African-American English

Abstract
The Africans who were brought forcibly to America over a period of three centuries developed a characteristic speech that combined the English of their white masters with grammatical and phonetic features common to West African languages. This speech, known as "Ebonics" or African American Vernacular English, is characterized by the simplification or transformation of certain phonemes and by copula omission (un-conjugated "to be"). A decision by the Oakland, California school district to recognize "Ebonics" as a distinct African-American language has fueled debate as to whether it is a dialect of English, a language distinct from English, or simply bad English. In any event, this "black" English has fascinated white society and occupies an important place in Anglophonic literature, folklore and music. As manifested in the musical genre known as blues, it has influenced all of today's popular music, prompting even Britons to imitate certain aspects of African-American speech.

Key words: Ebonics, African-Americans, Blues, Popular Culture

African-american dialect and popular culture

Introduction
The Africans who were brought as slaves to North America between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries developed a characteristic style of English speech that remains identifiable today. In its mildest form, this style may involve nothing more than the simplification of certain phonemes or unconjugated "to be". In its most extreme form, it may be unintelligible to speakers of Standard English. Many African-Americans celebrate it as an emblem of racial pride while other Americans, black as well as white, dismiss it simply as bad English. "Black" English, known to linguists as AAVE (African American Vernacular English) and popularly called "Ebonics", is of interest not only as a linguistic facet of the U.S.'s black minority but also as an important element of the general culture that the United States presents to the rest of the world. It has (as will be shown) influenced even the speech produced in Great Britain.

This paper will explain something of the origin, development, and present state of African American Vernacular English. Its impact on popular Anglophonic culture will then be discussed, especially as it relates to popular music. A typical blues song and a representative 1960's rock song will be compared in order to highlight the curious phenomenon of white Englishmen imitating the speech of black Americans. Finally, some pedagogical considerations implicit in the existence of African American Vernacular English as a socio-linguistic phenomenon and as a facet of world English will be discussed.

What is Ebonics?
The word "Ebonics", coined in 1973 by George Washington University Professor Robert Williams, combines the words "ebony" and "phonics" in an attempt to describe African American speech as "black sound". In 1996 the Oakland California school district approved a resolution that recognized Ebonics as the "primary language" of some of its black students, thereby entitling Ebonics speakers to federally funded second language instruction in Standard English. The Oakland resolution brought to a head a long-standing and acrimonious debate concerning the nature of the speech patterns commonly heard from African-Americans. Is Ebonics a dialect of English? Is it a language distinct from English? Is it simply bad English? Noma Lemoine, Director of the Language Development Program for African-American students at the Los Angeles Unified School District, justified the resolution in an interview with CNN in December of 1996:

We understand that the basis for positing a genetic kinship of languages is continuity in morphology and not in vocabulary. We understand that African-American language, or what is referred to as Ebonics, has a genetic kinship to African languages. Its root system is governed by African or Niger-Congo language rules, even though it borrows extensively English lexicon or vocabulary.(1)

Proponents of Ebonics point out that the terms "language" and "dialect" are imprecise and politically biased. The term "dialect", they argue, is applied pejoratively to language varieties whose speakers enjoy low social status, whereas the name and status of "language" is often given to regional speech varieties (for example, Swedish and Danish) that happen to correspond to political boundaries. "A language", the distinguished linguist Max Weinreich once said, "is a dialect with an army and a navy"(2).
One naively expects to find bespectacled, old-guard English teachers defending the sanctity of a monolithic, Standard English and, on the opposite side of the controversy, militant African-American leaders countering with cries of "racism!" and urging recognition of Ebonics as the legitimate language of the Black community. But in fact, the issue is much more complex. Many black leaders have criticized the Oakland decision as a serious error, if not an insult, to African-Americans, as it seems to imply that black children do not really speak English. Maya Angelou (the black poet who recited one of her poems at President Clinton’s inauguration) said, “I am incensed. The very idea that African-American language is a language separate and apart can be very threatening, because it can encourage young men and women not to learn standard English.”

The Rev. Jesse Jackson complained that the Oakland school board had become “the laughing stock of the nation” and he described the policy of legitimating Ebonics as “teaching down to our children”.

