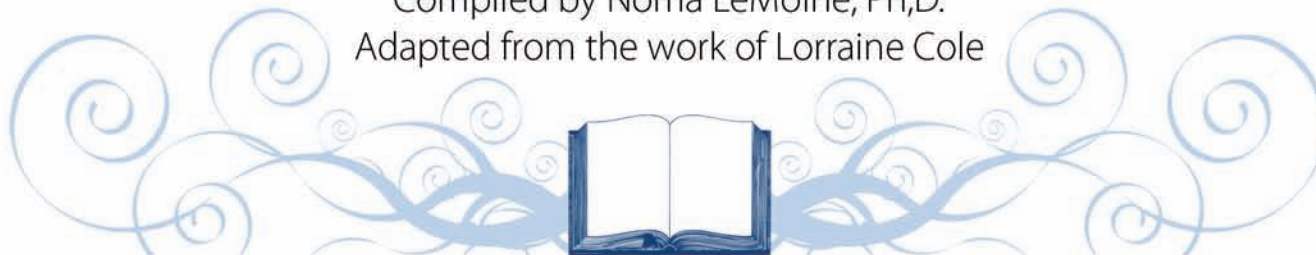


# **TEACHERS GUIDE TO SUPPORTING AFRICAN AMERICAN STANDARD ENGLISH LEARNERS**

*Understanding the Characteristic Linguistic Features of African American Language as Contracted with Standard English Structure*

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Adapted from the work of Lorraine Cole



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# PREFACE

Current data on the academic achievement of African American students are disconsolate reflecting a pattern of low achievement that dates back decades. African American Standard English Learners (SELs)—those students for whom standard English is not native and who represent a high percentage of the public school population in large urban school districts—must become proficient in the use of Standard American and academic English—the base for the development of school language, literacy, and learning. They must become literate in the forms of English that appear in newspapers, magazines, textbooks, voting materials, and consumer contracts. Because students acquire school literacy more easily when their language matches the language of school, African American, Hawaiian American, Mexican American, and Native American Standard English Language Learners (SELs)—students for whom standard English is not native—may not get the same benefits from traditional approaches to instruction as other students.

The general purpose of this guide is to serve as a reference manual and introduction to the linguistic features of African American Language (AAL). The specific aim of this guide is to facilitate the effective use of linguistically responsive instructional methodologies such as "contrastive analysis" and Mainstream English Language Development (MELD) instruction, to support language acquisition and learning in African American SELs.



# The History of African American Language

Few would argue with the fact that the speech utilized by the majority of African Americans is different and readily distinguishable from what is referred to as standard or mainstream American English. This language—African American language—differs from Standard American English in significant ways, including how words are pronounced and how sentences are formed to carry meaning (its grammar); and in how language is used in social contexts (its pragmatic rule system). While African lexical retentions have been reported in some forms of African American language (Turner, 1974) the majority of the vocabulary of African American Language is borrowed from English. According to the linguistic research, African American language is systematic and rule governed like all natural speech varieties and many of its characteristic linguistic features have been definitively identified.

The important theories on the origin and historical development of African American language can be categorized as Deficit or Difference perspectives.



# The History of African American Language

The Deficit theorists view the language of the descendants of enslaved Africans in America as a by-product of deficient learning. These beliefs often form the basis of negative educator attitude toward African American language. The Difference theorists—which include the Dialectologists, the Creolists, and the Ethnolinguists or Africologists—view African American language/Ebonics as a product of different cultural, linguistic, and historical influences.

The African Origin theorists maintain that Africans in Diaspora who were forcibly torn predominately from the west coast of Africa share a common system of rules that governed the languages of that region, primarily Niger-Congo and some Bantu (see Alleyne, 1971; Holloway & Vass, 1993; Smith, 1977; Welmers, 1973). These Africans, transported by Europeans to the New World, brought with them a linguistic competence (an intuited knowledge of the rules) of Niger-Congo languages. Their indigenous Niger-Congo languages included Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Umbundu, Mandinka, Wolof, Ewe, Twi, Kimbundu, and others (see Conklin & Lourie, 1983; Holloway & Vass, 1993). Africans enslaved in Portugal came to speak a form of Ebonics known as Brazilian Creole Portuguese, Portuguese Bush Negro or Black Portuguese. Those enslaved in North America came to speak African-American Language, or what is referred to off the coast of the Carolinas as Geechee or Gullah.



