

Linguistics/African American Studies 160: Introduction to African American English

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Subject/Discipline: [African-American Studies](#)

School: [University of Pennsylvania](#)

Project Area:

Fall 1997

This course was conceived as an introduction to African American English, stimulated by the general interest evoked by the "Ebonics" Controversy. As the syllabus and reading list of Pages 2-3 show, the course begins in the present with a review of this controversy, and then expands to get a clear view of research on African American English in the inner cities of the North. It then considers the migration of African Americans to the large cities of the North, and the linguistic effects of this migration. Further back in time, it considers the evidence we now have on the English spoken by the slave population before the civil war, and then to whatever evidence we have for African influence on the formation of the Present dialect.

The academic side of the course is parallel to the Service-Learning component, as can be seen in Pages 4-5, which describe the formation of research groups. One group of students is working in the classrooms of a local school, with an almost entirely African American population, where achievement in reading is very low. Another group is working outside of school, observing children on the playground and in a recreation program. The aim is to develop through observation of both teachers and students ways in which we can apply our knowledge of African American English to advance the reading and writing of Standard English, in ways that are attractive to both teachers and students.

To achieve this end, we hope to reduce the distance between teachers and students in both knowledge and cultural attitudes, retaining the system of respect for elders that fundamental to the African American community. Members of the class will study the language, the norms and the social patterns of 4th and 5th grade children in class, and learn as much as possible about the skills, practices and adaptability of teachers.

The immediate product of our efforts this year will be a "Dictionary of Every-day Words" constructed by the students, which will define

words found in daily speech and in hip-hop lyrics that they believe the teacher does not know. The project is described in detail on Pages 6-8.

Once contact with students and teachers is established, further steps will involve the construction of reading and writing programs that address the aspects of Standard English that differ most from the African American vernacular, continuing to build upon the topics of greatest interest to the children. This will be the topic of the continuing course, Linguistics 161, described on Page 9

Syllabus and Reading List

Sep 9-22. The Ebonics Controversy

1. Resolution of the Oakland School Board of December 18, 1996 (from San Francisco Chronicle, 1/2/97)
2. Amended resolution of the Oakland School Board
3. Synopsis of the Adopted Policy in Standard American English Language Development.

Sep 23-Oct 13. The Northern tradition and the educational issues

4. Labov, William 1995. Can reading failure be reversed: a linguistic approach to the question. In V. Gadsden and D. Wagner (eds.), *Literacy among African-American Youth: Issues in Learning, Teaching and Schooling*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press. Pp. 39-68.
5. Kochman, Thomas 1981. *Black and White Styles in Conflict*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Ch. 6: Truth and Consequences, pp. 89-96. Performance style in sports, pp. 139-152.
6. Smitherman, Geneva. 1977. *Talkin' and Testifyin': The Language of Black America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. Pp. 101-111".
7. Anderson, Elijah 1990. *Street Wise: Race, Class and Change in an Urban Community*. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press. Ch. 8: Street Etiquette and Street Wisdom. Pp. 207-222.

Oct 14-Nov 3. The transition from the South to the North.

8. Mezzrow, Nfilton "Mezz" and Bernard Wolfe 1946. *Really the Blues*. New York: Norton. Ch. 12: Pp. 220-233

9. Bailey, Guy, & Natalie Maynor. 1987. Decreolization? *Language in Society* 16:449-473.

Nov 4-Nov 24. The Southern tradition

10. Doyle, Bertram W. 1937. *The Etiquette of Race Relations in the South: A Study in Social Control*. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1937, Ch. X: Etiquette Restored. Pp. 136-159.

11. Hurston, Zora Neale 1935. *Of Mutes and Men*. Bloomington, Ind. Indiana University Press. Chapter II, pp. 21-41.

Nov 25-Dec 8. The Afro-Caribbean tradition

12. Tumer, Lorenzo 1948. Problems concerning the investigator of Gullah.

Publications of the American Dialect Society 9. Reprinted in W. Wolfram and N. Clarke (eds.) *Black-White Speech Relationships*. Washington: Center for Applied Linguistics. Pp. 1-15.

13. Abrahams, Roger D. 1970. Traditions of eloquence in Afro-American communities. *Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs* 23:505-527.

Texts

14. Fountain Hughes, born 1848. From Bailey, Guy, Natalie Maynor and Patricia Cukor-Avila (eds.) 1991. *The Emergence of Black English*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Benjamins. Pp. 29-40.