The American linguistic community has taken a somewhat ambiguous position. Few professional linguists will concede that what is called “Ebonics” differs sufficiently from Standard English as to justify calling it a separate language. Speakers of Ebonics and Standard English generally understand one another and it is this standard of mutual intelligibility that, by common definition, distinguishes dialects from languages. In using the term African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to refer to Ebonics, the linguistic community implicitly pronounces it to be a variety — that is to say a dialect — of English. Yet linguists recognize that languages do not always conform to neat distinctions. They tend to be open-minded about classifications, like those implied by the Oakland Resolution, that are made for political and sociological reasons. At this point, it would be worthwhile to clarify some of the terminology involved in this issue, and also to review something of African-American history.

**Historical Background – Languages, Pidgins, Creoles**

During a period spanning two centuries, captives speaking hundreds of West African languages were transported to North America. It is supposed that these captives, in order to communicate with one another and with their masters, developed a pidgin combining elements of diverse West African languages. **Pidgins** are improvised linguistic systems that develop when speakers of diverse tongues find themselves in circumstances that require them to communicate with one another. Pidgins, which typically combine and simplify elements drawn from their several component languages, are by definition transient languages. However, speakers of a pidgin may transmit it to their children, for whom the pidgin then becomes a native language. When this occurs, we say that the pidgin has become a **creole**. Creoles may eventually acquire the socio-political status of languages, and in this way complete a sort of linguistic cycle.

The black slave population of the United States is thought to have created an African-based creole, which the conditions of slavery and racial segregation tended to perpetuate. This creole, conserving certain grammatical and phonological features common to West African languages, while at the same time adopting English lexicon, is said to represent the origin of African American Vernacular English.

Yet the claim that American blacks conserved a distinct language system in isolation from white society is problematical. It would seem that the institution of slavery facilitated rather than hindered contact between whites and blacks. Whereas a small minority of planters owned hundreds of slaves, the vast majority of slaveholders had only one or two, and often treated them as family. Many slave owners habitually accompanied their men in the fields. Of course, in large estates significant numbers of slaves would be domestic servants. Charles Dickens, writing to his wife during a visit to America in 1842, expressed a belief widely held at that time: All the women who have been bred in slave States speak more or less like Negroes” from having been constantly in their childhood with black nurses”.

Dr. W. Cabell Greet, in his book, “Southern Speech”, published in 1934, argued the contrary, claiming that all aspects of black pronunciation could be traced to “vulgar or old-fashioned American speech”.

The idea that the emancipated Negro was strictly excluded from white society following the Civil War is conclusively refuted in Comer Yann Woodward’s classic 1955 book, “The Strange Career of Jim Crow”. As Woodward points out, racial segregation was a concept alien to the old slaveholding class, whatever it may have believed about the inferiority of blacks. The notorious “Jim Crow” laws mandating separate public facilities for blacks and whites and outlawing misogyny did not appear until the closing years of the nineteenth century, and they were frequently ignored in practice.
But day-to-day contact with whites during and after the era of slavery, such as it was, did not change the fact of the black man’s social inferiority. He associated with white society but did not form part of it. The speech of African-Americans assumed many forms representing diverse combinations of Standard English and black Creole. The Negro typically assumed one set of speech habits when dealing with whites and another when among his own people. James Clyde Seliman in his essay, “Black Vernacular English or Ebonics” writes:

One of the constant and determinative qualities of Black Vernacular English, from the days of slavery to the present, is its oppositional nature. From the first, African Americans confronted the reality of white power and the need to avoid or subvert white domination. Slaveholders and other whites, constantly fearful of slave rebellions, maintained ongoing surveillance of the African American population, attempting to prevent unauthorized gatherings of blacks and listening in on slave conversations.

Anthropologist James Scott has noted that slaves circumvented this scrutiny by using “linguistic codes, dialects, and gestures” that were “opaque to the masters and mistresses.” Black Vernacular English “continues to reflect these power realities and sharply delineates those who are within and those who lie without the group boundaries”. (8)

American society, both during and after the slavery era, clung to stereo-typed notions about the character, speech, habits and abilities of the black man. It was convenient, not to say obligatory, for blacks to behave according to such expectations. Negroes would, in their dealings with whites, consciously or unconsciously assume a “darky” mode of speech rather than risk being considered “uppity” by presuming to talk like white people.

