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The linguistic aspect of African American English

The article is devoted to study of the linguistic aspect of African American English (AAE or AAVE) including its grammar rules, phonetic and lexical features. Also, we consider some comparative differences between AAVE and Standard English and look at three theories of AAVE origin.

Key words: AAVE; Ebonics; phonetic features; lexical features; grammar.

What is language anyway? If we google this query, one of the first references is a Wikipedia article which says that a language is a complex sign system, naturally or artificially created and related by conceptual content and type of sound. But after reading this academic definition, it is still unclear what it is for. The main function of language is communicative, that is, a person must produce some information by means of language, and his listener must not just receive this information, but understand it. In addition, each language reflects popular culture, values, and human history. The history of a language describes the sequence of changes that occur to it: grammatical, phonetic, lexical, and syntax.

For example, English belongs to the Germanic group of languages, whose development was largely influenced by Latin, French, and Spanish. We all know words like «hamburger», «bouquet», «taco». For some reason, however, the African influence on English is actively ignored. There are quite a few words of African origin that are now considered common words like «wow», «yam», «gumbo», and «okra» [6, p. 17].

There are several terms for African American English these days: «Black English», «Vernacular Black English», «Ebonics» (comes from the merger of the words «ebony» and «phonetics»), «Afro-American English» (AAE), «African American Vernacular English» (AAVE).

There are three main theories about the origin of Ebonics [1, 2, 4]:

1. English origin. African slaves learned to speak from an uneducated segment of the American population of the Southern States, as it was forbidden to speak their native language in order to oppress and prevent conspiracies and escapes;

2. West African origins. As a result of acquiring a second language in the colonized territories from English-speaking servants and overseers, as there are similarities in English spoken in Nigeria and Ghana;

3. Caribbean Creole origin. It is connected with the formation of large ghettos of Creole-speaking slaves who were imported from the Caribbean during the earliest periods of colonial settlement.

Ebonics are thought to have a different energy, a different meaning, a different soul, and a certain mood and feeling is put into every word.

To begin, consider *the lexical characteristics of AAVE*. AAVE does not have an individual vocabulary but like any dialect it has words that are not found in standard English. In addition, we can see how AAVE builds an invisible wall between different races, and how much it brings together different social classes among African Americans.   Here are a few examples of such words with their denotations [1, 5]:

Boo – one's lover;

Blade – knife;

Crib – house;

Chips – money;

Cheese – money;

Dawg – close friend;

Fly – attractive;

Hood – neighborhood.Also common in AAVE is the use of opposites as emphasis: «You heard that new verse by Eminem? Crazy», «You know that's a bad coat» or «You're a bad brother». These expressions are not negative. Therefore, there can be misunderstandings in the conversation:

– She is bad

– What's so bad about that?

– Not bad meaning bad, bad meaning good

– Oh! So bad means good...

– You are stupid, man

– I'm stupid, oh that's a good thing, right?

– Oh, no-no-no-no-no-no that's not good, you think no, not stupid «good», stupid «bad», «bad» stupid

– Wait

– This stupid equals bad

– ☹

Another interesting feature can be called linguistic «tracing» [2]. In case you need to specific a complex idea in West African dialects, you are doing this with a combination of two words. In AAVE the same express is made by combining the English counterparts. For example:

bad-eye is translated as «nasty look», cf. Mandingo, nyE-jugu «hateful glance» (literally «bad-eye»);

big-eye is translated as «greedy», cf. Ibo. anya uku «covetous» (literally «big-eye»).

In 2010, many U.S. newspapers [3] were buzzing with headlines like «DEA Looking for a Few Good Ebonics Speakers». The papers described that the Southern States Drug Enforcement Division was requesting several linguists fluent in Ebonics to translate wiretapped phone conversations of drug dealers because AAVE related to the underworld is even more confusing. For example, the phrase «lil' neakers» is not at all about little sneakers, «neakers» probably means nine, «lil» means «ounce». Since it is related to drug dealing, the whole phrase could mean «9 ounces of some drug».

