

What Is AAE?

What's in a name? "Everything," says linguist Geneva Smitherman, "as we acknowledge that names are not merely words but concepts which suggest implications, values, history, and consequences beyond the word or 'mere' name itself" (*Talkin and Testifyin* 42). According to Smitherman and centuries-old African traditions (Asante 70; Nehusi 82–84), names wield power, and we can see their impact every day, especially in the composition classroom, where language commands so much attention. The language of our nurture often *names* us in U.S. society, with all of the positive or negative perceptions that are embedded within the name. Because of these perceptions, language, like ethnicity and social class, is a status predictor in the classroom, raising or lowering teachers' expectations and students' self-esteem. Therefore, what a teacher calls African American students' speech—and related features in their writing—is of no small significance.

Many African American students speak what we will call **African American English**, or **AAE**,¹ since that is currently the most widely accepted term among linguists.² Although all African Americans do not speak AAE, linguists estimate that it is spoken by 80 to 90 percent of African Americans (especially blue-collar workers and adolescents), at least among friends and relatives (Mufwene 32; Rickford, *AAVE* 323–24; Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk* 19). Occasionally, members of other racial and ethnic groups speak AAE as well; hence, they too are part of the AAE **speech community**.

You may have heard this type of speech referred to as Black English, African American Language, or Ebonics, among other names.³ But it is the names people use to classify AAE that matter most in our classrooms. Historically, AAE has been labeled "broken" English, slang, a dialect, and a language. These names

both reflect and affect the status of the speakers. Some names may lead teachers to view their African American students as lazy, illiterate, or even learning disabled, while other names invite teachers to see their students as multilingual learners. Likewise, certain names can make African American students feel ignorant or competent, ashamed or proud.

It is easy to imagine how the attitudes instilled by or embodied in these names might influence student performance in writing classes. Since teachers' and students' attitudes toward AAE *can* play an important role in writing instruction (see Chapter 4), this chapter aims to clarify what AAE is and is not. As we explain below, linguists agree that AAE is a dialect or a language rather than "broken" English or slang, but whether it is recognized as a language depends as much on politics as linguistics.

Is AAE "Broken" English?

Since enslaved Africans began speaking AAE, it has been regarded by some observers as **broken English**, "lazy English," or simply "bad English"—a fractured form of speech without logic or rules. After all, it appears to violate rule after rule of **Standard American English**, or what the American public calls **Standard English**. This is the variety of English privileged in U.S. academic, government, and professional circles as well as the mainstream media.

Despite its privileged status, the term *Standard English* is somewhat misleading, for there is no universal standard for speaking English in the United States. The spoken standard varies according to region (e.g., the South Atlantic versus New England). For simplicity's sake, however, we will refer to "Standard English" because these spoken varieties share many rules, especially grammatical ones. Moreover, there *is* a formal written standard, **Standard Written English (SWE)**, which is "codified, prescriptive, and relatively homogeneous" (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 281).

Whether the standard is spoken or written, AAE seems to defy the norm, especially the standard for formal writing. According to the rules of Standard Written English, AAE's verbs are missing or misused (e.g., *You the man* or *She be workin day and*

night), its subjects and verbs disagree (e.g., *Mary get*), its words lack endings (e.g., *gettin*), and its sentences are poorly structured (e.g., *Don't nobody know what's goin down*).

Thus, over the centuries, Americans of all colors have characterized AAE as an incorrect form of English: even the African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, who made his name by writing verse in AAE, lamented in "The Poet," "But ah, the world it, turned to praise / A jingle in a broken tongue" (220). More recently, in 1996 when the Oakland School Board declared AAE the primary language of its African American students, critics such as former New York Mayor Edward Koch, CNN talk show host Bob Novak, and *Washington Post* columnist Mary McGrory characterized AAE as substandard English. And once again some African Americans joined the fray, including comedian Bill Cosby, who called AAE "Igno-Ebonics" (Gilyard, "It Ain't" 203; Vaughn-Cooke 139–52). Such epithets imply that AAE speakers are not educated or intelligent enough to learn Standard English—that is, that they do not know how to follow the rules of a language.