Who Speaks AAEV?

Who speaks African American Vernacular English today? Why, of course, African-Americans! One imagines British Prime Minister Tony Blair practicing his Ebonics in preparation for a meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell (“Sho nuf he bin a’jive us. Ah know he got dem nucl’a weapa’s.”) In fact, aave speech is not typical of black Americans. On the one hand, the issue of AAEV concerns lower class black children whose natural speech habits lead to difficulties in reading and writing at school and to discrimination in the job market. On the other, it is about African-Americans who freely make use of AAVE or Standard English as the occasion requires. This cultivation of AAVE in order to reinforce feelings of social identity while communicating pride or defiance toward the larger society is an example of what linguists call hypercreolization. The lyrics of rap songs, which purport to represent black English but which, in fact, contain much more of street argot than of anything that could really be called AAVE, exemplify one aspect of hypercreolization.

Linguistic Features of AAEV

Like any other linguistic system, AAEV embraces regional and ethnological variations. Though it is rule-bound, its rules represent tendencies rather than absolute formulas. The following are the speech tendencies most typical of AAVE:

Pronunciation

- Reduction of consonant clusters. When two or more consonants occur together in a cluster, an AAVE speaker simplifies it by pronouncing only the first one. Thus, “children” becomes chil’un, “first” becomes firs or fir. The likelihood that reduction will occur depends somewhat on context. For example, a speaker might pronounce “last man” as “las’ man while retaining the consonant cluster in “last one”. Consonant clusters, and even individual consonants occurring at the ends of words may be omitted. Thus walk becomes wal or wa. Present continuous verb endings of “ing” are pronounced in.

- The unvoiced sound of “th” occurring within a word is simplified to “f” so that “nothing” becomes nofin and “both” becomes boff. The voiced “th”, on the other hand, changes to to “v”, “brother” becoming brover.

- Voiced “th” occurring at the beginning of a word is pronounced “d”, “that” becoming dat, “this” becoming dis and “they” becoming dey. Unvoiced “th” as in “thing” may (but rarely does) become “f” as in ting. However, if this phoneme is followed by an “r” the speaker may pronounce it as “r” so that “three” becomes free.
“L” and “r”, when they do not occur at the beginning of a word, are vocalized, that is to say, they take on a sound like uh. This is most easily observed when the “l” or “r” occurs after a vowel sound. For example, “sister”, and “nickel” become sist’uh and nick’uh.

Nasals (e.g. m, n) following a vowel are often omitted and the nasal sound is then attached to the vowel. For example, “man” becomes mah.

The vowel sound “e” as in “pen” is often given a higher pitch when it occurs before a nasal, “pen” and “friend” becoming pin and frind (or more likely, frin).

Diphthongs are typically simplified. Thus “my” is “ma” and “night” becomes “nat”.

Words, that in Standard English are stressed on final syllables, may be stressed on the first syllable. Thus police, and hotel, in Standard English but po-lie, and ho-tel in AAVE.

Grammar

The conjugated “be” (called a copula) is often omitted, particularly in compound verbal constructions; for example: I __ gonna’ fin’ it. He __ sleep’n. They __ all right.

Unconjugated “be” is used to express permanence or continuance of a situation, as in: She be family. They be com’in every day. The past participle, “been” (bin) may be used in a similar way when the situation expressed has its origin in the past. For example: I been know’in him.

The third person singular verb marker “-s” is typically omitted. For example: He live here.

Double negatives are common, the negative auxiliary typically occurring before the subject. For example: Can’t nobody beat him. Ain’t nof’in here.

Subject pronouns are repeated in appositive constructions. For example, “Tom, my brother...” might be Tom, he ma’ brover ...

Vocabulary

Many words and expressions have passed from AAVE into Standard English slang: “jazz”, “swing”, “jam”, “cool”, “hip”, “rock and roll”, “right on”, “up tight”, etc. Black jazz artists of an earlier generation, like their rap-singing counterparts today, delighted in coining slang words that expressed the black experience while subtly implying criticism of white society. This sharing of an “in” vocabulary reinforced feelings of community among blacks. Eventually, these slang words would be “raided” by whites and the process of linguistic invention would begin again. However, this continual reinvention of lexemes does not really constitute an AAVE vocabulary.