Next, study *the phonetic features*. AAVE and standard English pronunciation are sometimes very different. AAVE will sound like improper English for a person unfamiliar with it. But to native speakers it is the most communicative and meaningful sounds one can pronounce. Let's look at some of the phonetic characteristics of AAVE [7, p. 100–106]:

1. If the next word begins with a consonant, missing letters will be more likely than if the word begins with a vowel, e.g., «east side» becoming «eas side»;

2. When two consonants are at the end of a word such as the «st» in «lost», frequently the final isn't pronounced, but this is not systematically constant and the pronunciation of such words is variable;

3. The conjunction of the letters «th» in Standard English can be pronounced as voiced [ð], e.g., other, they, bathe, or unvoiced [θ] in words like think, thin, myth. In AAVE it depends on the location of the sound in the word. It is pronounced as d (the becoming de) at the beginning of a word, sometimes [θ] is pronounced as t (thin becoming tin). However, this does not happen often. If there is «r» after «th», it may be pronounced with «f» (froat for «throat»). Likewise, [θ] in the middle of a word is pronounced as «f» («nufn» instead of «nothing») [2];

4. «r» is not pronounced after «o» and «u». Therefore, words like «sure» and «show» can sound the same;

5. Diphthongs become monophthongs, e.g., allen = island;

6. When nasal «m» or «n» comes after a vowel, the nasal consonant nasalizes the vowel. This nasalization is written with a tilde (~) over the vowel. So, «man» becomes mã;

7. «e» and «i» merge before the nasal, so that «pin» and «pen» sound like «pin». A clarifying question «Do you mean a sticking pin, or a writing pen? » is self-explanatory when heard in conversation.

Finally, consider *the grammatical features*. To say that AAVE is broken English is fundamentally wrong because it has its own patterns and a number of rules.

1. The verb «be» [7, p. 113].

«Be» in AAVE comes in two varieties: conjugated, which varies in form (am, is, are, were, were), and invariant. One of the interesting features of «be» is that some of its forms (is and are) can disappear forming a null conjugation. The verb «be» is dropped before verbs ending in -ing (He taking it too seriously); before adjectives and expressions of location (People crazy; he kind of big; he at home). However, the verb «be» may appear in a repetitive sentence to enhance emotional coloring (People crazy! People are stone crazy!);

2. Tenses [2]. In AAVE, verbs are most often used without any endings. Instead, there are so-called «tense markers». Time markers can be used to indicate the past tense, such as «last week», «four years ago», «back in their days», etc., or the standard ending -ed, which depends on a number of factors including phonetic component (I visit her last week). Also, *past simple* can be formed with «been» and it will not be present perfect (He has been married ≠ He been married. In standard English, the implication is that he is no longer married. In AAVE, though, the meaning is the opposite: he is still married). The *present perfect* is formed with «done» (He has eaten his dinner = He did eat his dinner). To express the *future tense*, «gon» or «gonna» is added (you gon cry). There are also some nuances in constructing *continuous* sentences. Sentences can include the word «steady» if the activity is brisk and intentional (Richie Guerin be steady steppin in them number nines), events that occur habitually or repeatedly are often denoted by "be" in AAVE (He be cleaning all the time);

3. The negative form [8, p. 58]. In general, «ain't» replaces «haven't» and «didn't». (I ain't seen him; I ain't reassure you that night). In addition, double or plural negation is common in AAVE, as in a number of Romance languages (Ain't nobody talking to you; I ain't see nothing).

Language racism claims that AAVE is illiterate, wrong, and not beautiful, which puts black people at a disadvantage in all areas of life. However, after reading the above, it is clear that the opposite is true. AAVE, like any language, is more than just slang or the group of all its words. It is a complex structure with its own history, its own grammar, lexical and phonetic features. And sooner or later there will be an Ebonics dictionary with etymology, pronunciation and historical proofs on library shelves along with the Oxford English Dictionary. For now, we can draw information from already existing proven studies.

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**Семантические параметры нумеративных классификаторов
в японском, английском и русском языках**

Представлены результаты исследования семантических параметров нумеративных классификаторов в русском, английском и японском языках. В качестве методологии выбран функционально-семантический подход Сю Чжан. Результаты могут использоваться в других исследованиях, посвященных нумеративным классификаторам.

Ключевые слова: нумеративный классификатор; семантический параметр; русский язык; английский язык; японский язык.