# The History of African American Language

Africans enslaved in Jamaica came to speak Patois or what is sometimes referred to as Caribbean Creole English, or Jamaican Creole. These and other Caribbean languages, according to African Origin theorists, are forms of Ebonics, Pan African Languages, or African Language systems and represent African linguistic continuity in language. In summary the Africologists posit that African American language is a language that in the deep structure is governed largely by African (Niger Congo) language rules with extensive borrowing of English language vocabulary.

According to Smitherman, (1977) African American language is used by 99% of African Americans at least some of the time. The usage of African American language among African American students –particularly in urban public school settings– is widely acknowledged and is recognized in the literature as a significant barrier to learning. The barrier, according to the research, is shaped largely by negative attitudes of educators toward the language, lack of knowledge about the structure of the language, limited knowledge of instructional methodologies that support the acquisition of school language, and by structural differences in the language itself. (See Baugh, 1999b; Berdan, 1978; Labov, 1983; Politzer & Hoover, 1976; and Smitherman, 1983).





# The History of African American Language

Stokes (1976) identifies teacher's lack of awareness of linguistic research as one of the greatest barriers to language different African American students' success in school. She writes:

"Those teachers who accept these linguistic understandings are not likely to alienate their students by rejecting their language, which is an integral part of their identity and self-image, on the grounds that it is wrong, bad, or otherwise inferior to their own. Instead teachers will accept the student's linguistic ability for what it is and use it as a basis for increasing the language options that are available to them, thereby stimulating their linguistic competence to more productive linguistic performance capability (p. 3)

The research confirms that negative attitudes towards African American language exist and that negative educator attitudes toward African American language unfavorably impact classroom practices and has negative consequences for African American SELs' access to the core educational curricula. The Los Angeles Unified School Districts Academic English Mastery Program is designed to address the needs of teachers and students in ameliorating the barriers to academic achievement for African American and other SELs.



# Introduction to AAL Phonology

West Africans originally spoke a variety of languages (Mende, Ewe, Ibo, and Wolof, to name a few), primarily from the Niger-Congo language family. Africologists and some Creolists affirm that West African languages are an important source of the phonological differences between standard American English and the speech of enslaved diasporan Africans and their descendents (Allyene, 1971; Blackshear-Belay, 1996; Dillard, 1972; Holloway, 1990; Rickford, 1991).

The canonical form or shape of the syllable structure in African American Language is strongly a consonant-vowel (CV) pattern. Drawing a correlation between AAL and Niger-Congo phonological patterns, Ladefoged (1968) writes,

"Many West African languages, including most of the Kwa group, can be considered to have no consonant clusters."

In African American language consonant clusters are virtually non-existent at the end of words, particularly when the sounds have the same voicing. Incorporating West African, Niger-Congo word patterning rules into their speech, AAL speaker's typically alternate consonants and vowels, and almost always avoid clustering homogeneously voiced consonants at the end of words.



# Introduction to AAL Phonology

Phonics instruction, as part of a balanced approach to literacy acquisition for Standard English Learners requires that the teacher have knowledge of the phonological linguistic features of the language the student is most proficient in and the target language. The phonetic method of teaching reading which emphasizes auditory analysis of correspondence between oral and written language requires that learners be able to isolate and recognize the distinct phonemes of their language and relate them to graphic signs (see Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1996). For Standard English Language Learners, the ability to recognize Standard English phonemes may be impaired and may create phonological linguistic sources of reading problems. This phonological divergence can generate difficulties with sound/spelling relationships; differentiation of homophones and silent letters; and loss of confidence in the alpha-bet (Berdan, 1978).

