

# **African-American English (AAE)**

**Linguistic Features & Assessment  
Considerations**  
By Jamie Kurzman

# ACRONYMS & KEY TERMS

NMAE - nonmainstream American English.

MAE- Mainstream American English

SAE- Standard American English

SE- Standard English

GAE- General American English

AAE- African American English

- Some older articles used the term, “Black English.”
- Ebonics
  - Derived from the words *ebony* and *phonics*, the term Ebonics is intended to avoid the focus on race and emphasize the ethnolinguistic origin and evolution of this variety of the English language.

# Distinguishing difference from deficit

- ❖ Determining whether or not a true language disorder versus a language DIFFERENCE exists due to cultural linguistic factors -- is one of our most important and often difficult tasks as clinicians.
- ❖ In order to make that distinction, we need to be knowledgeable about...
  - Different dialects and understand them as rule-governed linguistic systems,
  - The phonological and grammatical features of the dialect, and
  - Nondiscriminatory testing procedures.
- ❖ Once the difference/disorder distinctions have been made, it is the role of the SLP to treat only those features or characteristics that are true errors and not attributable to the dialect.

## ASHA's position statement on social dialects:

“...**NO** dialectal variety of English is a disorder or a pathological form of speech or language. Each social dialect is adequate as a **functional and effective variety of English**. Each serves a **communication function** as well as a **social solidarity function**. It maintains the communication network and the social construct of the community of speakers who use it. Furthermore, each is a **symbolic representation** of the historical, social, and cultural background of the speakers. For example, there is strong evidence that many of the features of Black English represent linguistic Africanisms.”

## So what?

- ❖ Children who speak nonmainstream dialects, such as African American English (AAE), and have typical language skills may have been erroneously considered to have LI on the basis of the dialect they speak.
- ❖ Some linguistic features of AAE can be easily confused with markers of language impairment (LI) in speakers of mainstream English.
- ❖ Since the 1970s and 1980s, there has been an increased interest in improving the accuracy of LI diagnoses in children who speak nonmainstream dialects.
  - Hendricks & Adlof, 2017

## Current research on assessment issues

- ❖ Despite scoring modifications available for speakers of non-mainstream dialects on the CELF-4 & CELF-5, **1) these tests were not designed with speakers of NMAE in mind and can provide inaccurate diagnostic results, and 2) Scoring modifications on these tests may actually lead to an increase in false negatives, and thus underidentification of language impairment.**
  - Hendricks et al., 2017

“Society has adopted the linguistic idealization model that standard English is the linguistic archetype.”

- ❖ Standard English is used by government, the mass media, business, education, science, and the arts. Therefore, there may be nonstandard English speakers who find it advantageous to have access to the use of standard English.

Standard/Mainstream English is used in our schools & literature so...

- ❖ Children who enter school speaking a non-mainstream dialect must quickly learn to **dialect shift** (a.k.a “code-switch”).
  - Similar to bilingual children, they have two sets of syntactic, semantic, morphologic, and phonological rules, to be applied in different settings and with different communicative partners.

## Children who do learn how to dialect shift versus those who do not

- ❖ Most children who enter Kindergarten speaking a **NMAE dialect**, such as African American English (**AAE**), “...change their dialect use spontaneously and without explicit instruction,” with the 1st grade being critical as a time of the most rapid growth in dialect shifting.
- ❖ **Children who *DO NOT* learn how to dialect shift** (e.g. continue to use NMAE in their writing, when MAE is the expectation) struggle; they “...tend to **demonstrate weaker literacy achievement and less growth in reading skills** during the school year,” and
- ❖ “...research findings over the last 15 years suggest a strong, predictive relationship between young children’s spoken NMAE use and various language and literacy skills, including vocabulary, word reading, spelling, phonological awareness, reading comprehension, and composition”
  - [Johnson, L., Terry, N.P., Connor, C.M., Thomas-Tate, S. \(2017\). The effects of dialect awareness instruction on nonmainstream American English speakers. \*Reading and Writing\*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1007/s11145-017-9764-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-017-9764-y)

# Nonmainstream Dialects & Literacy Achievement

- ❖ The achievement gaps between poor and more affluent students are persistent and chronic, as many students living in poverty are also members of more isolated communities where dialects such as African American English and Southern Vernacular English are often spoken.
- ❖ Non-mainstream dialect use is associated with weaker literacy achievement.
- ❖ Johnson et. al (2017) examined whether second through fourth graders, who use home English in contexts where more formal school English is expected, can be taught to dialect shift between home and school English depending on context; and whether this leads to stronger writing and literacy outcomes.
  - The researchers created a program called **Dialect Awareness Program (DAWS)** to explicitly teach dialect shifting to nonmainstream speakers, and the program was found to be **very effective**, with post-program **gains in language, reading, and writing skills**.

