

1 **WILLIAM LABOV** 51
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3 **UNENDANGERED DIALECT, ENDANGERED PEOPLE: THE CASE** 52
4 **OF AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH** 53
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African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is not an endangered language variety; on the contrary, it is continuing to develop, as all languages, and to diverge from other varieties. The primary correlates of such divergence are residential segregation and poverty, which are part of a developing transgenerational cycle that includes also crime, shorter life spans, and low educational achievement. The most immediate challenge is creating more effective educational programs on a larger scale. In confronting residential segregation, we must be aware that its reduction will lead to greater contact between speakers of AAVE and speakers of other dialects. Recent research implies that, if residential integration increases significantly, AAVE as a whole may be in danger of losing its distinctiveness as a linguistic resource. While many of us would regret a decrease in the eloquent syntactic and semantic options of AAVE and its possible withering away, we must also consider that the loss of a dialect is a lesser evil than the endangerment AAVE speakers currently confront.

KEYWORDS: African American Vernacular English (AAVE), dialect divergence, education, literacy, race/racism, segregation, language endangerment

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, linguists are very much concerned with the rapid decline and disappearance of the majority of the world's languages, most of them subject to unequal treatment; and, much of our effort is devoted to social change that can reverse this process. This report will deal with another aspect of inequality.¹ I will be looking at social factors that lead dialects to diverge, develop, and flourish, and forms of cultural diversity that need no help to survive. In the final summary, I will have to say that I wish the world were otherwise, because this flourishing dialect is closely associated with the oppression, discouragement, and death of its speakers.

The argument of this paper may be outlined as follows:

- African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is not an endangered dialect; on the contrary, it is continuing to develop and diverge from other dialects.

- The primary condition for such divergence is residential segregation.
- Residential segregation, combined with increasing poverty, has led to a deterioration of many features of social life in the inner cities.
- In these conditions, a majority of children in inner city schools are failing to learn to read, with a developing cycle of poverty, crime, and shorter life span.
- Reduced residential segregation will lead to greater contact between speakers of AAVE and speakers of other dialects.
- If, at some future date, the social conditions that favor the divergence of AAVE are altered, then AAVE in its present form may become an endangered dialect.

THE UNENDANGERED DIALECT

Among all the nonstandard dialects that have been described in the history of linguistics, AAVE is the most closely and extensively studied. (Note that there is also a standard variety of African American English. See, e.g., Spears 2007.) From the mid 1960s to the present, studies of its invariant and variable features have been published for urban speech communities throughout the United States (New York: Labov 1972; Labov et al. 1968; Detroit: Edwards 1992; Wolfram 1969; Philadelphia: Ash and Myhill 1986; Labov and Harris 1986; Washington, DC: Fasold 1972; the Bay area: Mitchell-Kernan 1969; Rickford and McNair-Knox 1993; Rickford et al. 1991; Los Angeles: Baugh 1979, 1983, 1984, 1999; Legum et al. 1972; Columbus: Weldon 1994). Regional differences have appeared in only a few phonological features. (In cities with r-ful White vernaculars, African Americans show lower levels of r-vocalization than in cities with r-less vernaculars, Myhill 1988.) AAVE emerges as a geographically uniform system with the following general characteristics:

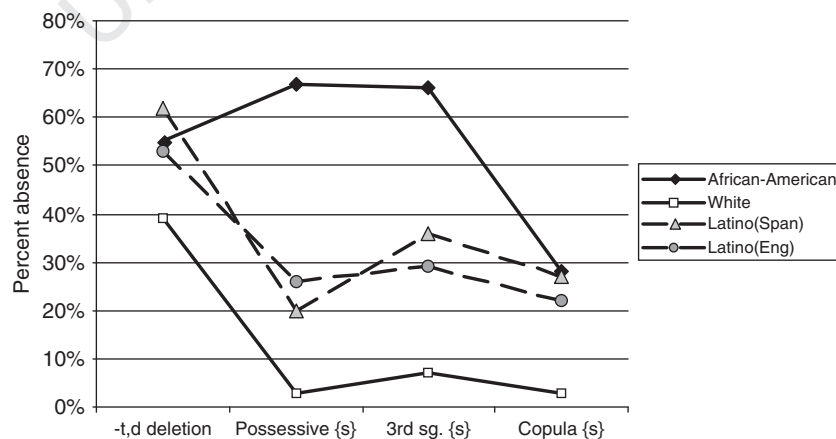
First, AAVE maintains a fairly uniform sound system, based on a modification of the Southern States vowel pattern, and does not participate in sound changes characteristic of surrounding White vernaculars. Remember that all living languages