15. Conversation 4, Oct 18, 1966. From Hannerz, Ulf (ed.) 1967. *Conversations in a Negro American Dialect*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. Pp. 2745.

16. Mexicana Rose, Honkey-Tonk Bud, The Fall. From Wepman, Dennis, Ronald B. Newman and Murray B. Binderman. 1976. *The Life: The Lore and Folk Poetry of the Black Hustler*. Philadelphia: U. of Pa. Press.

17. Sonny, by Mastie Blair. From Johnstone, Barbara. 1996. Southern speech and self-expression in an African-American woman's story. In C. Bernstein, T. Nunnally and R. Sabino (eds.), *Language Variety in the South Revisited*. Tuscaloosa: U. of Alabama Press. Pp. 87-97

Areas of individual (or group) participation in the class

The following are brief descriptions of the areas of activity for the course. Each student will have one main area, and may be assigned to a group in that area. The numbers indicate items on the reading list that are most relevant to that area.

SERVICE

Students in the service groups will visit the Wilson School at 46th and Woodland, once or twice a week during, October and November, and help develop methods for the teaching of reading that builds on the home language and interests of African American children. Those engaged in service assignments may draw from the work of the research cups by attending their meetings and reading their preliminary reports.

1. Playground

Observation of children outside of the classroom: on the playground or lunchroom; sociometric analysis of group structure; recording and transcription of jump rope rhymes; counting out rhymes, rap, and busting; study of current social categories in music and clothing providing raw lexical material for the Dictionary of Every-day Language project. Recording equipment served for this group will be issued at the Linguistics Laboratory. [1,2,3]

2. Classroom

Service with teachers, tutoring children individually and in small groups; observation of teaching methods for possible adaptation to the use of children's home language; analysis of phonics and other reading method used in the classroom; observation of teachers' methods; supervision of Dictionary of Every-day Language project. [1,2,3,4].

RESEARCH

Students in the research groups will work with printed materials reserved at Rosengarten Library and the Linguistics Laboratory, on the tape archives of the Linguistics Laboratory, or on film tracks presented on Laser Discs, and on the observed speech of family and friends in the African American speech community.

3. Music

Report on hip-hop and other musical traditions of the African American community over the last forty years; transcription of lyrics, and analysis of the extent to which they are grammar and phonology are related to AAVE in

grammar and phonology; description of cross-over patterns in music and lyrics. [8].

4. Clothing

Report on current styles in clothing, in the African American community and their history over the past forty years as reflected in folklore, film and television; the definition of -emic categories and socially defined terminology for styles of clothing; diffusion of style across racial lines; popular conceptions of racial differences in fashion and style. [161

5. Words, concepts and idioms

Rates of change in the popular lexicon reflected in recordings of AAVE in the late 1960's and early 1980's as compared to current usage; representations of early stages of African American English in literature; the direction and rate of diffusion of slang and idiom across racial lines; origin and development of the concepts centering around cool, chill, hip and lame. [11, 15, 17].

6. Grammar

The grammatical development of AAVE over time, focusing on the narratives of ex-slaves, early representations of black speech in literature, recordings of AAVE in the 1960's, 1980's and the extent to which the mass media reflect these developments. The main grammatical features to be considered are the use of habitual BE, the employment of ain't in the simple past; and the distribution of the possessive and verbal -s inflections. [Baugh 4,9]

7. Argument

Patterns of the use of language in the African American speech community, and distinguish it from others. Current forms of shucking, jiving, marking, signifying, and ritual insults (the dozens, busting, sounding, snap, etc.). Call and response patterns and the relation of speech to interest among audiences. Styles of formal address in preaching and political discourse. Showboating and the use of language in sports [5,6]

The Dictionary Project:

The project: A Dictionary of Every-Day Words

From students point of view: We'd like you to help make a dictionary of words that are used in every-day life, especially in rap songs, but that everybody doesn't know including some teachers and adults.

From teachers' point of view: The students are going to learn how dictionaries work by making one - writing definitions, illustrating them, starting with words that they know themselves but others may not know, and moving on to words that they don't know themselves but have to find out about.

The words chosen might be:

Especially interesting because they are taken from rap lyrics.

