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# The Selected Language Styles of African Americans in an Urban Environment

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The Selected Language Styles of African Americans  
in an Urban Environment

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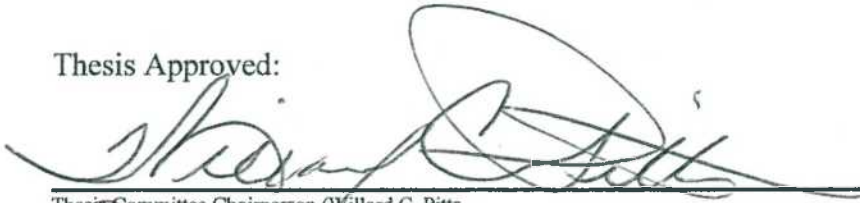
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December 16, 1999

# The Selected Language Styles of African Americans in an Urban Environment

By  
Danielle England

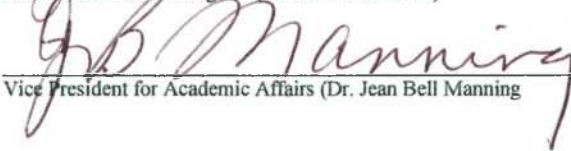
Thesis Approved:



Thesis Committee Chairperson (Willard C. Pitts)



Dean of the Honors Program (Dr. Jo Ann R. Clark)



Vice President for Academic Affairs (Dr. Jean Bell Manning)

## **Methodology**

### Introduction

This study was developed to point out the important aspects of African American Vernacular English as well as its other terms. The history of Black language styles was collected from books, AAVE literature and other prominent findings. An in-depth view of its history and cultural breaking was determined by the reading of several sources such as English textbook, literature and videos. Though all sources were not used, a useful portion was considered. Information was taken from the literature to give the best analysis of all the information received on the study. A test/survey was administered to four schools, two (2) elementary and two (2) high schools. Only a group of third and tenth grades were tested. As of December 14, 1999, both elementary schools on one (1) high school participated. Findings will be measured in percentile form based on the number of correct responses. Results of the test/survey will be analyzed in the completed thesis.

## **Preliminary Abstract**

The overall scope of this research is to define and explain the different styles of African American English. What are they and how do they affect the American society? The means by which many African Americans communicate is different from what American deems as standard American English (SAE). To this date, the voice of Black America has been categorized as Black Dialect, African American Vernacular English, and Black English. Only until recently has the Black voice been regarded as Ebonics. Where did these language styles originate and why do we continue to speak it? Of course, there is nothing wrong with the language, but true enough there is a time and place for its use. For centuries, African Americans have had their own "language," and, since its inception, has been passed down from generation to generation. Many authors have researched and determined that this type of language is a form of slave talk. During slavery, Blacks had to have a way of communicating with each other so that the "Massah" could not understand what they were discussing. Thus, a type of dialect was created. Is this dialect of English something about which all should be concerned or is it just a generational product? In addressing these questions, research will be done in the form of surveys and printed research.

## **Research Question**

Are African American language styles learned or are they a form of culture (way of life)? Why have we deviated from Standard American English?

## **Thesis Sentence**

Different African American language styles have taken their precedence in the cultural realms of African American society. They have embedded themselves in the culture and have subtle influential traces.

## Background/Review of Literature

Different African-American language styles have taken their precedence in the cultural realms of African-American society. The styles have embedded themselves in the culture and have subtle influential traces. In an attempt to trace its beginnings the evidence is apparent, but not too concise. Therefore, the views of these styles can never be brought to an end. Researchers as well have similar as well as different opinions on the following:

1. What is Ebonics?
2. Terms of the language styles
3. Uses of the language
4. Origins of the language
5. Misconceptions

This Review of Literature on African-American language styles focuses on these five areas.

### What is Ebonics?

Since the unending discussion of the Oakland School system's vote to feature Ebonics in its school curriculum, the term has been used loosely. Many do not know that the term has been around for more than twenty years. The term Ebonics was coined by Dr. Robert Williams who was a professor Emeritus of Psychology.



It was a term used by Black scholars as a new way of talking about the language of African descendants. This is what Williams wrote as recorded in The Real Ebonics Debate:

A significant incident occurred at the conference. The black conferees were so critical of the work on the subject done by white researchers, many of whom also happened to be present, that they decided to caucus among themselves and define black language from a black perspective. It was in this caucus that the term *Ebonics* was created. [The term refers to] linguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represent the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and United States slave descendant of African origin. It includes the various idioms, patois, aergots, ideolects, and social dialects of black people, especially those who have been forced to adapt to colonial circumstances. (p. 25).

It should be stated that the true definition of Ebonics is derived from African genealogy and it is the language of a particular, time, region, person, or group of persons. The term Ebonics is used interchangeably with Black English, Black Talk, African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), and African lingo. Of course, there is more terminology for this ever-changing vocabulary.