1 change over time, sometimes very slowly, sometimes
 2 more rapidly. In New York City, African Americans
 3 were found to be shifting the nucleus of /ay/ in *why*,
 4 *wide*, et cetera to the front, while in the White popu-
 5 lation, a new and vigorous change was moving the
 6 vocalic nucleus further and further back of center
 7 (Labov 1966, 1994). In Philadelphia, the fronting of /
 8 aw/ is an absolute differentiator of White and Black
 9 speech patterns, so that in an experimental study the
 10 controlled raising of the second formant of /aw/ in
 11 out and house converted the perceived identity of the
 12 speaker from Black to White (Graff et al. 1986). At
 13 Calumet College in Chicago, African Americans
 14 showed no tendency to participate in the Northern
 15 Cities Shift—the raising of /æ/, fronting of /o/ and
 16 backing of /e/—characteristic of the White population
 17 (Gordon 2000). In cities of the North, the Midland
 18 and the West, such phonetic patterns immediately
 19 differentiate the speech of African Americans from
 20 that of the local Whites.

21 Second, several phonological constraints on
 22 leniting sound changes are aligned with those oper-
 23 ating in other English dialects but operate at higher
 24 frequencies. The alignment of AAVE with general
 25 sociolinguistic variables was first demonstrated in
 26 the study of auxiliary and copula deletion, where
 27 deletion was found to be governed by the same
 28 constraints as contraction in other dialects (Labov
 29 1969). The major grammatical constraints on cop-
 30 ula/auxiliary deletion are replicated regularly in
 31 many different geographic areas, with future tense
 32 favoring deletion over progressive over following
 33 locative/adjective over following noun phrase (e.g.,
 34 Rickford et al. 1991).²

51 A similar alignment is found with the simplifi-
 52 cation of coronal clusters. The higher quantitative
 53 level in AAVE compared with other dialects is
 54 largely due to a qualitative difference in the effect
 55 of following pause on simplification. In AAVE,
 56 following pauses favor simplification, while in
 57 other dialects this environment has a disfavoring
 58 effect on simplification, resulting in higher overall
 59 rates of simplification in AAVE (Guy 1980).

60 Third, several morphosyntactic features present
 61 in most varieties of English are absent in the under-
 62 lying grammar of AAVE. Quantitative and
 63 qualitative differences between AAVE and other
 64 dialects is illustrated in figure 1, based on a study of
 65 287 elementary school children in low-income
 66 schools (Labov 2001; Labov and Baker 2008). These
 67 children are a random sample of recordings of a larger
 68 group of 721 struggling readers. They were
 69 recorded in a relatively formal situation, in a school
 70 setting, but with sociolinguistic techniques that shift
 71 speech style toward the vernacular. For all four
 72 variables, the vertical axis represents the percent ab-
 73 sence of the consonant involved. The differences
 74 among the four language/ethnic groups are quanti-
 75 tative for —t,d deletion and copula absence but
 76 qualitative for absence of attribute possessive {s}
 77 and third-singular {s}. For —t,d deletion, Blacks
 78 and Latinos show 55–65 percent absence and Whites
 79 40 percent; for copula absence, Blacks and Latinos
 80 are clustered at a much lower level, and Whites are
 81 close to zero. In contrast, the Black children are close
 82 to 70 percent absence for attributive possessive {s}
 83 and verbal {s}, far different from Latinos and com-
 84 pletely different from Whites.