Yet linguistic research shows that AAE speakers *are* following rules, rules that simply differ from those of Standard English. Linguist John Rickford offers an instructive example of how rules govern AAE pronunciation. Arguing that AAE is "no more lazy English than Italian is lazy Latin," he explains:

One reason people might regard Ebonics as "lazy English" is its tendency to omit consonants at the ends of words—especially if they come after another consonant, as in "tes(t)" and "han(d)." But if one were just being lazy or cussed, or both, why not also leave out the final consonant in a word like "pant"? This is not permitted in Ebonics; the "rules" of the dialect do not allow the deletion of the second consonant at the end of a word unless both consonants are either voiceless, as with "st," or voiced, as with "nd." (AAVE 323)

Ironically, the rule-governed nature of AAE was indirectly confirmed by some of the Ebonics parodies that proliferated in the media and on the Internet during the Oakland controversy. One striking example comes from a column penned by William Raspberry of the *Washington Post*. Attempting to ridicule AAE, Raspberry invents the following dialogue:

"What you be talkin' bout, my man?" he said, "I don't be offerin' you my grub; I be saying hello. You know, like, *what's up?*" (A27)

As Rickford and his journalist son Russell Rickford point out, however, this is not AAE, for it violates AAE's grammatical rules governing the use of the verb *be*. An authentic AAE version would read as follows:

"What you talkin' bout, my man?" he said. "I ain't offerin' you my grub; I'm sayin' hello. You know, like, *what's up?*" (208)

So Raspberry errs when he claims that AAE "has no right or wrong expressions, no consistent spellings or pronunciations, and no discernible rules" (A27). Indeed, as Rickford and Rickford observe, if AAE had no rules, how could AAE speakers understand one another? How could generation after generation of African American children learn AAE? (208). Clearly, AAE does have rules (as do all languages and dialects), and Chapter 2 introduces some of them.

Not only do the rules of AAE challenge the notion that it is "broken" English, but so does the very history of language. Drawing on that history in *Spreading the Word*, linguist John McWhorter cites six additional reasons that AAE is not a standard form of Standard English:

1. AAE is not derived from Standard English; it evolved from the English language alongside Standard English (7–8).
2. AAE is the product of the same sort of process that transformed Latin into French. Example: "[I]f the change from Latin *feminae id dedi* to French *je l'ai donné a la femme* was not a breach of Latin grammar, then how could the progression from *There's nobody here* to *Ain't nobody here* be a breach of English grammar?" (6).
3. AAE does not have "primitive" features. Example: AAE's omission of the verb *be* in *She my sister* or *He skinny* is the same sort of omission that occurs in the standard variety of many respected languages such as Russian, Arabic, Hungarian, Indonesian—even the original Hebrew of the Bible. (See *Atah ha-eesh* in 2 Samuel 12:7, which literally means "You the man," as in AAE's *You de man.*) (27–29).

4. Because we do not study AAE in school the way we study Standard English, most of us do not recognize the complexity of AAE, such as its rules governing *be* and pronunciation (10–11, 25).
5. Since AAE is not "frozen on the page" by printing and schooling, it has evolved further than Standard English, for instance, by simplifying sounds. Example: AAE simplifies the peculiar *th* sound in *them*, *these*, and *those*, producing *dem*, *dese*, and *dose* (25).
6. AAE is no more or less logical than Standard English or foreign languages. Example: AAE's double negative *I don't see nothin* mirrors the standard French *Je ne vois rien* ("I not see nothing"). In fact, the colloquial practice of dropping the first negative (*ne*) is considered "bad" French (26–67).

Is AAE Slang?

Instead of characterizing AAE as broken English, many Americans refer to AAE as *slang* or "street speech," that is, the lingo of the ghetto. Indeed, during the Oakland controversy, the Clinton administration and the *New York Times* classified AAE as such (Vaughn-Cooke 140). Unquestionably, AAE, like other varieties of English, encompasses a wealth of slang, words such as *chillin* ("relaxing"), *benjamins* ("\$100 bills"), and *def* ("excellent") (Smitherman, *Black Talk* 65, 91, 105). From the Harlesemese of the 1920s to the blues talk of the 1940s, from the Black Power chants of the 1960s to the rap of today's Hip-Hop, slang has remained one of AAE's most memorable contributions.

But AAE is much more than slang, for slang consists of short-lived, informal words coined and shared by a limited group, typically musicians, hustlers, or teenagers of a particular region or social class. AAE, on the other hand, includes words that have endured for decades, known primarily to African Americans regardless of age, gender, class, or region. For instance, surveys have documented that, unlike white Americans, a wide range of African Americans recognize AAE expressions such as *bougie* ("an elitist African American"), *cut your eyes* ("to give a contemptuous look"), and *ace boon coon* ("best friend") (Rickford and Rickford 93–94).