# Linguistic Features of AAE & Language Delay

Linguistic research has indicated there are features unique to AAE across morphology, semantics, syntax, pragmatics, and phonology. To one unfamiliar with AAE, these linguistic variations may appear similar to patterns of language delay or disorders.

# Linguistic Features of AAE: Morphosyntax

- ❖ *Zero copula* (or the deletion of the verb be and its variants) is a commonly cited syntactic feature of AAE. Some researchers have noted instances where the copula is deleted (where the copula is contractible and not required) and where the uncontractable forms are not deleted because of their obligatory positioning in a sentence. Without its use, the meaning or intention of a sentence could be lost.
  - For instance: Yes, he (not used in AAE) or Yes, he is (used in AAE as well as SAE), for example, He a hard worker (AAE) or He is a hard worker (SAE).
- ❖ *Lack of the past tense marker (ed)* is a common morphological feature of AAE.
  - For example, Last week he cook dinner (AAE) or Last week he cooked dinner (SAE).
- ❖ *Absence of possessive s*. This marker in AAE is considered a notable morphological feature. For example, Here is John watch (AAE) or Here is John's watch (SAE).
- ❖ *Irregular verb form usage* is a feature of AAE whereby in many instances a past tense verb is used in place of a past participle and vice versa.
  - For example, She seen him (AAE) or She saw him (SAE) or She knowed he was there (AAE) or She knew he was there (SAE).

# Linguistic Features of AAE: Morphosyntax

- ❖ *Absence of plural -s marker* (with nouns of measure, i.e. numbers) has been noted as a salient feature in AAE as a means of reducing redundancy. Example:
  - James got 11 shirt. The number 11 already denotes plurality within the sentence, therefore the addition of an s after shirt is deemed redundant. James got 11 shirt (AAE) or James got 11 shirts (SAE).
- ❖ *Use of negation* in AAE has two salient features.
  - One is that the use of *ain't* is permissible and replaces SAE words and contractions such as am not, isn't, aren't, hasn't, don't, and haven't, for example, She ain't coming home today (AAE) or She isn't coming home today (SAE).
  - Another feature is that of multiple negation, where more than one form of negation can be found in one sentence, for example, She ain't got no money for nobody.
- ❖ *Inflection of be*. In AAE, the habitual state is marked by the inflected word be. In contrast, SAE expresses habitual aspect through the use of adverbs and inflected forms of the word be. Some research indicates that this inflection of be has parallels in other Caribbean creoles such as with the words steady, come, and done.
  - For example, We be sleep (AAE), which would translate to We sleep all the time in SAE.
- ❖ *Irregular verb form usage* is a feature of AAE whereby in many instances a past tense verb is used in place of a past participle and vice versa.
  - For example, She seen him (AAE) or She saw him (SAE) or She knowed he was there (AAE) or She knew he was there (SAE).

# Linguistic Features of AAE: Phonology

AAE has distinctive phonological features that often are mistaken for phonological substitutions. Some examples of AAE phonological markers are:

- Initial /th/ = d (i.e., them becomes dem)
- Final /th/ = f (i.e., mouth becomes mouf)
- Deletion of middle and final /r/ (i.e., all right becomes aiight, star becomes stah)
- Deletion of middle and final /l/ (i.e., help becomes hep, will becomes wi)
- Final consonant deletion (especially affects nasals, i.e., live becomes li)
- Reduction of final nasal to vowel nasality (i.e., man becomes mæ)

# Noncontrastive Features between SAE & AAE

There is no evidence that conjunctions, demonstratives, and prepositions function any differently for AAE than for SAE.

An AAE-speaking child could utter (2) and be no different syntactically from an SAE child producing the same utterance because no exclusively AAE syntactic or phonological features would be evidenced in this utterance.

Utterances 3a, 3b, and 3c may be spoken by the same child on different occasions or even within the same conversation.

“ (2) Throw a ball to us so we can catch.

Still another form of noncontrastive AAE features arises from AAE contrastive features that are produced in a noncontrastive or standard manner. Consider the following utterances:

“ (3) a. He \_ a boy.  
b. John is a boy.  
c. Yes, he is.

# Noncontrastive features between AAE & SAE

Articles

Complex sentences

Pronouns

Conjunctions

Locative

Modals

Verb Particle

Prepositions

Present Progressive

## Non-Contrastive Methods:

- Target features less susceptible to influence from dialectal varieties (*non-contrastive* features)
- Are appropriate for identifying language impairment in speakers of varieties like AAE.
- Features include:

## Non-Contrastive Diagnostic Item Types



Wh-Movement

Exhaustivity

Theory of Mind



Articles

# Take Away Messages: *Contrastive versus noncontrastive features*

Contrastive features are linguistic features unique to AAE

Noncontrastive features are SHARED linguistic features between AAE & SAE.