Teachers of SELs, therefore, must be knowledgeable of the phonological characteristics of both the non-standard languages of their students and Standard American English in order to apply phonics instruction contextually.



# African American Language Features of Phonology

RULES FOR COMBINING  
FEATURES OF SOUNDS INTO  
SIGNIFICANT SPEECH SOUNDS

# 1. Word Final Consonants in African American Language

African American Language phonological rules do not permit the production of consonants in clusters in the following contexts:

- when both consonant sounds are voiced  
ex: AAL (col) MAE (cold)
- when both consonant sounds are voiceless  
ex: AAL (des) MAE (desk)
- when the cluster precedes a consonant  
ex: AAL (bes' kind) MAE (best kind)
- when the morpheme /-ed/ is added  
ex: AAL (rub) MAE (rubbed)



## 1b. The following are additional examples of sound clusters which AAL phonological rules do not allow to exist.

- Sound Clusters
- AAL & MAE contrasts

[ st ]	test/tes - list/lis - missed/miss
[ sp ]	clasp/clas (class) - grasp/gras (grass)
[ sk ]	desk/des - risk/ris - mask/mas (mass)
[ sht ]	finished/ finish - crashed/crash
[ zd ]	raised/ raise -
[ nd ]	mind/min (mine) - find/fin (fine)
[ ld ]	cold/col (coal) - old/ol - called/call
[ kt ]	looked/look -act/ak
[ pt ]	mopped/mop - stopped/stop

## 2b. The /TH / sound

- In the final position in words /th/ is pronounced /f/ most of the time and less frequently as /t/.

ex: th = f    Ruf / Ruth  
                  Teef / Teeth  
                  Mouf / Mouth

ex: th = t    sout' / south



### 3. The / R / sound

- In African American Language the /r/ sound in words is often not produced or is replaced with / uh / sound. The sound does not exist in most west African languages.

ex: /r/ = / - /    c'ol / carol

ex: /r/ = /uh/    sista/sister





## 4. The / L / sound

In African American Language the /l/ sound is not produced in the following contexts:

- when it precedes the /w/, /j/, or /r/ sounds  
ex: a'ways/ always, mijon/million, a'ready/already
- when it precedes the /u/, /o/, and /aw/ vowels  
ex: poo/pool, co'/cold, sawt/salt
- in the contracted form of the future modal [will]  
ex: he'/he'll

## 5. Stress Patterns

- In African American Language stress is often placed on the first syllable of two syllable words which are produced in MAE with the stress on the second syllable.

ex: AAL - po' lice    MAE - po lice'

ho' tel

ho tel'



## 6. African American Language Homophones

- Due to the influence of AAL phonological rules many words that are not homophones ( words that sound alike but are spelled different) in English are homophonous in AAL.

ex:    find    and    fine  
      run    and    rung  
      mask    and    mass  
      pin    and    pen  
      coal    and    cold  
      mold    and    mole



# Introduction to AAL Morphology and Syntax

What we have gleaned from the research is that both the Creolists and the Africologists acknowledge African retentions in the morphology, syntax, phonology and vocabulary of African American language. We know that a large percentage of African Americans from all socioeconomic levels use this language as their primary mode of discourse, and that many young children acquire it as their first language.

Many researchers have identified similarities in Ebonic and Niger-Congo language verb systems. Dillard, (1972), asserts that “in the system of its verbs, Black English reveals the greatest difference from white American dialects...and the closest resemblance to its pidgin and creole ancestors and relatives.” (p. 40). Asante, (1990), points out:

The verb system of Efik and Ewe differentiate between a customary aspect (habitual) or repetitive aspect and aspect of completion. Thus it is possible in Efik to express an action that occurs habitually in the present, past, or future, with time determined by context rather than vocal inflection. AAL also uses aspect rather than tense in some verbal constructions... The African American Language verb system has four perfectives, whereas English has only two. (pp. 23-24).