52 **Figure 1. Percent absence for four linguistic variables for African-American elementary school children in Philadelphia,**
 53 **Atlanta, and California by language and ethnic-group (N = 287). Latino(Span), Latinos who learned to read in Spanish first;**
 54 **Latino(Eng), Latinos who learned to read in Spanish first.**

1 Fourth, variable past tense marking due to high
 2 levels of consonant cluster simplification is rein-
 3 forced by the use of *had* as a past tense marker. The
 4 earliest studies of the 1960s detected occasional use
 5 of the past perfect as simple past (Labov et al. 1968).
 6 In Springfille, Cukor-Avila (1995) found an explo-
 7 sive growth of this feature in both apparent and real-
 8 time. In all White dialects, the auxiliary *had* indicates
 9 that the event so marked occurred before the event
 10 last referenced. In current AAVE, auxiliary *had*
 11 occurs freely in semantic contexts where the marked
 12 event follows the preceding one. The speakers
 13 in Cukor-Avila's study born before World War I
 14 showed no trace of this feature, while for those in the
 15 youngest group, born after 1970, innovative *had* was
 16 the predominant form.

17 The ways in which AAVE is expanding and
 18 flourishing appear most clearly in the semantics of
 19 mood and aspect. The examples that I cite here have
 20 a dual import, showing on the one hand the evolu-
 21 tion of new semantic possibilities, and on the other
 22 hand the eloquent application of these possibilities in
 23 social interaction.

24 Fifth, unique mood and aspect categories have
 25 developed with new semantic features. Bailey and
 26 Maynor (1985) trace the dramatic rise in the use of
 27 habitual *be* as a percentage of all progressives with
 28 habitual meaning, from speakers born in the 19th
 29 century to modern times. This quantitative develop-
 30 ment has been confirmed in the study of East Palo
 31 Alto by Rickford and McNair-Knox (1993).

32 The combination of (*will*) *be* with perfect/inten-
 33 sive *done* has been co-opted in AAVE to signal the
 34 compound tense equivalent to the future perfect
 35 (*will have*) of other dialects. In this case, *will have*, or
 36 *be done* is used to signal the first of two future events,
 37 as in the following:

38 (1) They be done drunk up all the wine by the time
 39 you get there.

40 In 1983, Baugh observed a confrontation in the
 41 Los Angeles suburb Pacoima, where an angry parent
 42 threatened a pool guard who he thought had man-
 43 handled his son:

44 (2) I'll be done killed that motherfucker if he tries to
 45 lay a hand on my kid again.

46 This is not equivalent to a future perfect, since
 47 *I'll have killed that motherfucker if he tries . . .* does
 48 not make sense. Here *be done* is attached to the sec-
 49 ond member of two future events, rather than the
 50 first. The new resultative *be done*, as analyzed by
 51 Baugh (1983), is a marker of mood, indicating the
 52 high degree of certainty with which event B follows
 53 event A. (2) is not easily translated into any tense,
 54 mood, or aspect combination used in other dialects.

51 The semantic content of this combination is not
 52 simply that B will follow A, but that B will inevitably
 53 follow A. Spears (1985, 1990, in press) analyzes
 54 *be done* as one of the set of disapproval markers in
 55 AAVE, expressing not inevitability, but the intended
 56 rapidness of the reactive event B, following
 57 a strongly disapproved of event A (his trying to lay a
 58 hand on my kid again).

59 These are only two of the new—and old—mood
 60 and aspect features of AAVE, which include *come*,
 61 *go*, and *go come*, expressing strong disapproval
 62 (Spears 1982, 1990, in press); frequentative-iterative
 63 *stay* (Spears 2000, in press); remote present perfect
 64 *been* (Rickford 1973) and many other new and pro-
 65 ductive combinations (Dayton 1996).

66 THE GREAT MIGRATION AND RESIDENTIAL 67 SEGREGATION

68 Bailey 1993 argues that the development of modern
 69 AAVE is contemporaneous with the great migration of
 70 African Americans from the rural South to large cities,
 71 primarily in the North. The grammatical developments
 72 we have traced are essentially characteristics of these
 73 large urban speech communities, where African
 74 Americans are heavily concentrated in homogeneous
 75 neighborhoods.

76 For White immigrant groups, residential segre-
 77 gation is a by-product of the initial movement of a
 78 population into a new city, and that an immigrant
 79 group will follow a path of decreasing residential
 80 concentration over time as members obtain jobs,
 81 sometimes intermarry, and generally assimilate to
 82 American society. This has been the case for many
 83 immigrant groups, as shown in Table 1, taken from
 84 Hershberg's studies of the history of Philadelphia
 85 (Hershberg et al. 1981). Irish, Germans, Italians, and
 86 Poles all show a regular decline in the index of dom-
 87 inance, which is the proportion of a person's census
 88 tract that consists of the same group. The trajectory
 89 of African Americans is just the reverse in these data.
 90 Starting in 1850, the index of dominance for African
 91 Americans is just the reverse in these data.