Moreover, any careful observer of African American life can see that AAE is not merely “ghettoese”: it inhabits not only the inner-city streets but also most of the lower-, middle-, and even upper-class homes, churches, clubs, and other gathering places in African America. Therefore, to call a student’s speech “street” or, in rural areas, “country” may associate the student with a lifestyle he or she does not embrace. Even referring to AAE as “slang” communicates a lack of respect for a tongue that the student’s community considers good enough for church or home. Hence, linguist John Baugh found that many churchgoing AAE speakers took pains to distinguish “black street speech” from “the home language, which was devoid of ‘foul language’ or other ‘bad words’” (*Beyond* 105).

But there is a more compelling reason why AAE is not slang: slang is simply vocabulary, and, as Rickford and Rickford remark, AAE is “much more than the sum of its words” (91). As we now explain, AAE possesses additional features—a distinctive pronunciation, grammar, and rhetoric.

Is AAE a Dialect?

Most linguists have classified AAE as a **dialect** since the 1960s, when they began to document the rules that govern its pronunciation and grammar. Dialects are variations of a language that are mutually intelligible but include some grammatical and/or pronunciation patterns that are unique to speakers in certain regions, social classes, or ethnic groups. Like other languages, English consists of dialects that possess distinctive features. Thus, even Standard American English is a dialect—just one member of the family of dialects that constitute the English language.⁴ Yet much of the public wrongly assumes that the standard dialect is the English language because it is the dialect promoted by the people in power.

As our definition indicates, to qualify as a dialect of English, AAE must not only resemble other varieties of English but also vary systematically in distinctive ways. Many linguists argue that it does. For instance, linguist William Labov declares that AAE is “more different from standard English than any other dialect

spoken in continental North America” (“Testimony”). According to Smitherman, the most distinctive grammatical difference between AAE and Standard English lies in the use of the verb *be* (*Talkin and Testifyin* 19). AAE speakers use “habitual *be*” to signal a recurring condition and “future *be*” to express future time.⁵ On the other hand, they omit forms of *be* when the condition is fixed in time, unless it is essential for meaning, such as to indicate the past (*Talkin and Testifyin* 19–21). The sentences in Table 1.1 illustrate this complex grammatical pattern.

In the following scenario, Smitherman illustrates how the AAE usage of *be* can confuse teachers who do not understand it:

SCENE: First-grade classroom, Detroit

TEACHER: Where is Mary?

STUDENT: She not here.

TEACHER (exasperatedly): She is *never* here!

STUDENT: Yeah, she *be* here.

TEACHER: Where? You just said she wasn’t here. (*Talkin That Talk* 25)

Chapter 2 summarizes other distinctive patterns of AAE, including pronunciation rules and rhetorical strategies that set AAE apart from Standard English.

Despite these striking differences, linguists such as Baugh, Labov, and McWhorter, as well as Wolfram, maintain that AAE is still a dialect of English because it shares most of the features of other American English dialects. That is why, they maintain, despite some baffling words, speakers of American English can usually understand AAE speakers. What these speakers say may sound different, but the underlying meaning (the **deep structure**)

TABLE 1.1. Contrasting Uses of *Be* in AAE

Feature	AAE	Standard English
Habitual <i>be</i> :	<i>He be busy.</i>	= <i>He is always busy.</i>
Future <i>be</i> :	<i>He be busy soon.</i>	= <i>He will be busy soon.</i>
Absent <i>be</i> :	<i>He busy.</i>	= <i>He is busy right now.</i>
Past <i>be</i> :	<i>He was busy.</i>	= <i>He was busy.</i>

remains the same. Although Smitherman has recently reevaluated this assumption, in her 1977 book *Talkin and Testifyin* she explains the concept well:

[O]ne American English speaker might say, *John hit the ball*. Another might say, *The ball was hit by John*. In the deep structure of English, these two sentences are really the same; thus despite being expressed in different ways, their meaning is clear to speakers of English. Similarly, one [AAE] speaker might say, *He do know it*. And another [Standard English speaker] might say, *He does know it*. Again, both statements are the same in the deep structure, and the two different versions are simply two ways of saying the same thing. (193)

So similar is the vocabulary of AAE and Standard English that some linguists doubt those American English speakers who claim to misunderstand it. Pointing to the popularity of AAE in mainstream music, advertising, and media, linguist Anna Vaughn-Cooke declares, "There is abundant evidence that mainstream speakers not only understand Ebonics, they often borrow words and phrases from it, especially when these borrowings are economically and socially beneficial" (145). In turn, AAE speakers can readily understand media and print written in Standard English. To sum up, because AAE and Standard American English are so mutually intelligible, many linguists consider them both English dialects.