- ❖ The clinician should be able to identify and distinguish **contrastive features** versus **noncontrastive features** in order to differentiate an AAE-speaking child with a disorder from a typically developing AAE-speaking child.
- ❖ A child may indeed use contrastive features consistent with his dialect, but that alone does not indicate a language disorder. However, if the child uses AAE but exhibits **difficulties in use of the features shared with SAE, then a clinician may suspect a language disorder.**
- ❖ Noncontrastive features are more diagnostically salient when distinguishing differences versus deficits.
  - Consider a 6-year-old child who speaks AAE does not appropriately use pronouns, articles, demonstratives, or complex sentences, a clinician may suspect a language disorder.

# Assessment Considerations

(and some some solutions!)

- ★ Language Sample
- ★ Contrastive & Noncontrastive Analysis
- ★ Dialect neutral assessments
- ★ Modifications to assessments developed for MAE



# What's an SLP to do?

- ❖ Language Sample & Contrastive/Noncontrastive Analysis between SAE and AAE
  - **DELV-S and the Diagnostic Evaluation of Language Variation**–Norm Referenced (DELV-NR; [Seymour et al., 2005](#)) follow this approach. The DELV-S and DELV-NR are normed for ages 4;0 (years;months) to 9;11. According to the manual, the diagnostic accuracy of the DELV-NR was examined in a clinical sample of 88 children aged 4;0–9;11 with diagnosed language disorders, and a control group of 88 children from the norming sample who were matched on age, parental education, region, and sex. Using a standard score cut-point of 85, the DELV-NR was determined to provide excellent discrimination, with 95% sensitivity and 93% specificity.
- ❖ Dialect-neutral assessments to identify children with LI.
  - For example, researchers have examined the use of processing-based measures, such as **nonword repetition** (e.g., [Campbell, Dollaghan, Needleman, & Janosky, 1997](#); [Dollaghan & Campbell, 1998](#); but see [Moyle, Heilmann, & Finneran, 2014](#); [Oetting, et al., 2013](#); [Oetting & Cleveland, 2006](#)) and **dynamic assessment methods** (e.g., [Peña et al., 2016](#)). These methods place the focus of assessment on the child's perceived potential for acquiring language versus the current level of achievement. Although these measures have shown promise in various preliminary investigations, at this time there is limited normative information available to provide a generalized standard of reference for making diagnostic decisions.

## What's an SLP to do? (continued)

- ❖ Use an assessment developed for MAE speakers and modify the scoring so as not to penalize responses which are grammatical within the child's dialect. For example, when applying scoring modifications such as those suggested by the **Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals–Fourth Edition (CELF-4; Semel, Wiig, & Secord, 2003)** and **Fifth Edition (Wiig, Semel, & Secord, 2013)**, clinicians are encouraged to give children credit for responses that are grammatical within their dialects but ungrammatical in MAE (e.g., in response to “Here the bird \_\_\_\_\_,” *fli*es and *fl*y are both scored as correct).

## But modify with caution...

- ❖ It is unclear whether to apply all possible scoring modifications for any given child. That is, if a clinician determines that a child speaks an NMAE dialect, this does not mean that it is always appropriate to apply scoring modifications to all items.
- ❖ Speakers differ in how often they use NMAE features, with some children speaking dialects that vary strongly from MAE and others speaking dialects with less variation from MAE ([Washington & Craig, 1994](#)).
- ❖ The general trend is that children who speak NMAE upon school entry tend to use NMAE features less frequently over time, but there is substantial variability between children as to how their use of NMAE features changes over time ([Van Hofwegen & Wolfram, 2010](#)). In addition, use of NMAE features differs depending on the context, with NMAE features more common in informal than formal contexts ([Labov, 1966, 1990](#)), as well as the type of discourse.
- ❖ Certain contexts, such as narratives, provide more opportunities for NMAE feature use than expository contexts. Thus, contextual changes and changes over development complicate decision making regarding how and when to apply scoring modifications for children who speak NMAE dialects.

# In Summary

in order to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to work with children who are speakers of AAE clinicians should familiarize themselves with the non-contrastive and contrastive features of AAE.

**However, clinicians should recognize that it is the non-contrastive linguistic features (those that are shared between SAE and AAE) that are more diagnostically important if the clinical goal is to distinguish a language deficit from a difference and bring us closer to our goal of providing non-biased assessment to AAE speakers.**

One could modify the test administration process by:

1. allowing extra time for the client's response
2. increasing the number of practice/trial items
3. removing potentially culturally biased items
4. rewording the test instructions
5. continuing to test beyond the ceiling
6. asking a client to explain incorrect responses
7. recording the responses, particularly when a client changes an answer, explains, comments, or demonstrates
8. adapting the test scoring process by using alternate scoring procedures ( e.g., % correct vs. raw score)
9. supporting test results with dynamic assessment (e.g., language sampling, parent/teacher interview, and observation measures)
10. conducting file reviews of relevant medical, social, developmental, and educational history
11. conducting observations in the child's classroom, home, and other academic/naturalistic environments where peer interactions can be observed
12. avoiding using standardized tests that have not made adjustments for dialect users
13. using criterion referenced measures