That AAVE takes its lexis from Standard English is acknowledged by its most ardent champions. They maintain, as mentioned earlier, that a language is identified by its phonology and grammar rather than by its vocabulary.

African Americans as Perceived by White Society

North Americans have always been fascinated by the presence of “primitive” peoples in their midst. Indians, Negroes and other nonwhite peoples figure prominently in U.S. literature of the nineteenth century, Chingachgook (“The Last of the Mohicans”), Jim (“Huckleberry Finn”) and Queequeg (“Moby Dick”) being well-known examples. America’s great popular composer Stephen Foster (1826-1864) showed a predilection for sentimental “Ethiopian” songs whose lyrics purported to represent Negro dialect. However much these popular characterizations in literature and song reflect white attitudes of romantic admiration or condescending humor, they also give evidence of a genuine sympathy for the peoples represented, and of a real interest in their human qualities.

The arrival of the first slaves in North America marked the beginning of an American fascination with the culture and speech of these black men who had exchanged a barbarous existence in Africa for a life of servitude among civilized, English-speaking Christians. But however much novelists like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Mark Twain, or songwriters like Stephen Foster attempted to represent black speech, one finds in their work little indication of their having carefully studied it. Touches of “nigger” dialect lend pathos to the speeches of Stowe’s Uncle Tom, humor to the philosophizing of Twain’s runaway slave Jim, and sentimentality to Stephen Foster’s Uncle Ned (“He’s gone war de good niggers(9) go...”) precisely due to its being “bad”
English. An example of such pseudo African-American dialect is "Oh! Susanna". This Stephen Foster composition, sung by generations of American schoolchildren in Standard English, is given here in the original version:

I come from Alabama  
with my Banjo on my knee—  
I's gwine to Lou'siana,  
My true lub10 for to see,  
It rain'd all night de day I left,  
De wedder it was dry;  
The sun so hot I froze to def—  
Susanna, don't you cry.

How else should nineteenth century white Americans have regarded black dialect other than as English badly spoken? Blacks, like the many immigrants who had come and were still coming to America, spoke a variety of English strongly flavored by the diverse languages they had spoken in their native lands. Being now Americans, they could only be said to speak English well or to speak it badly, the specific nature of their speech errors being of scant interest. One might at least comprehend the venerable linguistic tradition behind a Scottish immigrant’s peculiar vocabulary and pronunciation, but America had not yet produced the school of structural linguistics that would trouble to study such “primitive” languages as those of West Africa. If blacks really were hindered in their imitation of correct English speech because of interference from their former “barbarian” tongues, this could only be regarded as yet more proof of their ignorance.

During the nineteenth century a popular device of satire, and often of simple vulgar entertainment, was the mimicking of black music and dance accompanied by caricatures of black vernacular speech. Around 1830 a white man known as Thomas “Daddy” Rice, concocted a musical show called “Jim Crow”, a farcical representation of black song and dance that became sensationally popular both in the U.S. and England. Thus began of the era of the blackface minstrel shows, which initially featured white men, their faces blackened with burnt cork and their lips enlarged with makeup, singing and dancing in what was supposed to be the authentic manner of “Ethiopians”. Later, black men themselves performed in these minstrel shows, which could then claim to present “the darky as he really is”. This absurd phenomenon of blacks deliberately acting out stereotypes defined for them by whites sometimes went to the extreme of light-skinned Negro performers smearing themselves with blackface. But for all their crass racism, the minstrel shows represented America’s first mass entertainment, an entertainment inspired, in however distorted a form, by the African-American experience. They also provided the first scenarios in which black Americans could perform in public. By the 1920’s and 30’s these had finally given way to more serious entertainment like Roger and Hart’s Broadway musical, “Showboat” (11) and George Gershwin’s opera, “Porgy and Bess”, in which blacks were portrayed with somewhat more understanding and sympathy. Before writing the libretto to “Porgy and Bess”, Gershwin spent a great deal of time living among the blacks of Charleston, North Carolina and studying their culture and speech. The following lines from the song, “Got a Lot a’ Nuttin’” gives some idea of a sympathetic, non-linguistically trained white man’s perception of African-American English:

Oh, I got plenty o’nuttin’,  
An’ nuttin’s plenty for me,  
I got my gal, got my song, got Hebben the whole day long  
No use complainin’!  
Got my gal, got my Lawd, got my song!