A number of linguists also argue on historical grounds that AAE is a dialect of English. Taking what is known as the **Eurocentric view of AAE**, they have proposed that AAE is a variety of English sharing far more features with British and American English dialects than with West African languages. Labov (*Language*), for example, as well as Walter Wolfram, Carolyn Temple Adger, and Donna Christian have compared many AAE features to Appalachian speech, which is spoken predominantly by southern white Americans. Meanwhile, other linguists have found that some AAE rules are consistent with older forms of American and British English, such as rules that substitute *was* for *were* and produce questions such as *Why I can't play?* (Poplack). These linguists maintain that such structures were already part of the colonial English spoken by the whites with whom enslaved Afri-

cans were forced to communicate, especially Irish indentured servants. Hence, Shana Poplack contends that "the grammatical core of contemporary AAVE developed from an English base, many of whose features have since disappeared from all but a select few varieties" (1).

Rickford, however, questions this Eurocentric view because some of AAE's most distinctive features (e.g., *he runnin*, *he be runnin*, *he BIN runnin*) are practically nonexistent in other varieties of English (AAVE 325). Moreover, he challenges the assumption that enslaved Africans readily learned the dialects of white colonists. Such an assumption, he insists, "requires a rosier view of their relationship than the historical record and contemporary evidence suggest" (AAVE 326).

Like the supporting evidence, the educational implications of the Eurocentric view are also not clear. On the one hand, if AAE is a dialect of English, the differences between AAE and Standard English may not be significant enough to account for most of the difficulties that AAE speakers have encountered in English classes. If so, we must look elsewhere for the major sources of their difficulties, such as pedagogical practices as well as teachers' attitudes toward AAE and toward the students who speak it. On the other hand, the similarity between AAE and Standard English may breed the sort of confusion that a Spanish-speaking student might experience while learning Portuguese. In fact, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes observe, "in some ways, it may be easier to work with language systems that are drastically different" (287). In other words, because many of the differences between AAE and Standard English are subtle, the differences may be difficult for AAE speakers to identify.

Is AAE a Language?

Although most linguists consider AAE a dialect, most would also admit that the distinction between a dialect and a language is not cut-and-dried. According to *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*, dialects are "subdivisions of languages" (Crystal 114). So what is a **language**? Linguistic research has established that three rule-governed components identify a system of speech as a lan-

guage: (1) pronunciation rules (**phonology**), (2) rules that convey meaning (**semantics**), and (3) grammatical rules (**syntax**). As we have seen, however, so-called dialects like AAE *also* possess rules for pronunciation, meaning, and grammar. That is why many linguists apply the test of mutual intelligibility to distinguish a dialect from a language: in other words, if speakers of African American English, Appalachian English, and Standard American English can understand one another fairly well, then theoretically all are speaking dialects of the English language.

Nonetheless, in the real world this test of mutual intelligibility has proven unreliable, as the Linguistic Society of America acknowledges in a resolution it passed during the Oakland controversy:

The distinction between “languages” and “dialects” is usually made more on social and political grounds than on purely linguistic ones. For example, different varieties of Chinese are popularly regarded as “dialects,” though their speakers cannot understand each other, but speakers of Swedish and Norwegian, which are regarded as separate “languages,” generally understand each other.

Clearly, the classification of AAE as a dialect versus a language depends as much on politics as linguistics. As linguist Max Weinreich once quipped, a language is a dialect with an army behind it (Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk* 139). Considering that AAE speakers have historically occupied the least powerful positions in U.S. society, it is not surprising that, officially, AAE has not enjoyed the status of a full-fledged language.

Indeed, a growing number of African American scholars insist that the classification of AAE as a dialect rather than a language stems from racism—from the same institutional forces that tried to dehumanize Africans to justify exploiting them as slaves and as second-class citizens. Africologist Kimani Nehusi explains, “Since language is a distinguishing feature of humans, the denial of language is the same as the denial of humanity” (78).

