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**Features of African American English (AAE)**

“**Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes human voice to infuse tem with deeper meaning**.” ~ **Maya Angelou**

Like any language or language variant there are different types of features and the same goes for African American English (AAE). The categories these features fall into include: lexicon, pronunciation, and grammar. The narrow focus here is limited to only select pronunciation and grammatical features of AAE; many of which show up in the writing of high school students in the United States. The key interest here is in how these features function. The question I’m posing is “Where does AAE fit into the classroom and how should teachers view or approach it given it does not fit the form of \*Standard English used and assessed in American schools.

There are some myths acquainted with these features seen below. AAE is:

1. Bad or broken English
2. Slang
3. Genetically Based
4. Speakers of it all sound the same
5. All Africans speak it
6. Speakers of it can’t use Standard English

There are theories as to how this type of English came to exist that won’t have much time devoted to them since they are another topic altogether; however, they generally involve some type of mapping of English onto West African Grammar. One such theory is the Creole theory that suggests AAE began as a creole language that developed as a result of colonization in America as Africans were brought to work as indentured servants or as slaves. In the southern regions of the United States like the state of Louisiana this language was called Gullah. There is also a substrate theory which suggests AAE was initially similar to regional white dialects, but reflected some substrate influence related to differences in English and West African grammar structures. There are many features of AAE but only two examples of these features will be addressed.

Regarding pronunciation, one feature is Monomorphemic and Bimorphemic Consonant Cluster Reduction. Morphemes are minimal units of meaning, groupings of letters that make up parts of a word. Notice the term used in the label of this feature is “reduction” rather than “deletion.” Now, note the examples of consonant cluster reduction below and the following indented examples of how a student of AAE may communicate the numbered idea [in context]:

1. Wes’ side –(for) West side
   1. I’m from the Wes’ side [an area where the person lives]
2. I miss’ the bus –(for) I missed the bus
   1. I miss’ the bus so I [arrived] to school late.

These features exist in many dialects but are more common in AAE and other select language variants. The issue for vernacular speaking groups is that the cluster itself may not exist in their vernacular. Many people assume these examples above exhibit deletion of consonant clusters; however, you cannot delete something that does not actually exist. Students who don’t have these clusters in their speech will not be able to produce the difference between present and past tense in regular verbs. They don’t NOT understand the concept. It just doesn’t exist in their speech; therefore, they do not differentiate the sounds when they listen and consequently it doesn’t come across in their writing, which they are tested and assessed on in school. How do teachers deal with this when it is expected that students function within the realm of Standard English as well as produce works in “proper” standard form?

Regarding grammatical features there is one that is particularly interesting and that is the Habitual form of “BE.” In AAE there is use of the uninflected “be” to indicate a habitual event versus a punctual or durative event. It is something like the progressive “I *am* going” or “I *had been* going.” It can also suggest the possibility of the event occurring in the future; hence the root word “habit”. Here are three examples:

1. My mom be working – (for) “My mom works a lot.”
2. He be absent – (for) “He is absent [often].”
3. The students be talking in class – (for) “The students talk in class [all the time]”

In these examples “be” was underlined in green by the Microsoft Word spell checking system to indicate a grammatical mistake had been made. If you saw these without the Standard English translation, what would these mean to you? How would they be translated? In general, English speaking people would probably not even think of it as translation because most anyone would easily be able to understand the meaning of what is being said with only a minor, and usually inconsequential, misunderstanding if that. No one would respond to “He be late for class” with, “I’m sorry, I think we need a translator. I’m just not sure what you’re saying…” In general, linguistic awareness can aid a great deal in correcting misunderstandings in or out of the classroom.

It is important to understand that there *is* a grammatical structure that must be followed when using the Habitual “BE.” “Is” and “are” cannot simply be replaced with the word “be.” For example, the following shows grammatical and ungrammatical uses of the Habitual “BE.”

1. The students always be talking in class. -**Grammatical**
2. The students don’t be talking right now. -Ungrammatical
3. Sometimes the teacher be early for class. -**Grammatical**
4. At the moment the teacher be in the lounge. -Ungrammatical
5. My name be Bill. -Ungrammatical\*

Number two and four are ungrammatical because a time is being pin pointed (a *punctual* event). Number five is ungrammatical because a person’s name is always constant and stays the same throughout the duration of their life; thus, it is a durative event. The habitual case is used to indicate events of habit, *not* punctual or durative. Number one indicates that the students of the class are usually talkative. The same goes for number three referring to the teacher’s arrival. She habitually arrives early; not always, but on a regular basis.

Teachers who are not aware of patterns that exist in dialects like AAE may assume that their students are not intelligent or are incapable of performing well in the classroom and even in life. This is a blatant falsehood. It is easy for those who are unaware of how these language structures work to fall victim to the myths of AAE and any other variant of English. When teachers fall victim to these myths it can often have detrimental effects for the students because they are in charge of both instruction and assessment. Since students are tested and assessed on Standard English standards, but often are not taught how to switch between their language variance and Standard English consciously, they receive harsh grading that damages their grade averages and also does not help them learn to function inside the standard. Many students become discouraged and simply develop distaste for the standard system rather than coming to an understanding of how their own language variance works and how they can change the form of it to function successfully in different environments. This code-switching ability is a valuable tool in the classroom as well as in life. It *be* a skill speakers of AAE and other language groups need to use.