Implicit in all of such attempts to represent the black man was an acknowledgement of his special musical gifts. The musical bent of African-Americans, first manifesting itself in religiously inspired “slave songs” or “Negro spirituals“, attracted the notice of whites almost from the first days of slavery. An article, published in 1856 in Dwight’s Journal of Music, observes, The only musical population of this country are the Negroes of the South…Compared with our taciturn race, the African nature is full of poetry and song.(12)

Similar appreciations were voiced by European visitors to the United States, most notably Antonin Dvorak who, in a 1893 interview by the NEW YORK HERALD said, “...the future music of this country must be founded upon what we call Negro melodies”.(13) The Czech composer’s own Symphony No. 9 (“From the New World”) and String Quartet No. 12 (“American”) written during his sojourn in the United States, are thought to have been inspired by Negro spirituals. Before and after the Civil War, blacks were often called upon to provide music for public events, such as carnivals in New Orleans, or work songs for labor gangs. Toward the close of the nineteenth century a popular African-American music began to emerge as a hybrid of European and African
musical styles. First coming to attention as first coming to attention as a piano style piano style called “boogie-woogie”, and evolving later into “jazz”, it became fashionable not only in the United States, but also in Europe. Another African-American genre that developed about the same time was the vocal style known as “blues”. In musical terms, the blues is distinguished by its twelve bar musical structure, fixed harmonic progression and the inclusion of a flattened seventh note (known as a “blue” note”). Blues songs typically consist of three stanzas, the first being repeated (in order to give the singer time to improvise a rhyming concluding stanza). As the word “blues” suggests, these songs typically express feelings of sadness, complaint, or frustration (often tempered by humor) and come to be identified with the sufferings of the African-American. Initially, record companies marketed blues records as “race records”, their appeal presumably being limited to black audiences. Nevertheless, blues, like jazz, rapidly became popular with white listeners. It has exercised an incalculable influence on all styles of American and British popular music.

During the 1930’s, 40’s and 50’s, Bessie Smith, John Lee Hooker, Blind Lemon Jefferson and a host of other important blues artists made thousands of popular records sung in a black vernacular style that became a sort of trademark of the blues genre. In spite of the crude, biting style of this music, its sexually explicit lyrics, and its stigmatization by black churches as “the devil’s music”, an ever-larger and more diverse market developed for blues records. The 1950’s, witnessed the birth of “rhythm n’ blues”, a more fast-paced, rhythmic version of the blues, and of “rock’n roll”, a combination of blues and country-and-western styles. Many of the early rock ‘n roll songs were performed by black artists (Chuck Berry, Little Richard, etc.) or by whites who, like Elvis Presley, deliberately adopted a “black” style. During the late 1950’s and early 1960’s the phenomenon of white singers incorporating features of blues vocal style into their music and into their music and, consciously or not, imitating mannerisms of black speech, became common and remains so today. Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, The Animals, the Rolling Stones, John Mayal, Eric Clapton, Janis Joplin, the Grateful Dead, the Doors, Van Morrison, and Creedence Clearwater Revival are but some of the more famous examples.

That rock-and-roll music owes its much of its origin to the blues is common knowledge. Less well-known is the significant influence of the blues on country-and-western music. During the 1930’s and 40’s such legendary artists as Jimmie Rodgers (“The Father of Country Music”) and Sam McGee popularized songs like “The Railroad Blues” and “The Knoxville Blues” whose debt to African-American music was unmistakable. Such “blue yodel” and “white blues” compositions occupy an important place in the history of country-and-western music. This is to say that each of the two direct forbearers of today’s American pop music (blues and country-and-western) bears the indelible mark of African-American influence and has to a greater or lesser degree been influenced by African-American speech patterns.