Many researchers have referenced the tense and aspect quality in African American language. Turner (1949) noted the tendency for speakers of the



# Introduction to AAL Morphology and Syntax

Gullah language to attach little significance to the actual time when an event takes place, much like speakers of many West African languages, the stress is on the manner of action. Asante, (1990), reported numerous constructions in which tense is superseded by aspect in slave narratives from Alabama, and in present day African American language usage.

In reference to syntax, Asante, (1990), reports that (AAL) sentences tend to have a serial-like constructions that matches the serial verb construction of many West African languages. Serial verbs according to Malmkjaer (1991), are “a series of two or more verbs which are not joined by a conjunction such as and, or by a complementizer such as to, and which share a subject” (p. 85). Asante cites examples of serial verbs in African languages. In Twi he cites: (“ode sike no mad me” which literally translated is “He take money gave me” and means “He gave me money”). In Vagala: (u e u te n literally “he did it gave me” meaning “he did it for me”). In Yourba he cites: ( o mu iwe wa literally “he took book come” meaning He brought a book). Asante provides the following examples of serial-like constructions in AAL: “I took consideration and joined de lawd,” meaning I became a Christian. “Turn loose and drap down from dar” meaning “Come down from there”. Other examples provided include “I hear tell you went home”; “I made do with what I had”; “He picked up and went to town”;

# **African American Language**

## ***Features of Morphology***

RULES FOR COMBINING  
SOUNDS INTO BASIC UNITS  
OF MEANING ( WORDS ).

## ***Features of Syntax***

RULES FOR COMBINING WORDS  
INTO ACCEPTABLE PHRASES,  
CLAUSES, AND SENTENCES

# 1. Pluralization

mainstream American English:

- / -s / following voiceless sounds      ex: five cents
- / -z / following voiced sounds      ex: different foods
- / -iz/ following "hissing" sounds      ex: kisses - ditches

African American Language:

- Nouns that refer to quantity do not require a plural marker  
ex: two pound - twenty year ago - three cent



## 2. Possession

mainstream American English:

- / -s / following voiceless sounds      ex: Peat's chair
- / -z / following voiced sounds      ex: Pam's hat
- / iz / following hissing sounds      ex: Mitch'es car

African American Language:

- Possession is marked by word order and word stress  
ex: the girl hat - John cousin

(underlined words, indicating the possessor, are stressed in the sentence.)



### 3. Past Tense

mainstream American English:

- / -t / following voiceless consonants      ex: cooked
- / -d/ following voiced consonants      ex: moved
- / id/ following word final /t/ or /d/      ex: kidded

African American Language:

- In African American Language the / -ed / suffix which marks past tense in mainstream American English is not produced due to the phonological rules that prohibit the clustering of consonants at the end of words example: MAE / named, cracked    AAL / name, crack



## 4. Auxiliary Verbs

mainstream American English (MAE):

- is, am, are      contractions - he's, I'm, you're
- have, had, has      contractions - I've, you'd, she's
- will, would      contractions - I'll, I'd

African American Language (AAL):

- In African American Language the contracted form of the copula, /is/ and /are/ do not exist.  
example: *He a big boy. You a pretty girl.*
- The MAE /'m/ & /'d/ contracted forms do exist in AAL.  
example: *I'm hungry. He'd gone already.*

## REGULARIZATION

*"REGULARIZED"* features cause uniformity of the irregularities that occur in mainstream American English (MAE). MAE is highly irregular, with exceptions to many linguistic patterns. In African American language (AAL), the features that follow are "regularized", resulting in the elimination of the irregularities of mainstream American English.