92 Table 1. Indices of dominance for five ethnic groups in
 93 Philadelphia from 1850 to 1970 (proportion of a person's
 94 census tract that consists of the same group).

	1850	1880	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970
Blacks	11	12	35	45	56	72	74
Irish		34	8			5	3
German	25	11			5	3	
Italian		38			23	21	
Polish		20			9	8	

95 Source: Hershberg et al. (1986), table 8.

Americans steadily rises to its maximum in 1970, the last year reported on. This pattern is not peculiar to Philadelphia. Massey and Denton (1993) show a spectacular rise in residential segregation for all major American cities from 1930 to 1970. They argue that the high level of residential segregation is a root cause of the many other social problems that afflict the African American community with a close interrelationship between poverty rate, residential segregation, crime rate rises, the percent of female-headed families, and the percent of high school students in the lowest 15th percentile.

RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION AND THE CORE SPEAKERS OF AAVE

In the 1970s, we studied linguistic change and variation in the White community of Philadelphia (Labov 1980, 2001). All available evidence indicated that African Americans did not participate in the new and vigorous sound changes that characterized the Philadelphia vernacular: only a few older Blacks and isolated youth showed any tendency to adopt these sound changes in progress. In the 1980s, we carried research in North Philadelphia and found a linguistic segregation that matched the high level of residential segregation we have just seen (Labov and Harris 1986).

The majority members of the Black community who consistently showed the defining features of AAVE were those who stayed within the Black neighborhoods from one day to the other, worked only with Blacks, lived with and talked with Blacks, and rarely had face-to-face conversations with speakers of other dialects.³ In the adult social

networks of North Philadelphia, we found a certain number of speakers who did not follow the AAVE grammatical pattern described above, but they were all people who, for one reason or another, had more extensive contact with Whites. This second group sounded very much like the first on the surface, and used the same vocabulary and phonetics, but they showed in their inflectional variables the influence of contact with White grammars.

We also studied two groups of White speakers of both middle and working class background, one with extensive contacts with the African American community and one with very limited contact. Figure 2 shows the level of absence of three grammatical inflections for the four groups of speakers. The majority of Blacks with minimal White contacts show a very high degree of inflectional absence of possessive and verbal {s}, while Blacks with extensive contacts showed substantially lower levels of inflectional absence. Whites with extensive Black contacts showed little tendency to shift their grammar in this direction.

The consistency of the core group reflects the general findings of Milroy (1980) that speakers engaged in dense multiplex social networks in their own community resist linguistic change from outside, while those with many weak ties to other social groups are subject to the influence of those groups. The other side of the coin is that within the core group of Blacks, linguistic change has accelerated, in both the tense/mood/aspect system and the morphosyntactic reflections of grammatical categories. Dense and multiplex networks are of course a concomitant of residential segregation.

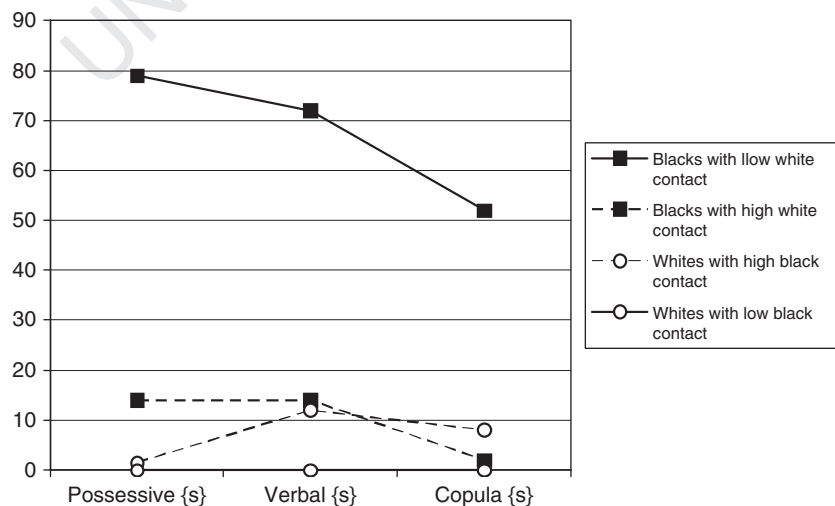


Figure 2. Percent absence of three morphological features of standard English by race and degree of contact across racial groups in North Philadelphia. Source: Ash and Myhill (1986).

