Black English as Cultural Resistance and Linguistic Identity

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Abstract
This study explores the linguistic, cultural, and historical evolution of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), also known as Black English, as a linguistic identity formed from the trauma of the African Diaspora and maintained through cultural resistance. From the forced dislocation of African peoples, through centuries of slavery and systemic racial oppression, Black English emerged as a creole-based vernacular, later becoming a legitimate linguistic system characterized by rule-governed grammar and sociocultural function. This paper reconstructs the historical background of African American identity and language formation, analyses linguistic phenomena in music, particularly in Hip-Hop, and includes case studies of Tupac Shakur and Kendrick Lamar, supported by detailed analysis and some lyrical excerpts. The work examines musical forms from early work songs and spirituals to gospel and rap, offering a holistic perspective that draws from academic, musical, and sociolinguistic literature.

Keywords: *African American Vernacular English, AAVE, Black English, linguistic identity, diaspora, slavery, emancipation, Tupac Shakur, Kendrick Lamar, Hip-Hop, creole, pidgin*

Introduction

Language is more than syntax and lexicon; it reflects the soul of a people, their survival, and their resistance. African American Vernacular English (AAVE), colloquially referred to as Black English, is one of the clearest examples of a linguistic tradition born from oppression and transformed into an expressive force of identity. Emerging from the Middle Passage, the plantation system, and centuries of racial segregation, AAVE stands today as a dynamic language variety with deep historical, social, and artistic roots.

The goal of this paper is to provide a thorough exploration of AAVE and its manifestations – linguistic, historical, cultural, and artistic. We will begin by exploring the African Diaspora and the brutal institution of slavery that shaped African American culture. We will examine the development of creole languages, the emergence of Black English, and its grammatical features. This is followed by an analysis of the role of language in cultural resistance, especially in the context of African American music – beginning

with spirituals and gospel, evolving into blues, jazz, and eventually Hip-Hop. Finally, we will conduct detailed case studies of Tupac Shakur and Kendrick Lamar, incorporating complete lyrical analysis and drawing attention to how their use of AAVE serves both an artistic and political purpose.

1. The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Linguistic and Human Catastrophe

The transatlantic slave trade, as described in Mario Azevedo's Africana Studies: A Survey of Africa and the African Diaspora (Azevedo 120), saw more than 12 million Africans forcibly transported across the Atlantic Ocean between the 15th and 19th centuries. These captives came from West and Central Africa – modern-day Senegal, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria, and Angola – and were sold into slavery in Brazil (43%), the Caribbean (44%), and the American colonies (13%).

These enslaved Africans brought with them a wide variety of native languages, including Yoruba, Igbo, Wolof, Mandinka, Akan, and Kikongo. Upon arrival, they were forbidden from speaking their native tongue. To communicate with one another and their English-speaking overseers, they developed a pidgin – a simplified contact language that combined elements of multiple languages. - Over generations, this pidgin evolved into a creole, particularly in regions with high concentrations of enslaved Africans and limited access to European languages.

Even in the most brutal conditions, African culture persisted. This cultural continuity was evident in the maintenance of oral traditions, naming practices, and above all, language. Naming children after days of the week (e.g., Kofi, Kwame) remained common, reflecting Akan and other West African customs.

Resistance was also overt. From maroon communities in Jamaica and Suriname to the Stono Rebellion (1739) in South Carolina, Africans fought back. Language was often a key tool in these revolts. AAVE developed as a method of resistance, a way to speak beneath the oppressor's comprehension.

By studying this phenomenon from a linguistic point of view, it would be fair to start with the studies of linguists such as John Rickford (*Spoken Soul, 2000*), who have shown that AAVE shares many characteristics with West African languages and Caribbean creoles. As second and third generations of African Americans were born into slavery, English became their dominant language - but shaped by African phonology, syntax, and semantics, and Geneva Smitherman (see *Talkin and Testifyin, 1977*).

Now, provided a few examples to identify according to a Phonological, grammatical, and Lexical point of view, the new language and its variation from the standard.

Phonology:
- th-stopping ("this" becomes "dis"),
- consonant cluster reduction ("cold" becomes "col"),
- monophthongization ("time" becomes "tahm")

Grammar:
- Copula deletion: "She nice" → Instead of "She is nice".
- Habitual 'be': "He be workin'" → Instead of "He works/He is working".
- Remote 'been': "I been had that job" → Instead of "I had that job".
- Aspectual 'done': "She done gone" → Instead of "She has gone/She went".
- Negative concord: "Ain't nobody got time for that"

Slang and Lexical Innovation:
- Shortening: "gonna" from "going to"
- Blending: "blackalicious" = black + delicious
- Conversion: "clown" as a verb "niggas clown a lot"
- Respelling: "nuttin'" for "nothing"

1.1. Literacy as Liberation

Frederick Douglass's writings highlight the importance of literacy for Black freedom. Despite being forbidden from learning, he taught himself to read and later published a powerful narrative. Harriet Jacobs did similarly in secrecy. For enslaved people, language became a key to liberation.

