Teaching notes

These notes and answers support the student activities that follow. Several articles are referenced as well as videos, to help students understand the emergence of and use of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE).

Task one

1. www.ncsu.edu/grad/handbook/official_language_english.htm is a useful list of countries where English is an official language.

2. The variety of English in the UK is the direct result of the fact that English has been the main language for almost a thousand years, allowing for geographically isolated or remoter areas to diverge. In the USA and Australia, English did not arrive until much more recently, so it hasn’t had the time to develop. Additionally, the people migrating to the USA and Australia tended to come from many different countries, with different languages. As a result, many migrants learned English as a second language, resulting in a more homogenous form of English.

Task two and three

Summary of the characteristics of AAVE by language level, which you may wish to share with students:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Language level</th>
<th>Features</th>
</tr>
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| **Phonetics and phonology** *(Students may need to listen to the songs and read the lyrics for task three.)* | • Substitution of /ɪŋ/ with /ɪn/  
• Substitution of /ð/ with /d/  
• Leaving out initial /ð/ (the voiced th- sound that you get at the start of ‘this’)  
• In words that end in two (or more) consonants, the final consonant is often dropped. This happens more frequently if the next word also starts with a consonant: ‘West Side’ becomes ‘Wes Side’.  
• The dipthong /aɪ/ as in ‘my’ is reduced to a vowel /a/. |
| **Grammar** | • Second person plural pronoun is different from second person singular (you).  
• Leaving out of copula.  
• Use of ‘gonna’ as a future or prospective tense.  
• Use of ‘ain’t’ to make negative simple sentences. ‘Ain’t’ can be used in AAVE both in place of ‘haven’t’ or ‘didn’t’.  
• Regular third person singular verb forms.  
• Unmarked possessive forms - but clear from context (contextual possessive).  
• Double negation / double negatives.  
• AAVE verbs often do not have endings (when in SAE/SE there would be), so a verb may lack past tense -ed, because an adverbial phrase is used to give contextual time: ‘Yesterday, I walk home.’  
• The verb form ‘done’ is used to indicate completed, finished action - the so called present or past perfect tense: ‘He done eat his dinner,’ which in SAE would be ‘He has eaten his dinner.’  
• A special habitual tense-aspect of the verb that does not exist in
### An introduction to African-American Vernacular English (AAVE)

| SAE/SE. The verb ‘be’ is used with the main verb in -ing (present participle form): ‘She be working.’ This means that she is working all the time, she does it habitually. This contrasts with ‘She working’ which means, she is working right now. SAE and SE cannot make this distinction: ‘She is working,’ could mean she does it all the time, regular occurrence or she is doing it right now.
| **Lexis and semantics**
| Special double negatives: negative inversion. A negative auxiliary verb is added to go in front of the subject: ‘Ain’t nobody talkin to you!’, ‘Can’t nobody beat them’, ‘Don’t nobody say nothing to dem peoples!’ and ‘Wasn’t nobody in there but me an him.’

| Some well-known examples include:
| - Taboo lexis.
| - Reclaimed lexis especially ‘nigga’.
| - Use of the word ‘steady’ as an adverb: ‘She be steady workin’ which means that the action of her working is happening consistently/persistently and it adds emphasis to the habitual tense.
| - The noun ‘homie’ to refer to peers/friends. The etymology is debated, but it is suggested that it is borrowed from Mexican-Spanish ‘hombre’ (‘man’), in the early 20th century as many African-Americans migrated north to work in the industrial cities where they mixed with Mexican immigrants.
| - The clipped noun ‘hood’ instead of neighbourhood.
| - ‘Yo’ as a discourse marker, greeting.
| - ‘Cool’ as adjective to describe something or someone as ‘good’.

### Other useful references:


### Task three

1. You will need to provide students with some lyrics by the rap artist Tupac for this activity.

Unfortunately these cannot be reproduced due to copyright restrictions, but are widely available online. Please be mindful of the explicit language and material in the lyrics and videos.