One might argue that the African American youth in these core areas are not isolated from other dialects: that they are exposed to more standard speech through the mass media or from their school teachers. But a great deal of evidence indicates that passive exposure of this type does not affect speech patterns or underlying grammars (Labov et al. 2005). As far as we know, language changes occur in the course of verbal interaction among speakers who track each other's utterances for appropriate responses at possible sentence completion points (Sacks 1992). African American children in core areas do not have the opportunity to engage in such conversations with speakers of other dialects.

THE MINORITY GAP IN READING

The first research on AAVE that we conducted in 1965–68 was supported by the Office of Education, designed to find out if there was any connection, between dialect differences and the minority gap in reading. In the yearly reports of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2007) since 1971, the minority gap in reading proficiency levels has remained large and stable. In the most recent figures, only a small proportion of African American fourth graders, 13 percent, are rated as proficient, that is, able to use reading as a tool for further learning.

When we examine the situation at the local level in Philadelphia, a further relationship appears between poverty and low reading levels. Figure 3 is a scattergram of all Philadelphia schools at the time when we first began our efforts to raise reading levels. Each point registers on the vertical axis the

percent of students performing at the lowest quartile of the state-wide PSSA reading test, and on the horizontal axis, the percent of students who qualify for free lunch as their family income falls below the poverty line. The symbol labeled “Davis” is the elementary school where we have worked most consistently in the period since 1997. It is evident that there is a direct relation between poverty and reading achievement.

THE RELATION BETWEEN SPEECH AND READING

The data for figure 1 was drawn from an analysis of the spontaneous speech of 287 struggling readers in the second through fourth grades who were the subjects of our interventions in three regions of the United States. The same data can be used to examine the relationship between the use of AAVE variables in spontaneous speech and decoding success in oral reading. We can expect of course that there will be a correlation between the realization of each of these variables in speech and in oral reading. Table 2 shows that a moderate but significant correlation between reading errors and those features that are specific to speakers of AAVE. The first column shows the correlation between the absence of each feature in spontaneous speech and absence in oral reading of a diagnostic text. The fact that there is such a correlation is not remarkable, because the vernacular deletion of these apical inflections is in the first analysis indistinguishable from an oral reading error.⁴ However, the third column of Table 2 shows that the same degree of correlation exists

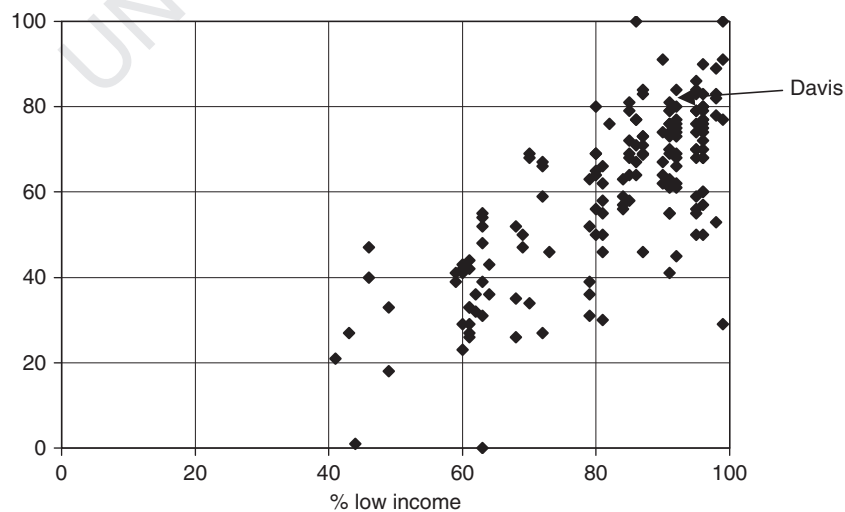


Figure 3. Percent readers in the bottom quartile of PSSA reading scores in the 5th grade of Philadelphia schools (1997) by percent of low-income students.