The variety of Ebonics spoken in the United States is rooted in Black American Oral Tradition and represents a synthesis of African (primarily West African and European (primarily English) linguistic-cultural traditions. (Perry & Delpit, 1998). When talking about Oral Tradition, it is referring to the African-American ancestry. It is the language that these ancestors brought to America during the slave trade and has been passed down through the generations. Through song, story and folk sayings among everyday people, lessons and precepts about life and survival are handed down from generation to generation (Smitherman, 1977). An example of this Oral Tradition is the saying, "Keep on keepin' on." In Black Talk, Geneva Smitherman writes, "Oral tradition, then is a part of the cultural baggage the African brought to America." (p. 77). Oral tradition preserves the African American heritage and reflects the collective part of the race.

### Terms of the Language Styles

In order to ensure correct understanding of the terms used in this paper, it would only be proper to give the definition of the various terms. According to Webster's dictionary (1987):

**Dialect** - variety of language confined to a region or group

**Lingo** - strange language

**Slang** - informal nonstandard vocabulary

**Vernacular**- relating to a native language or dialect and esp. its normal spoken form.

### Uses of the Language

Americans show a great diversity in their use of the language. As Geneva

Smitherman states in her book *Talkin' and Testifyin'*:

The crucial difference in American culture lies the contrasting modes in which Black and white Americans have shaped the language--a written mode for whites, having come from an European culture, a spoken mode for Blacks, having come from an African, orally-oriented background (p. 77).

Moreover, the way we speak shows a great deal about the atmosphere in which we live. Speech, in fact, may have to deal with our region, social class, age, sex, topic of discourse, social situation, and participants of conversation (Stroller, 1975). In the history of the Black culture, we can see how this "language" is expressed. More often it is spoken at churches, family reunions, buses, beauty shops--wherever black people congregate. There is a time and a place for this particular language to be spoken. Therefore it is safe to say that Blacks shift in and out of it. We use language in its formal and informal styles (McWhorter, 1998). For example, if we are talking to an

interviewer, we would use Standard American English, but when conversing with a friend, Black English could be used.

### Origins of the Language

Black English had its origins in enslavement, where it was necessary to have a language that would mean one thing to African Americans, but another thing to Europeans (Smitherman, 1991). Today, the lingo still serves a somewhat similar purpose. Although Standard American English is deemed to be the correct language, consequently it is, being all have to speak it in order to interview and communicate effectively among other things. Many Blacks feel that to talk "proper" all the time is offensive to their heritage. Therefore, as did in the days of old, we make up our own rules of syntax and diction. Black psychiatrist Frantz Fanon made an interesting quote:

"To talk like a book: is to "talk like a white man"

This is an intense statement and could be looked at as offensive to the White culture.

This is not the intent of this research.

In reference to the Oakland School district's policy on Standard English, many do not understand why the policy was passed. In lieu of that, many are not aware of how the language (namely Ebonics) works. Carolyn Adger remarks, "English (like other languages) is quite variable from place to place and group to group." (p. 1). Such is the same with African American language styles. This is what makes it a usable means of communication. This is also what occurred with the African slaves. They used a language so that everyone whom they wanted to understand could understand (Holloway & Vass, 1993). It (Black Dialect) is sort of like a code or password into "Black Society".

### Misconceptions

When most people hear of Black Talk, they think of it as slang (McWhorter, 1998). This is not a stable concept. Once again, it is just another form of language. It can be compared to the different types of English, such as British English and American English. Then too, it can be compared to the different languages that are in the United States. For example, in America, there are people who speak Spanish, French, German, Portuguese--the list could go on forever. However, most of these same people can speak American English as well. Most of the time when talking

with family and most friends, these people speak the language with which they are most comfortable. That does not mean that their language is slang or necessarily wrong. A pitfall in labeling language as wrong concerns the social identity function that language serves (Adger, 1997). Carolyn Adger also states, "It seems that correcting someone's natural language usage leads to more, not less, vernacular use." (p. 2)

The American society is truly diverse. When speaking in a dialect to which others can relate, one should not feel ashamed about doing so. It is wrong for the majority of a society to dictate the boundaries of another's natural language style. The key to understanding it all is to research the language and attempting to put an end to all of the social dissention, therefore making the world the true language melting pot that it really is.

## Findings

Thus far, three (3) schools have been surveyed in the form of a test. The test consists of 10 questions. Some of the questions are incorrect according to Standard American English (SAE) and some correct. (See figure 1).

Tests were distributed to four schools, two (2) elementary and two (2) high schools.

Only three schools, which included the two elementary schools and one high school, participated in the survey. Scoring was based on a 100-point scale. These were the results:

100    90    80    70    60    50 or below

School 1 (elementary)

School 2 (elementary)

School 3 (high school)

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**Objective** To become an effective journalist in the news media and work all assignments to fruition

**Experience** 1999-present Gazette Newspaper Langston, OK

**Staff Writer**

- Prepare news copy which adheres to the proper format.
- Select facts and write lead for a news story.
- Report and organize information accurately, fairly, and objectively

1998-present Stan Clark Companies Oklahoma City, OK

**Sales Representative**

- Assist customers with purchases
- Employee of the Year

**Education** 1997-present Langston University Langston, OK

- 75 credits earned; complete degree still in progress.
- Field related courses in: Communication Skills, Intro to Mass Media, News Writing I, Photojournalism, News Writing II, Journalism Participation, Field Experience

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