# 1. Third Person Singular

mainstream American English: Irregular Third Person

Singular

I swim

you swim

he swims

Plural

swim

you swim

they swim

African American Language: Regular Third Person

Singular

I swim

you swim

he swim

Plural

we swim

you swim

they swim



## 2. Past Tense Copula Verbs

mainstream American English: Irregular Past Tense

Singular

I was

you were

he was

Plural

we were

you were

they were

African American Language: Regular Past Tense

Singular

I was

you was

he was

Plural

we was

you was

they was

### 3. Present Tense Copula Verbs

mainstream American English: Irregular Present Tense

Singular

I am

you are

he is

Plural

we are

you are

they are

African American Language: Regular Present Tense

Singular

I is

you is

he is

Plural

we is

you is

they is



## 4. Second Person Plural

mainstream American English: Irregular Second Person

<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>	<u>Plural</u>
I	We	
You	You	
He, She, It	They	

African American Language: Regular Second Person

<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>	<u>Plural</u>
I	We	
You	You All	
He, She, It	They	



## 5. Indefinite Article

mainstream American English: Irregular Indefinite Art.

- Before a consonant

A ball

- Before a vowel

An apple

African American Language: Regular Indefinite Article

- Before a consonant

A ball

- Before a vowel

A apple





## 6. Demonstrative Pronoun

mainstream American English:

- Objective  
Them ( I see them. )
- Subjective  
Those ( I see those men. )

Irregular Demonstrative  
Pronoun

African American Language:

- Objective  
Them ( I see them. )  
Them ( I see them men. )

Regular Demonstrative  
Pronoun

# 7. Reflexive Pronoun

mainstream American English: Irregular Reflexive Pronoun

## Possessive

- My
- Your
- His
- Her
- Its
- Our
- Their

## Objective

- Me
- You
- Him
- Her
- It
- Us
- Them

## Reflexive

- Myself
- Yourself
- Himself
- Herself
- Itself
- Ourselves
- Themselves



## 7b. Reflexive Pronoun

African American Language: Regular reflexive pronoun

### Possessive

- My
- Your
- His
- Her
- Its
- Our
- Their

### Objective

- Me
- You
- Him
- Her
- It
- Us
- Them

### Reflexive

- Myself
- Yourself
- Hissself
- Herself
- Itself
- Oursself
- Theirsself

**THE FOLLOWING GRAMMATICAL FEATURES  
EXIST IN BOTH MAINSTREAM AMERICAN  
ENGLISH AND AFRICAN AMERICAN LANGUAGE  
BUT DIFFER IN HOW THEY ARE EXPRESSED.  
THE DIFFERENCES ARE REALIZED IN THE  
SURFACE (SPOKEN) FORM.**



# 1. First Person Future

mainstream American English: Informal

- I'm gonna

African American Language:

- I' mona
- I' mo
- I' ma



## 2. Multiple Negation

Mainstream American English Rule: two negatives in a sentence equals a positive statement.

example: It isn't likely that there won't be any rain.

N + N = positive

eg. It will probably rain. statement

African American Language Rule: the more negatives used in a sentence the more negative the statement.

example: Nobody don't have no excuse.

N + N + N = negative statement

eg. Everyone is without an excuse.



### 3. Use of 'GO '

mainstream American English: ' GO ' as lexical verb

- Here I go
- There it goes
- There goes the car

African American Language: ' GO ' as copula verb

- Here I go = Here I am
- There it go = There it is
- There go the house = There the house is



**THE FOLLOWING FEATURES OF AFRICANAMERICAN LANGUAGE HAVE NO COUNTERPART OR PARALLEL LINGUISTIC FEATURE IN MAINSTREAM AMERICAN ENGLISH.**



# AFRICAN AMERICAN LANGUAGE:

## 1. DISTRIBUTIVE ASPECT

He be tired. = He is frequently tired.

## 2. REMOTE COMPLETIVE ASPECT

He been sick. = He's been sick for a very long time.

## 3. ' AT ' IN CONTENT QUESTIONS

Where is my shoe at?



# **SEMANTICS**

**THE LEVEL OF MEANING  
OF INDIVIDUAL WORDS  
AND WORD RELATIONSHIPS  
IN MESSAGES.**

# **PRAGMATICS**

**THE LEVEL OF LANGUAGE AS  
IT FUNCTIONS IN VARYING  
SOCIAL CONTEXTS.**

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