**Blues, Rock ‘n Roll and Ebonics: teaching the British to Speak English**

African American Vernacular English is, like any other language system, a living, ever-changing phenomenon. No one linguistic sample could serve as a typical example. However, the blues songs of the 1940’s and 50’s probably represent good examples of spontaneous, authentic black vernacular. Blues artists of this period sought neither to ingratiate themselves to white audiences nor to aggressively affirm their African-American identity. They simply made music that expressed the the African-American experience, hoping thereby to sell records to black listeners (popular music being, after all, a business!). They could hardly have expected that their instrumental and vocal styles would provide models that several generations of popular white singers would imitate.

Two samples of musical AAVE will be examined here. The first is an interpretation by John Lee Hooker of the blues song, “Women in My Life”. The second, “Under My Thumb” sung by The Rolling Stones, will help to illustrate the ever-present influence of African-American dialect in the music of white American and British pop artists. In both samples the text of the song (left column) is accompanied by a transcription representing the way the words are really pronounced (right column).

**“Women in My Life”**

John Lee Hooker was born in 1917 in the delta region of Mississippi, a fertile breeding ground for great blues artists. He moved to Detroit shortly after World War II and it was there that he recorded the song “Women in My Life” sometime around 1954. Perhaps the single most significant feature of this AAVE sample is the fact that, for the most part, it is readily comprehensible to a speaker of Standard English. Only the last stanza presents any serious difficulty. Yet a great many of the AAVE features discussed earlier can be seen. The most
conspicuous of these occur in the very first stanza: the simplification of consonant clusters mah for "mind", the copula omission ("you `o") instead of "you are off", and the substitution of in for "ing" ("going").

Lines 4 and 5 again present the tendency to omit final consonants: ain(t), love(d), wome(n) whereas the "r" in "never" and "four" are vocalized. The diphthong "y" in "my" is reduced to a simple short "a" sound so that we get ma'.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<td><strong>Written as...</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Yes, I´m going away, baby, where you´re off my mind.</td>
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<td>2 Yes, I´m going away, baby, where you´re off my mind.</td>
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<td>3 You keep boozing, buzzing, trouble all the time.</td>
</tr>
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<td>4 I ain`t never loved but, four women in my life,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 I ain`r never loved but, four women in my life,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 That`s my mother and my sister, sweetheart and my wife.</td>
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<td>7 Listen, you don<code>t want me, please don</code>t dog me round,</td>
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<td>8 Listen, you don<code>t want me, please don</code>t dog me round,</td>
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<td>10 I said, goodbye baby, you can go back home, (?)</td>
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Line 6 begins with a typical reduction of the cluster “th” in “that’s” to “d” giving us das (the t’s cluster at the end of the word is of course, reduced as well. The "r" in "mother" and "sister" occurring as they do after vowels, are noticeably vocalized, giving us mod-ah and sis-tah. Noticeable also is the vocalization of the “n” in “and”, so that we get something like ayin.

The copula omission in the first two lines has already been mentioned. Other typical AAVE grammatical features occur in the last line of the song where the auxiliary will ("you'll") and again the "ing" in "coming" are omitted. These grammatical modifications of Standard English barely catch the listener’s attention. They certainly do not interfere with comprehension of the song nearly so much as do the simplifications of standard pronunciation. Interestingly, the word "yes", which we would expect to hear as yeah, gets an unmistakably clear, Standard English pronunciation (yes) every time it occurs.

One searches in vain for specific “black” lexicon. The expressions with double meaning that one occasionally finds in Hooker songs as, for example, "My daddy was a jockey he taught me how to ride… once in the middle and the from side to side", merely exemplify the kind of sly, suggestive language used in folksongs the world over when referring to the sex act. A famous example of this – an expression occurring in many blues songs – is of course, “rock ‘n roll”.

“Under My Thumb”: The Rolling Stones “Paint it Black”

In 1962 a young Englishman named Mick Jagger, carrying with him a collection of records by such blues artists as Howl’In Wolf, Muddy Waters, and Lightn’n Hopkins, met with an old school friend, Keith Richards in order to form a band that would play cover versions of the blues songs that both loved so much. When finally they had to choose a name for themselves, someone casually suggested the title of a Muddy Waters song – “Rolling Stone Blues” – and so they became the “Rolling Stones”. A desire to distinguishing themselves from the clean-cut, well-spoken, wholesomeness of the Beatles encouraged the Rolling Stones to develop a working class, bad kid, bad-mouthed image which fit in well with their artistic inclination toward the blues – still regarded by many as lower class, vulgar black music.