In the Jim Crow era, Black schools were underfunded and discouraged AAVE. W.E.B. Du Bois, another fundamental figure of the black empowerment and its liberation, whose concept of "double consciousness" - being conscious that the African American carries both the social background and identity of the American Citizen and at the same time the African one as carrying heavier and wider luggage to be preserved and to use whenever it might be needed - applied to language as well. Black students spoke Standard English in public and AAVE at home. Historically speaking, it has always been challenging to recognize AAVE as an official language or dialect rather than as a protest or outrageous variation. The Oakland School Board's attempt to recognize AAVE was met with media backlash in 1996. Linguists defended it, but the public misunderstood the proposal. This moment revealed America's unwillingness to view AAVE as a legitimate language.

2. African American Music: From Work Songs to Hip-Hop

Work Songs: Used to maintain rhythm and morale
Spirituals: “Wade in the Water,” “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”
Gospel: Originated in the post-slavery Black Church
Blues & Jazz: Emotional expression, improvisation, coded language
Soul & Funk: James Brown’s “Say it Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud”
Hip-Hop: AAVE becomes mainstream via rap.
Guru, the African American artist in the first track of his album *Jazzmatazz* Vol. 1, stated, “’Cause Hip-Hop, rap music, it is real. It is a musical, cultural expression based on reality.” (See Guru, “Jazzmatazz Vol . 1”, Chrysalis Records, 1993.)
Guru *Jazzmatazz* fused jazz with AAVE-laden Hip-Hop, respecting the roots of both.

3.1. Case Studies: Tupac Shakur and Kendrick Lamar

3.1.1. Tupac Shakur: The Voice of Urban Black America

Tupac Amaru Shakur (1971–1996) was more than a rapper. he was a cultural icon whose lyrics, interviews, and activism shaped a generation’s understanding of race, poverty, and justice in America. With a background deeply influenced by the Black Panther Party and revolutionary Black politics, Tupac infused his music with sociopolitical awareness and poetic intensity. His use of AAVE was not incidental but foundational to his artistic identity. It allowed him to speak authentically to the Black community and communicate his messages with emotional precision and rhythmic flair.

His track "Brenda has Got a Baby” Talks about an African American girl pregnant through incest and abandoned by society. The linguistic strategies in this song exemplify Tupac’s skill in using AAVE as a socially coded language to convey both suffering and critique." (1991) is a stark narrative of a 12-year-old

A. *"Brenda’s Got a Baby*" – Linguistic and Sociocultural Analysis (Shakur, Tupac. *Brenda’s Got a Baby*. Interscope Records, 1991.)

"Brenda’s belly is gettin’ bigger": AAVE’s phonological reduction (ing to -in’) underscores speech naturalism and rhythmic continuity. The word choice also reflects sociolect-specific ways of expressing physical changes without medicalized or sanitized vocabulary.

“There ain’t nothing left to sell”: Features negative concord ("ain’t" + "nothing"), marking emphasis and reflecting urban vernacular realism.

“She tried to sell crack”: Cultural slang. “Crack” is both a lexical item and a symbol - this drug reference is loaded with the sociopolitical legacy of Reagan-era policies disproportionately affecting Black communities.

"Her man was a cousin, now let us watch the joy of the girl destroy": This line offers an elliptical syntax familiar in AAVE, omitting auxiliary verbs. It reflects emotional compression, mirroring the brevity and bluntness often present in oral Black narrative forms.

B. *"Keep Ya Head Up*" – Linguistic and Social Commentary (Shakur, Tupac. *Keep Ya Head Up*. Interscope Records, 1993.)

Tupac's 1993 anthem "Keep Ya Head Up" addresses misogyny, single motherhood, and Black resilience. The song's tone is uplifting, but it remains embedded in the AAVE tradition:

"I give a holla to my sisters on welfare": "Holla" as a resemanticized verb is both communal and expressive transforming a noun for a shout into a symbolic act of solidarity.

"You ain't nuttin', don't believe him": Uses negative concord and the respelling "nuttin'," showcasing phonetic adaptation and emotional resonance.

"Got our name from a woman and our game from a woman": Rhyming parallelism, a structure derived from both AAVE and oral sermon traditions.

"Tired of the way we treatin' our women": Again, the -in' suffix reduction is phonologically faithful to AAVE, while the verb choice "treatin'" shows habitual action, emphasizing ongoing societal behaviour.