In his criticism, Nehusi echoes linguist Ernie Smith, who has accused linguists of using a double standard to classify AAE. Smith claims that they have unjustly cited similarities in vocabulary to classify AAE as a dialect of English. If they applied the same

criteria to English, he contends, English would be classified as a dialect of Latin or French. “It is universally accepted that English has borrowed the bulk of its lexicon from the Romance or Latin Language family,” Smith states. “Yet English is not classified as being a Latin or Romance language but as a Germanic language” (52).

Since linguists cite similarities in grammar to prove that English is Germanic, Smith reasons that they ought to do the same to prove that AAE is a variety of English. But, he insists, they have not and cannot. They have not done so, he charges, because the weight of the evidence suggests that AAE has an “African grammar with English words” (55). To illustrate his point, he argues that AAE speakers do not “omit” a form of *be* in sentences such as *He busy*. They have simply retained an African sentence structure that can connect such words (*he* and *busy*) without a linking verb such as *be* (57). Nehusi cites other African continuities in AAE’s verbs, adjectives, possessive case, vocabulary, tone, and intonation to demonstrate that, as enslaved Africans learned English, they molded it to fit the patterns of their West African (Niger-Congo) languages (111).

This **Afrocentric view of AAE’s evolution** is shared by scholars such as Aisha Blackshire-Belay, Clinton Crawford, and Charles Debose and Nicholas Faraclas. Since West African languages vary significantly, however, some linguists demand stronger evidence of an African structure for AAE (Rickford, *AAVE* 325). As an alternative, they offer a **Creolist view of AAE**. Creolists such as John Rickford (*AAVE*), John Holm, and Walter Edwards and Donald Winford agree that AAE evolved from a **pidgin** that fused English and West African languages. The most frequently cited evidence is the omission of the linking verb *be* (e.g., *They happy*), the absence of endings (e.g., *two boy*), and the simplification of consonant clusters (e.g., *them* = “dem”). All of these features have been traced to Africa through the Sea Islands’ Gullah language of South Carolina (Stewart; Dillard; Jones-Jackson; Turner).

At this point, it would be logical to ask, “If AAE evolved from a pidgin, where did the pidgin come from?” A pidgin is not a native language for any speech community but rather a simplified language created for limited communication between two

communities that speak different languages. Harris cites three conditions for the development of a pidgin:

1. Restricted access to the target language (in this case, English)
2. A shortage of bilingual speakers
3. The need to communicate

The history of slavery in the United States suggests that all three conditions were present. First, their enslavers limited the Africans' access to English. Second, although some enslaved Africans spoke more than one African language, only a select few had the opportunity to learn English well enough to serve as interpreters. Finally, although the need to communicate was forced, it was also a need to survive.

Over time a pidgin becomes the dominant language in a speech community. When this happens, the pidgin expands its vocabulary and grammar to serve the language needs of the community, and a creole is formed. This process takes place over many years, during which features from more than one language may shape the pidgin before a creole is born. The creole is then taught to the new generation as its language of nurture; thus arose Haitian Creole (from French and African roots) and Jamaican Creole (from British and African roots). In the African American context, AAE may have evolved from a local pidgin or from a creole imported by enslaved Africans from Jamaica, Barbados, or the slave trading forts of western Africa (Rickford, *AAVE* 327). Therefore, some creolists view AAE as a language that is distinct from English (Dillard; Turner).

Today Smitherman agrees that there is something "un-English" in the underlying structure of AAE grammar:

[H]ow do you explain that there is a distinction in meaning between "The coffee cold" and "The coffee be cold"? The first statement means that the coffee is cold today, or right now, as we speak, but the second statement means that the coffee is cold on more than one occasion and perhaps most of the time. . . . [T]here are indeed deep-structure linguistic differences. (*Talkin That Talk* 15–16)

Smitherman also questions classifying AAE as a dialect on the basis of mutual intelligibility. She points out that sometimes listeners misunderstand AAE because they are not familiar with AAE communicative strategies, such as reversing the meaning of a word. As an example, she cites the "international diplomatic disaster" that occurred during the Cold War when boxing champion Muhammad Ali declared, "There are two bad white men in the world, the Russian white man and the American white man. They are the two baddest men in the history of the world" (*Talkin That Talk* 137). At that time, much of the white English-speaking world thought Ali was insulting the two leaders instead of implying, in the AAE tradition, that the men were powerful, tough, great.