The analysis below is of a sample of lyrics from the song ‘Temptations’, from ‘See you walkin and you lookin good, yes indeed’ to ‘All my niggaz go’.

- Substitution of -ing suffix with -in.
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- ‘you looking good’ - omission of auxiliary (in analogy with omission copula perhaps as ‘lookin good’ may be thought of as complement rather than present participle and adverbial).
- ‘witcha’ - representation of pronunciation /θ/ substituted with /t/ and elision with /j/.
- ‘cause I hate when you act like’ - no tense marker on verb ‘act’ (possibly intended as ‘when you’re acting like’).
- ‘I be stressin in the spotlight’ - habitual aspect which does not exist in Standard English ‘be’ + present participle to indicate a habit, regular activity.
- ‘Ain’t no time’ - negation with ‘ain’t’.
- ‘Can’t be wit you’ - substitution of /θ/ with /t/.
- ‘so here I go’ - can be read as a quotative / discourse marker as it introduces the chorus
- ‘in my ride’ - ‘ride’ lexical choice for ‘car’.
- ‘when she pull’ - omission of third person singular present tense suffix -s.
- ‘and say it’s cool’ ‘homies’ and ‘niggaz’ - lexical choices typically associated with AAVE.
- ‘niggaz’ is a controversial example of an attempt at reclaiming, which might lead to stimulating classroom discussion. Is it successful? Can extremely offensive and oppressive language ever be reclaimed by those who are / have been oppressed by it? There are lots of interesting discussions and presentations on this word by African-Americans on YouTube. Here are two examples:

  - [www.youtube.com/watch?v=_LK-j8ZED44](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_LK-j8ZED44) (A blog by a young African-American woman.)
  - [www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFnF1c2Tbfw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFnF1c2Tbfw) (A CNN report on the history of the N word.)

2. Dialects and sociolects often give speakers a sense of a shared identity, as well as setting them apart from the mainstream or other groups. In a racist society, African-Americans’ use of AAVE can become a means of uniting people and reinforcing a separate identity.

**Task four**

1. These are the OED definitions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AAVE / Black English words</th>
<th>Etymology</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>banana</td>
<td>Portuguese <em>banana</em> or Spanish <em>banana</em> (the fruit), Portuguese <em>banano</em> or Spanish <em>banano</em> (the tree), given by De Orta (1563) and Pigafetta, as the name used in Guinea (Congo).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yam</td>
<td>Portuguese <em>inhame</em> (Clusius 1567) or Spanish <em>igname</em> (Scaliger 1557), <em>iñame</em>, <em>iname</em>, whence French <em>igname</em> (Thevet 1575); the ultimate origin is uncertain. Although in many popular sources it is maintained that ‘yam’ comes from an African language’s word for ‘eat’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>okra</td>
<td>A West African language, probably Igbo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gumbo</td>
<td>From the Angolan <em>kingombo</em>, the <em>ki</em> being the usual Bantu prefix, and <em>ngombo</em> the real word.</td>
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An introduction to African-American Vernacular English (AAVE)

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<tr>
<th>AAVE lexis</th>
<th>Etymologies from West African language form + West African language meaning</th>
<th>According to OED</th>
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<td>bogus</td>
<td>Means ‘fake’ or ‘fraudulent’ as in Hausa ‘boko’, which comes from ‘boko-boko’ the Hausa word for ‘deceit, fraud’.</td>
<td>Unknown etymology. Suggests it might be related to the noun ‘bogy’ or ‘bogey’, which means devil or evil.</td>
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<td>hep (original), hip (later)</td>
<td>Means ‘well-informed, up-to-date’, from Wolof ‘hepi, hipi’ (to open one’s eyes and be aware of what is going on).</td>
<td>US slang, etymology unknown.</td>
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<td>In Mandingo there is a word ‘suma’, which literally means ‘cool’ or ‘cold’, but it has taken on a metaphorical meaning of ‘calm’, ‘slow’, ‘controlled’ as well.</td>
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<td>dig</td>
<td>Means ‘to understand, appreciate’, from Wolof ‘deg’ which means to understand, appreciate.</td>
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The proposed West African etymologies for these words (among others) are rather unlikely. Coincidences such as the Wolof word ‘deg’ meaning ‘understand’ and the fact that another West African language has a word that means both literally ‘cool’ as well as more
metaphorically, do not prove that AAVE borrowed these words from languages spoken by the
slaves arriving in the USA. Many languages have adjectives for ‘cold’ and ‘cool’ that refer
both to a literal use as well as a metaphorical use; it is probably a universal observation that
coolness goes with certain emotions, different from emotions associated with heat.

