Università di Firenze Dipartimento di Formazione, Lingue, Intercultura, Letterature e Psicologia a.a. 2019-20 Corso di Laurea magistrale 37 in Lingue e Letterature moderne europee e americane

Laboratorio di Lingua e Traduzione inglese

“Characteristics and Varieties of North American English” John Gilbert

**Handout 5: Afro-American English**

**Ethnic varieties**

- Spanish & Chinese most rapidly growing languages

- USA 2nd Sp-speaking nation (ca. 60 m) in world after Mexico

- 2000 census USA greatest linguistic diversity in world (ca. 380 languages present)

- more than India

hybridization of cultures, ethnicities

**Afro-American Vernacular English** (**AAVE**)

- heightened consciousness of Afro-Am cultural identity w/ distinctive linguistic variety to mark it (from mid-1960s)

- signaling ethnic identity by select speech forms: **covert prestige**

- **code-switching** also frequent among higher, more educated social classes

- extremely varied: linguistic continuum <——>

- not spoken just by Afro-Ams or by all Afro-Ams

- many middle-class Blacks do not speak it

- linguistically indistinguishable from their white neighbors

- poorer & working/lower-classes in rural South & urban North speak most distinctive forms

- controversial; ideologically contested

- from “Nonstandard Negro English” esp. before 1960s to “Ebonics” or AAVE

**history**

1st slaves brought to English colonies in 1619 (Virginia) (maybe earlier according to recent archeological evidence)

**origins of AAVE** controversial

1) isolation from Europeans soon resulted in the evolution of a creole language w/ strong retention of African elements?

or

2) essentially dialectal British character of earlier AAVE?

or

3) both 1 & 2 (most likely)

**Gullah** dialect

- several hundred thousand speakers on coastal islands of Georgia-South Carolina

- probably closer than any other variety of English in the Americas to the original Creole Eng-lish of New World

- as many as 6,000 Africanisms retained in Gullah (*Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect,* Lorenzo Turner, 1949)

- ca. 95% of lexis from English despite undeniable influence of W.African languages

after **Civil War (1861-65)** w/ failure of Reconstruction & affirmation of “**Jim Crow**” Apartheid **segregation** after 1877, intensified the differentiation in development of AAVE w/ respect to other NAE varieties

“Great Migration” late 19th c – thru WWII of Afro-Ams from rural South to Northern urban ghettoes

- continued segregation

- color-caste system impeded assimilation

- AAVE has its own roots & heritage

- cultural roots from spirituals to rock ‘n’ roll permeated by African past

- AAVE & culture began to have great influence on white speech & life:

- music, dance, slang/street-talk

- spirituals (term in print 1866)

- blues (from 1870s)

- jazz (from mid-1870s)

- ragtime (1896)

- Harlem Renaissance of 1920s

- boogie woogie (1920s)

- jive (1930s)

- rhythm & blues (1950s)

- soul music (1960s)

- funk (1960s)

- 1970s hip hop, rap

- the talk of the Afro-Am jazzmen & women became cult slang of hippies in 1960s

- *beat* (tired), *cat, chick, groovy, have a ball, hip, hype, in the groove, jam, mellow, out of the world, pad, riff, solid, square, stache,* for *kicks, rip off, hung-up, cool, man, dude, roach, busted, heavy, stoned* (borrowed from AAVE intensifier e.g. *stone blind), uptight, sock it to me baby, let it all hang out, right on!, get down, get with it, do one’s thing, funky*

- great influence on Br musicians in 1960s (e.g. Rolling Stones, Beatles) & then back on U.S. culture

**Grammar**

- syntactic distinctiveness in fairly elaborate linguistic system

- simplification of conjugation of *to be*

- **invariant *be***:

- followed by verbal *–ing* form to express recurrent, habitual actions

- *He be going.*

- negated w/ ***don’t***

- *He don’t be going.*

- usu. signifying “in general”

- *He be sick.*

- also *bees* if subject is *it* or if word that follows begins w/ vowel

- *It bees yellow.*

- *“It bees dat way sometime.” (Nina Simone)*

- *Sometime it bees/be and sometime it don’t.*

- also for formation of *futures & conditionals*

- meaning understood from context

- *He (will/would) be talkin’ to the judge.*

- **zero copula** usu. signifying “right now”

- only 3rd person sing. or plural

- *They good. Who that?*

- negated w/ *ain’t*

- *They ain’t good.*

- also in pidgins & creoles of Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, Guyana, also Hawaii, Surinam, Liberia

- support for creolist hypothesis for origins of AAVE

- **zero auxiliary** usu. signifying “right now”

- *He going.*

- negated w/ *ain’t*

- *He ain’t going.*

- perfective **pre-verbal *been*** (the “Creole *been”)*

- action initiated in past & continuing or just/recently finished (past activity w/ current relevance)

- *I been workin’ all day. I been had it a long time.*

**-** use of ***be done***in sense of *will have*

*- We be done washed all those cars soon.*

- occasional use of ***to be*** forms w/o agreement conditions of Standard Eng.