Thus we find these four young Englishman singing in what must have been to them the completely alien accents of African-Americans. If Elvis Presley was criticized for singing “nigger music” one can imagine the horror felt by Englishman at hearing these young sons of Britain consciously imitating Americans “of the worst sort”.

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UNDER MY THUMB (The Rolling Stones)

Written as... Sung as...

1 Under my thumb  Under ma thum
2 The girl who once had me down  The girl who once had meh down
3 Under my thumb  Under ma thum
4 The girl who once pushed me around  The girl who once push me aroun
5 It's down to me  It's down to me
6 The difference in the clothes she wears  The difference in the close she wears
7 Down to me, the change has come  Down to me, the change has com
8 She's under my thumb  (Ain't it the truth babe?)  She's under ma' thum'
9 Under my thumb  Under ma thum
10 The squirmin' dog who's just had her day  The squirmin' dog who's jus had her day
11 Under my thumb  Under ma' thum'
12 A girl who has just changed her ways  A gir who has jus changed her way
13 It's down to me, yes it is  It's down to me, yes it is,
14 The way she does just what she's told  The way she does jus what she's tol
15 Down to me, the change has come  Down to me, the change has come
16 She's under my thumb.  (Ah, ah, say it's alright.)  She's under mah thum.  (Ah, as say it's alright.
17 Under my thumb  Under ma' thum'
18 A siamese cat of a girl  A Siamese ca of a girl,
19 Under my thumb  Under ma' thum'
20 She's the sweetest, hmmm, pet in the world  She's the sweetest, hmmm, pet in the worl.
21 It's down to me  It's down to me
22 The way she talks when she's spoken to  The way she talk when she's spoken to
23 Down to me, the change has come  Down to me, the change has come,
24 She's under my thumb.  (Ah, take it easy babe, Yeah.)  She's under ma' thum'
25 It's down to me, oh yeah It's down to me, oh yeah
26 The way she talks when she's spoken to  The way she talks when she's spoken to
27 Down to me, the change has come  Down to me, the change has come
28 She's under my thumb.  (Yeah, it feels alright.)  She's under ma' thum'
29 Under my thumb  Under ma' thum'
30 Her eyes are just kept to herself  Her ahs are jus kep to herself
31 Under my thumb, well I  Under ma' thum', well ah'
32 I can still look at someone else, Ah' can steel look at somewa' else
33 It's down to me, oh that's what I said It's down to me, oh tha' wha' ah sa'
34 The way she talks when she's spoken to  The way she talks when she's spoken to,
35 Down to me, the change has come  Down to meh, the change has come,
36 She's under my thumb.  (Say, it's alright. Say it's all...)  She's under ma' thum.

Whereas Mick Jagger seems to have adopted a cockney speech style for purposes of ordinary
discourse, the songs in which he generally sings the lead role consistently mimic black singing.
This is not to dismiss the music of the Rolling Stones as mere mimicry. Like all artists, Jagger
imitates, making what he imitates his own. In “Under My Thumb”, (Figure 2) the Stones give a
raw, blues-flavored performance without mechanically following all the mannerisms of black
speech. The song, true to the most venerable blues tradition, is blatantly and deliciously
sexist.Clearly, we are not dealin

d here with a real blues song. Yet, the influence of blues style is
everywhere present: the vocalization of “r” in “under” (undah), simplification of diphthongs in “my”
(mah), the simplification of consonant clusters in “pushed” (push) where the context makes the
clear enunciation of the past tense morpheme superfluous) and again in “just” (jes).