3. The link with West Africa and the ancestry of African-Americans is made stronger,
helping perhaps to restore a sense of pride to a long oppressed minority. Also, if AAVE
can be ‘proved’ to have undergone influences from West African languages, it may make
it harder for objectors of AAVE to argue that it is not a proper language which is ‘lazy,’
‘bad’ or ‘broken’.

Interestingly, the habitual aspect construction of ‘be’ + present participle could be the
result of West African linguistic influences, as many of the West African languages have a
habitual aspect (in fact, many of the region’s languages have a far more complex tense-
aspect system than English).
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Task one

1. List as many countries as you can think of where English is spoken. In which of these is English an official language?

<table>
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<th>Is English an official language?</th>
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2. All these countries each have their own varieties of English, as well as (often, not always) their own Standard version of English. However, most English-speaking countries (e.g. USA and Australia) have less variety with regard to regional dialects and accents than the UK.

Bearing in mind the history of English in these countries, can you explain why a smaller country like the UK has more varieties of English than a much larger country such as the USA?

Task two

The USA has General American (the equivalent of British Received Pronunciation): it is the standard, most common American accent. The Standard English form in USA (the standard dialect) is called Standard American English, or SAE.

There are some different accents and dialects across the US, such as the New York or Texas accents. However, there is a well known sociolect: African American Vernacular English, AAVE (or Black Vernacular English or Ebonics).

1. Where or how might you have come across AAVE in the UK?

2. In the study of English, AAVE is significant. In pairs or small groups, find out the significance of AAVE for the study of varieties of English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Investigation</th>
<th>Useful websites</th>
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<td>AAVE: what are its phonological and grammatical characteristics? What do linguists think about where it came from?</td>
<td><a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_American_Vernacular_English">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_American_Vernacular_English</a></td>
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<td>The following link is a short animated video about AAVE, which covers the key aspects of this variety: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkzVOXKxfQk">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkzVOXKxfQk</a></td>
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<td>Basil Bernstein and his work on ‘restricted code’ and ‘elaborated code’.</td>
<td><a href="http://doceo.co.uk/background/language_codes.htm">http://doceo.co.uk/background/language_codes.htm</a></td>
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William Labov’s research on Black English in Harlem, New York in the late 1960s and the ‘Ann Arbor Decision’.

http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/95sep/ets/laboh.htm
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ann_Arbor_Decision

Task three

Have a look at some extracts from lyrics by a well-known 1990s rapper, Tupac Shakur.

1. Identify any language features you notice that you think are typical for AAVE.

2. Tupac Shakur was born in the mainly African-American area of Harlem in New York, and many of his family members were involved in the ‘Black Power’ movement. Explain, using linguistic concepts and theories, why a rapper of Tupac’s background would write lyrics in AAVE.

Task four

Although not many linguists agree that AAVE is a West African languages-based creole, there have been suggestions that some of its lexicon has been derived from West African languages such as Wolof and Mandinka. The etymology of a word is its origin and how the word came into AAVE and into SAE/SE.

1. Use an etymological dictionary such as the OED online to explore the origins of the words in the table below. (The etymology of a word is its origin, which explains how linguists think a word might have come into AAVE or SAE/SE, for example).

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2. Look at the table with some AAVE lexis below. Other typical AAVE lexemes (words) have come into AAVE via a combination of languages. Do you think these etymologies are convincing? Use an etymological dictionary and explain your reasons.

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3. Why might some speakers of AAVE argue in favour of West African origins for their language variety?