- *I is the one.*

- “Be who you is and not who you ain’t, cause if you is what you ain’t, you am what you not.”

- elderly Afro-Am woman quoted in *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture* by Michael Eric Dyson

- use of **3rd person** singular present tense **/s/** for all subjects as a **marker of narrative**:

- *I gets a lil crazy, We comes, I says*

- use of ***ain’t*** for *am/is/are/has/have not* =common to many nonstandard varieties

- instead of *am not going to, does/did not* only in AAVE

- like Creole of Jamica, Trinidad & Barbados

- **no final /s/** in **3rd person singular** & loss of /s/ often also w/ Saxon genitive possessive & regular plural nouns

- common to other varieties (e.g. Southern) but w/ AAEV systematic

- doubling of subject

- peculiar to AAVE

- e.g. *Leroy he got a bike.*

- **multiple negatives**

- prescriptive rule from late 1700s

- common/possible beforehand: Geoffrey Chaucer, Wm Shakespeare

- common to many non-standard varieties internationally

- use of ***it*** instead of standard *there*

*- It’s a boy in my class named Mike.*

*- y’all, yuh (you)*

**Pronunciation**

- often remarkably similar to white Southern vernacular

- shared features:

- /aɪ/ as /a:/ e.g. *died, I’ve, I’m*

- convergence of /ɪ/ & /e/ + nasal e.g. *pin < pen*

- merger of /ɔɪ/ & /ɔ:/ esp. before /l/ e.g. *boil > ball*

- merger of /i/ and /æ/ before /ŋk/ e.g. *think > thank*

- merger of /ʊ(r)/ & /ɔ(r)/ *sure > shore*

- vocalization of /l/

- /l/ sound replaced by a vowel or semi-vowel sound

- e.g. middle /’mɪdəʊ/

- simplification of final consonant clusters thru deletion e.g. *desk > /des/*

- but AAVE goes much farther than Southern in deletion of final consonants

- regularly deletes inflectional endings /s/ & /d/

- **non-rhotic accent**

- /r/ only pronounced before a vowel

*- gangsta rap*

- different realization of vowels

- *can’t /ka*ɪ*nt/*

- simplification/merging of groups of consonants

- e.g *children (chileren)*

- absence of *–ed* suffix in past participle of regular verbs & lack of irregular forms w/ consonant clusters in final syllable (e.g. *told /toʊl/* or simply *tell)*)

- tendency not to pronounce final syllables in many African languages

- metathesis (inversion of sound pronunciation)

*-* e.g. *ask /aks/*

- *where* (whar), *there* (thar), *creature* (critter), *certain* (sartain), *young-ones* (young-uns)

- also in Scots-Irish influenced NAm varieties (e.g. Appalachia, Southern Mississippi Valley, Southern plains, Texas)

- substitution of interdental fricative (th) unvoiced /ð/ (e.g. think /tInk/) & voiced /θ/ (e.g. them /dem/) at beginning of word w/ /t/ & /d/

- *there (dar), the /d*ə/, that /dæt/

*-* substitution of voiced & unvoiced interdental fricatives in mid-word or end position w/ labiodental fricatives /f/ or /v/

*- South /saʊf/, with /wIf/ (also /wId/), bathe /beIv/, mother /m*ʌvə/ (also

*/m*ʌdə/, truth /tru:f/

- elision of unstressed initial vowel or syllable in word:

- *about /bout/, because /k*ʌz)*, electric /’lek trIc/*

- loss of nasal velar in group /Iŋ/ (e.g. *talkin’* /n/)

- common to other varieties

- substitution of bilabial occlusive (the closing of the breath passage in a stop, a nasal consonant) */b/*  w/ voiceless labiodental fricative */v/*

*- over /o*ʊbə/, never /nebə/