Deliberately or not, the Stones avoid the sort of caricature of black singing that might have
resulted from simplifying the consonant cluster “th” in “thumb” to “t”. The effect is to make the
listener feel the rawness of the music without being aware that this effect is achieved by linking it
to the tradition of American blues. A popular axiom holds that only black men can sing the blues –
although the spectacular commercial success achieved by Eric Clapton and other white
performers who have specialized in the genre seems to contradict this notion. In fact, most white
artists who sing blues scrupulously avoid any pretence of being authentic bluesman, adopting
instead a “white” style in which the influence of black vocal devices and speech patterns is
acknowledged but not slavishly imitated. Yet as the 60’s and 70’s recede into history, the use of
black vocal styles by white pop singers tends to become more stereotyped, as exemplified by
artists like Bon Jovi. Among today’s white female pop artists, few can resist the temptation to
adopt the intonation and vocal ornamentation characteristic of black singers.

Some Pedagogical Implications

Life would certainly be easier for English teachers and learners if everyone spoke like cultivated
Londoners. However, native English speakers differ enormously in their pronunciation,
vocabulary, and even grammar. Among native English speakers, a profusion of dialects exists
that are all but unintelligible to the non-native, AAVE and Scottish being only two of the best-known. Yet the English teaching profession continues to make believe that only two English’s exist: British and American, a concept all the more attractive considering the high quality of BBC pedagogical materials. One may hope that students traveling abroad will go to the upper class neighborhoods of London or New York. But what if they go instead to inner city neighborhoods of Miami, Los Angeles, or Atlanta? Residents of these neighborhoods, if they are not Hispanics, are often African-Americans. Perhaps this is why veterans of English language institutes complain of not being able to cope with the real English language they encounter when travelling abroad. Wouldn’t a moderate amount of preparation in AAVE (students would not have to speak, read or write it, just understand it as spoken) be worth the efforts of English teachers and students? Even if students never hear Black English on the street, they may hear a considerable amount of it in the context of popular songs and movies. Or if one may let the imagination run free, they may even hear arias from George Gershwin’s opera, “Porgy and Bess”15, which, besides being one of the most admired American contributions to the classical music literature, is sung in Black Vernacular English.

Conclusion – Whose Ebonics is It?

African American culture and language have, from the very beginning, exerted their influence on white American culture. AAVE was not suddenly discovered in the 1970’s (even if the term “Ebonics” was). The language spoken by Africans when they arrived in the United States, and later as they adapted to their condition of subjection to white society, has exercised a continuing fascination for Americans and has left an extensive literature representing white men’s attempts to understand and imitate it. Jazz and blues, two of the most dynamic facets of African-American culture, have held an enormous attraction for white Americas, and in so doing, have brought about the curious phenomenon of British pop artists imitating the speech of black Americans.

AAVE or “Ebonics” is a language system with its own rules of pronunciation and grammar. One may be correct in calling it a dialect of English or even as a creole, but not in stigmatizing it as a speech deficiency or a collection of street slang. Yet it is undeniable that it has undergone a process known as hypercreolization – by which many of its speakers have adopted it as a badge of cultural identity and have developed its vocabulary in such a way as to exclude and rebel against the dominant white culture.

To the extent that its speakers see it as a barrier with which to protect the “in” group and exclude white society, efforts to understand AAEV are bound to be counterproductive. But insofar as AAVE can be seen as a valid cultural and linguistic expression of African-Americans, its study represents an important reaffirmation of the dignity of this important minority group. More than that, its study reveals a great deal about the American people as a whole and about the manner in which its distinctive culture represents a wide diversity of racial and ethnic expressions.

Notes

5. Ibid.
9. During the nineteenth century the word “nigger”, had not yet acquired its meaning as a racial slur. As a colloquial term for “Negro” it occurs in the songs of Stephen Foster, the writings of Mark Twain and Walt Whitman, and even in reported conversations of Abraham Lincoln. Some have insisted that such traditional literature be censored.
10. Nineteenth century caricatures of African-Americans inexplicably represent them as being unable to pronounce the phoneme “v”, so that we frequently have black preachers talking about
“ebil” (evil) and “de debil” (the devil).

11. Best known for the songs, “Old Man River” and “Can’t Help Loving Dat Man”.


14. “To feel “blue” or “to have the blues” means to feel depressed.

15. The aria, “Summertime” from “Porgy and Bess” has been covered by numerous pop artists, including the Doors and Janis Joplin.

Bibliography


