes AAVE as a “‘cultural secret’” (Chery). It is distance from white America, she argues, that forms the buttress of Black English’s power. In her eyes, non-native speakers threaten the symbolic value of her language through cultural appropriation.

Given these stakes, the question of how to use AAVE and other vernacular languages in academic writing and teaching is pressing. In their article “Language, Race, and Critical Conversations in a Primary-Grade Writers’ Workshop,” teacher Paul Hartman and pedagogical researcher Emily Machado present a model that overlaps with and goes beyond hooks. While hooks discusses the use of vernacular and first languages by native speakers, Hartman shows the potential benefits of exposing a multiracial classroom to AAVE in his study of a second-grade class’s exploration of nonstandard English. Hartman, a white man and standard English speaker, explores the patterns of black vernacular with his native AAVE-speaking students. The class reads and discusses a number of poems in AAVE, and students are encouraged to employ its linguistic patterns in their own creative writing. Interestingly, of three students whose work the article cites, one is the classroom’s only white pupil, Sarah. Hartman and Machado describe Sarah’s interest in AAVE’s elements via a poem in which she

removes final gerund *g*'s – a consistent pattern in Black vernacular. With the lines, “cookin’ in the kitchen” and “I wonder what he’s makin’,” Sarah explores a language which is distinct from her cultural heritage (Hartman). At the same time, she explains this linguistic decision because this pattern of speech reflects the way her (presumably white) grandfather speaks in Nebraska. Sarah’s poem blurs the fine lines of hooks’s article. Rather than displaying the dynamic between ‘the nonstandard-English speaker’ and ‘the white listener who cannot understand,’ Hartman and Machado present a complication. Sarah’s speech presents the possibility of overlap between elements of AAVE and those of other non-‘standard’ Englishes. The question of which English belongs to whom becomes more complicated.

The multiracial uptake of AAVE by youth both online and in the classroom is not an entirely novel development, but stems from historical precedent, as analyzed by Albert Tricomi in his 2006 essay “Dialect and Identity in Harriet Jacobs’s *Autobiography and Other Slave Narratives*.” Studying dialect in 19th century American literature, Tricomi describes a politically fraught antebellum America in which both Black and white authors assigned dialects to their characters, as a tool to represent social status and power. Thus, Tricomi examines dialogue to examine the level of racism and classism encoded in speech. He finds that a sympathetic Black character, with whom white audiences are meant to identify, may speak in standard English, while other Black characters rely on dialect (622). Through this process of linguistic profiling, these tactics employ dialect as a marker of personality. Moreover, Tricomi connects the degree of dialect employed and skin color. Characters with darker skin have historically been written with heavier dialects than their lighter counterparts (623). He particularly calls out the alteration of spelling to suggest meaning, or “eye dialect” (622). Substituting “sed” for “said” or “kum” for “come,” the pronunciation of these words doesn’t change. So, eye dialect only serves to imply speakers ignorance and low class on the page (622). Tricomi argues that, used in this way, dialect “intimates an attitude of condescension or at least superiority” in the transcriber (619). Speakers of nonstandard English thus become foreigners who must be translated by a more proximate, often whiter or more educated, author. Historically, dialect has threatened to distance from academia and power the very people it professes to represent.

Where does this problematic use of dialect leave us, in the classroom and on the page? Importantly, Tricomi does not advocate doing away with transcribing dialect. To do so would be, he says, presenting “an ahistorical equality of condition between” races and ignoring “the distinctive oppressive history of blacks as slaves” (619). hooks would undoubtedly agree; it is, after all, the erasure of AAVE that drives her argument. She suggests that Black dialect today, just like black dialect 150 years ago, should not be ignored simply because it is a reminder of racial difference in this country. To ignore vernacular language is to ignore reality. For his part, Tricomi argues for more – not less – vernacular transcription. He writes that transcribing the dialects of slaves or ex-slaves, but not whites, is “inequitable” and “problematic” (Tricomi 619). Hiding the

estrangement of white America from standard white English reinforces the very stereotype of racialized academic intelligence that hooks seeks to upend. Beyond that, if authors distinguish only Black vernacular speech, they reinforce the status of ‘standard’ English, into which – as hooks laments – native speakers of other Englishes must translate themselves in order to be heard.

It is likely Truth’s voice has been lost to history, refashioned by white authors who have reconstructed it in various ways. Historians who could never understand her experience have remodeled her words in language she might not have spoken, in the service of their own pursuits. As we consider AAVE in its increasingly multiracial twenty-first-century context, the language remains rooted in the oppression and resistance of Black bodies. For many, Black English is a form of political resistance, born from a “counter-language” that connected and sustained America’s earliest Black communities. And though non-native speakers might employ its vocabulary or its syntax, that language bears burdens and powers over which they have no claim. Yet these students can still be taught to see these legacies as they listen to the language. Hooks assigns us the task of seeing and listening – the task of ensuring that AAVE remains a tool of black communities rather than a weapon of white America.

Works Cited

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