Because of such differences, Smitherman has started speaking of the "language" rather than the "dialect" of African America. Recently, however, linguist Arthur Palacas proposed that the "mother tongue" of African America is *simultaneously* a dialect and a language. On the one hand, Palacas classifies AAE as a dialect of English because AAE and English are mutually intelligible, thanks to a large shared vocabulary and certain common grammatical features such as English word order (338). On the other hand, Palacas views AAE as a separate language when he looks at features that distinguish types of languages—for instance, whether a language requires its subjects and verbs to agree. He observes, "English and Ebonics are structured oppositely in many respects at their core—in the grammar of noun phrases and verb phrases and in the grammar of subject-verb agreement" (334). Even when AAE and English look alike, he notes, the similarity may stem from different grammatical rules. Both Standard English and AAE speakers might say, for example, "He is messed up," but the AAE speakers are unconsciously following a rule that also produces *You is messed up*. The rule differs dramatically from the Standard English rule that results in *You are messed up* (333).

If indeed AAE qualifies as a language, the educational implications could be far-reaching. As Smitherman observes, "[I]f we are dealing with a language, then the barriers reside not only in [teachers'] attitudes, but also in actual linguistic interferences that

hamper communication” (*Talkin That Talk* 139). If such linguistic barriers exist, teachers may need the sort of linguistic training that an English as a Second Language program offers so that they can better assist AAE speakers in their classrooms. As for AAE speakers, Palacas contends that the discovery that AAE is a language may instill pride in them. After introducing AAE as much more than a dialect, he heard students who said in their own words, “I always thought I was just stupid because of the way I talked; but now I realize that I’m bilingual!” (345).

Should We Even Ask?

While other linguists have been debating whether AAE is a dialect or a language, linguist Salikoko Mufwene has questioned whether linguists should presume to answer the question “What is AAE?” He suggests instead that they should pay attention to how AAE *speakers* classify their speech, and AAE speakers normally do so without identifying a certain number of distinctive features. Even when they do, AAE speakers tend to pay more attention to vocabulary and pronunciation than grammar (36). “[I]n many communities,” Mufwene observes, “a language means no more than the particular way its members speak” (21). The preoccupation with whether AAE is a language or a dialect, he argues, stems from the stigma placed on AAE speakers (36). After all, he remarks, “we do not go around asking people to define or describe Cockney, Japanese, or Swahili for us . . . in order to determine what they are” (21). Thus, he concludes that there is no need to characterize AAE “otherwise than as ‘English as it is spoken by or among African Americans’” (37).

Summary

Historically, AAE has been labeled broken English, slang, a dialect, and a language. These names both reflect and affect the status of AAE speakers. Linguistic research shows that AAE is neither broken English nor slang, for it possesses not only an enduring vocabulary but also its own rules for grammar and pronuncia-

tion. Linguists disagree, however, about its classification: While most agree that any classification will reflect politics as well as linguistics, those who consider AAE a dialect point to the similarities that make AAE and English mutually intelligible most of the time. On the other hand, those who call it a distinct language single out certain differences in grammar and communicative strategies. Finally, there are those who question whether linguists should attempt to classify it at all.

Whether AAE should be labeled as a dialect or a language also depends on a person’s view of AAE’s origins. Researchers of AAE do not possess the type of historical or written records they have for many European languages. Therefore, it has been more difficult for linguists to trace AAE’s evolution. Whether Eurocentric, Afrocentric, or Creolist, however, all hypotheses acknowledge that AAE is different phonologically, syntactically, and semantically from Standard American English; it is the “why” that is debated, not whether there is a difference. The debate will continue as each hypothesis builds on new discoveries and as AAE continues to evolve.⁶

Notes

1. Terms in boldface type appear in the glossary, unless they are sub-headings.
2. The term **African American Vernacular English** is also quite popular among linguists since the word **vernacular** (meaning “common everyday language”) distinguishes it from the formal English spoken by many African Americans.
3. According to some scholars, these terms are not synonymous. For instance, the term **Black English** theoretically could encompass the languages of all English-speaking blacks, not just African Americans. Likewise, the term **Ebonics** was coined to embrace the multitude of languages spoken by people of African descent in the Caribbean as well as the United States (Williams vi). The terms also differ in terms of classification: *Black English*, for example, refers to a dialect of English, while *African American Language* suggests such speech is a language rather than a dialect.
4. Consequently, U.S. Standard Spoken English and Standard Written English are subdialects of Standard American English.
5. Lisa Green has observed that “habitual *be*” can also signal a perma-

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