These examples from Tupac show not only technical linguistic features but also how AAVE conveys community values, critiques systemic neglect, and uplifts unheard voices, as using the common language is something African American people can identify with.

3.1.2. Kendrick Lamar: Modern Consciousness and Linguistic Layering

Kendrick Lamar (b. 1987) represents a contemporary evolution of Tupac's linguistic legacy. Raised in Compton, California, Lamar incorporates layered references to religion, politics, history, and identity through complex rhyme schemes and dense metaphors. His 2017 track "DNA. – an acronym which stands for "Dead Niggas Association" (See the YouTube Official video) explores Black identity, genetic heritage, and resilience. Lamar uses AAVE not only as a cultural marker but also as a cipher to encrypt multifaceted meanings."

A. *"DNA.*" – Linguistic and Social Analysis (Lamar, Kendrick. *DNA.* DAMN., Top Dawg Entertainment, 2017.)

"I got, I got, I got, I got loyalty, got royalty inside my DNA": The use of "I got" instead of "I have" demonstrates ellipsis typical in AAVE. The

repetition adds emphasis and oral flow. “Royalty” is a revalorization term that infuses pride into linguistic identity.

“This is my heritage, all I am inheritin' / Money and power, the mecca of marriages”: The -ing to -in’ again aligns with AAVE phonological norms. The juxtaposition of “heritage” and “inheritin’” emphasizes ancestral trauma and generational survival.

“I just win again, then win again like Wimbledon”: Internal rhyme and repetition mirror the oral tradition’s use of cyclic patterning.

“I got hustle, though, ambition, flow, inside my DNA”: Lexical compounding “hustle,” “ambition,” “flow” demonstrates how identity is constructed through verbs-as-nouns, a common trait in AAVE semantics.

“See, you's a, you's a, you's a Bitch, your hormones prolly switch inside your DNA”: The use of prolly instead of probably as an example of re-spelling and shortening, also the use of the repetition “you’s” instead of “you are” stands for corrupting tenses and their construction.

Lamar’s work exemplifies a form of sociolinguistic layering; every line operates simultaneously on syntactic, cultural, and metaphorical levels. His AAVE use is polished, intentional, and rooted in heritage.

Conclusion: AAVE as Cultural Legacy and Linguistic Resistance

African American Vernacular English (AAVE), far from being a corrupted or simplified form of Standard American English, is a linguistic system with deep historical, cultural, and political roots. As explored in this study, AAVE developed from the need for communication among enslaved Africans during the transatlantic slave trade. It evolved through a process of creolization and cultural preservation, continuing to adapt as a marker of Black identity and resistance. Its origins, as detailed in foundational texts such as Azevedo's *Africana Studies* and supported by linguistic frameworks outlined by Smitherman and Rickford, demonstrate that AAVE is not a random linguistic offshoot but a product of systemic pressures and cultural resilience.

This article has examined the grammatical features that define AAVE – copula deletion, negative concord, phonological reduction, and aspectual markers – and has situated these features within a framework of linguistic legitimacy. These patterns, shown not only to be rule-governed but culturally embedded, illustrate the intricate logic and internal consistency of AAVE as a language variety.

Through a diachronic lens, the study traced the journey of Black musical expression, from the covert communication in spirituals and work songs to the theological protest of gospel music, the melancholy of the blues, the improvisational genius of jazz, and the political consciousness of Hip-Hop. Each of these musical genres has served as a historical record of the African

American experience, with AAVE playing a central role in their lyrical content and stylistic delivery.

The case studies of Tupac Shakur and Kendrick Lamar offered insight into how AAVE functions in contemporary musical texts. Tupac's use of AAVE in "Brenda's Got a Baby" and "Keep Ya Head Up" foregrounds systemic neglect and the strength of Black women, respectively, combining phonological and syntactic features of AAVE with profound social critique. Kendrick Lamar, in "DNA.", employs AAVE as a layered code to explore themes of ancestry, trauma, pride, and empowerment, demonstrating that Black English is not only linguistically rich but philosophically complex.

Moreover, the inclusion of Smitherman (*Talkin and Testifyin*) and Rickford (*Spoken Soul*) affirmed that the struggle for recognition of AAVE is both academic and political. The linguistic discrimination faced by speakers of AAVE, evident in educational policies and legal proceedings such as the Rachel Jeantel case, remains a pressing civil rights issue. Recognizing the legitimacy of AAVE is not merely a linguistic concern but a matter of cultural justice.

To conclude, AAVE is not a deviation from English; it is a declaration of presence. It has survived centuries of erasure attempts and emerged as one of the most influential linguistic forces in global culture. It deserves scholarly attention, public respect, and institutional recognition. Whether in classrooms, songs, or daily conversation, AAVE is a language of truth, protest, artistry, and identity.

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