Words that kids know and use themselves or words from other parts of the country that they don't know or use

The dictionary may be:

A spiral bound book, 8 1/2" x 11" with a colored cover made with pictures cut out of magazines, and reproduced as a color Xerox:

The cover will read:

DICTIONARY OF EVERY-DAY WORDS

[Teacher's Name] [Grade]

With pictures of rap artists whose lyrics are used and some of the words defined

The first inside page

Name of all the people who worked on the project

With thanks to all the artists whose lyrics are used

A typical page

Word to be defined

Definition, with synonyms and illustrations

Quotation of use from rap lyrics

Black and white pictures of artists taken from web sites

Pictures of clothing, fashions, with brand names and general names

Map pages

Map of U.S. with Rap regions shown

Pictures of artists superimposed on their regions with regional words

A successful product will be

[1] One that the teachers like enough to do themselves

[2] One that will involve kids who usually don't participate

[3] A good-looking result that kids can take home to show their parents

Dictionary Project: Procedures and time-table

Nov 1-6

1. The Music Group should prepare a list of words in rap lyrics, with the names of the artists and songs that can be cited.

2. The Words & Expression should obtain the list from the Music Group, adding any additional words of their own, and prepare definitions that can be used to prime students' definitions or to for them to learn.

3. The Clothing Group should prepare a set of pictures and names of whatever clothes they believe will be recognized and named by students.

Nov 6-11

4. Files of pictures of artists should be made available on all machines in the Computer Room.

5. The Classroom Group should prepare a questionnaire to distribute to students, simply asking how familiar they are with the words, using a scale such as "Use it all the time; hear it occasionally; have heard it a few times hear it on the radio but don't use it; never heard of it." The list of words for the dictionary should then be selected from -words that are best known, and some words that are very little known.

Nov 10-24

6. On several days each week, the teacher should be asked to select a group of three or four students to work on the project in class in the computer room. We can suggest that the groups selected represent a pretty

fair cross section of the class. Students who want to continue on the project might be given preference.

7. Once a week, teachers ask all students in their class to write out a definition of a given word. These will be collected by the Classroom Group member, and analyzed to produce a consensus of the class.

8. Students will work on the cover, assemble pictures into page layouts and write definitions or choose among definitions suggested by members of the Classroom Group.

9. Words, definitions and pictures will be assembled into pages of the dictionary in the Computer Room.

10. Teachers should be consulted for their ideas on the project throughout.

Nov 25-Dec 8

11. The Classroom Group will print out some of the preliminary pages and circulate them among members of the class, with a report on how interested the students are in this project.

12. Class members will respond with more words or further suggestions to increase the interest of the dictionary project.

13. Production of the final dictionary.

Dictionary Project: A typology of definitions:

I. A generic definition:

Subordinate	Superordinate	Specifier
a crib	is the place	where someone lives
your crib	is the place	where you live
to dig	is the act	of comprehension
chillin'	is the act	of associating with intimate acquaintances
clique	is a group	people with whom a person associates regularly

2. Synonyms

cream - money

to dig - to understand

Benz - Mercedes-Benz

the hood - the neighborhood
a clique [click] - a group

3. Synonyms with specification

- the hood - the neighborhood, especially where friends grow-up together
- a clique [click] - group, very tight, not easy to get in

4. Paraphrase

cool - very good
clique [click] - the people you see most often
to chill - to socialize with people you like
flossin' - well dressed, clothes that are in and cost a lot

5. Deixis

benjamin - {a picture of a \$100bill}
Benz - [a picture of a Mercedes-Benz]

6. Exemplars

Clique [click] - like when you see people all the time
chillin' - it's when you're with someone you like
fly - like someone who is really cool, well dressed and everything name brand
the crib - it's where you live, except if you're living at home

Linguistics 161

The Sociolinguistics of Reading:

A Service Learning Seminar

W. Labov Tues-Thurs 12-1:30

This course will be concerned with the active development of current knowledge of dialect differences to reduce the minority differential in educational achievement in Philadelphia schools and elsewhere.

Members of the seminar will conduct projects in local schools designed to reduce the cultural and linguistic distance between teachers and students, and to develop the learners' knowledge of the word and sound structure necessary to advance the reading process. For this purpose, they will draw upon the findings of linguistic and anthropological research in the inner cities. Their work will also be informed by the experience of educational projects with parallel goals in Oakland, Los Angeles, Atlanta and Philadelphia.

Members of the seminar will write, computer program's to grammatical and phonological knowledge of Standard English for children whose underlying systems are radically different from Standard English.

The seminar will be primarily concerned with African American English but will also consider the problems created by dialect differences in the Hispanic community and in other nations, with special attention to modern African societies.

The course is a continuation of Ling/AFAM 160 but may be taken by students who have not taken that course with the permission of the instructor.

The seminar will be limited to 15 students. The meeting, times indicated above might be adjusted to the consensus of the members.