Table 2 . Pearson correlations between spontaneous speech and reading for four AAVE variables.

	With grammatical variable in oral reading	With mean phonological error rate
Consonant clusters	.16*	.10*
Third singular {s}	.15*	.18**
Possessive {s}	.28***	.14*
Copula {s}	.15*	.21***

$N = 287$. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

between the AAVE speech variables and the mean error rate in decoding all orthographic aspects of onsets, nuclei and codas.⁵ This indicates a global relationship between the use of AAVE and decoding problems. The relationship is not necessarily a direct one, as there are many intervening factors that are likely to be responsible for a high use of AAVE and low performance in decoding. Before we explore these, we must consider an unexpected finding on regional differences.

DIFFERENCES BY REGION

In the many studies of AAVE published so far, no major regional differences in the grammar have appeared (Baugh 1983; Labov et al. 1968; Rickford et al. 1991).⁶ However, if we break down the data for African Americans in figure 1 into three regional groups, some surprising differences appear. Figure 4 shows that Atlanta and Philadelphia have the highest simplification of consonant clusters and absence of possessive attributive {s} and that Atlanta has even higher absence of third singular {s} and copula {s} than Philadelphia. On the other hand, the California subjects are considerably lower than the other two regions for all four variables. If residential segregation were an essential component for the full development of the vernacular, we would expect to find a lesser degree of segregation in the West. However, Massey and Denton (1993) show that Los Angeles is not less segregated than any of the other large cities, and all schools were selected by the same socioeconomic criterion—the percent of low-income families who qualify for the federal free lunch program. Why then should our California sample show a lower frequency of the defining AAVE features?

We examined the racial distribution of students for all the schools involved in Philadelphia and Atlanta, including the relations of Latinos, Whites, and Blacks. With the help of John Rickford, we were able to include a number of schools in the Bay Area of California, and we later added schools in Southern California, in the Long Beach area. Figure 5

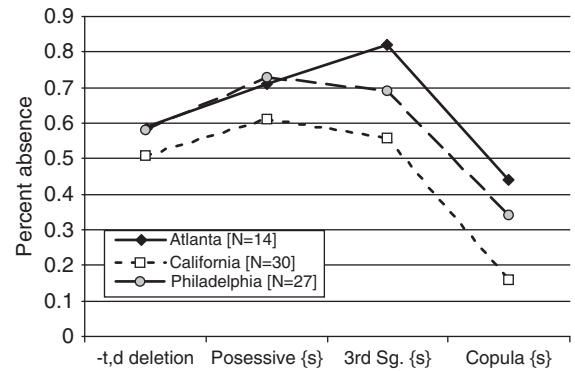


Figure 4. Four morphosyntactic variables of AAVE for African American struggling readers by region.

displays the proportions of African Americans to Latinos on the horizontal axis, and the proportions of African Americans to Whites on the vertical axis. Each axis shows the log ratio of African Americans to the other group. The 0 rating on each axis is therefore the point where there is an equal mixture of the two groups that is a ratio of 1:1. The schools with the most extreme segregation are at upper right, where the numbers next to each symbol indicate the overall percentage of African Americans: 90 and 93 percent. No California schools show such a high concentration. The five schools in the lower left quadrant have relatively low ratios of African Americans to Whites and Latinos: there are no Philadelphia or Atlanta schools in this quadrant. It appears then that the lower frequency of AAVE characteristics in the California schools is a direct reflection of the lower concentrations of Black students.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AAVE IN THE FRAMEWORK OF RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION

Figure 6 models the development of AAVE within the framework of residential segregation, symbolized by the Black rectangle. AAVE is shown as the product of its history, which begins outside of that framework, in plantations and small towns of the South (Bailey 1993, 2001) and in the earlier less segregated areas of the Northern cities. The 20th century developments of AAVE discussed in the first part of this paper occurred in conjunction with the other social conditions outlined in Figure 6. The first and over-arching condition is the degree of poverty as indicated at upper left with its interlocking relationships with other forms of social pathology. Unemployment is of course the primary cause of poverty: Unemployment rates for young Black men who have not graduated high school have recently been reported at 72 percent, as opposed to

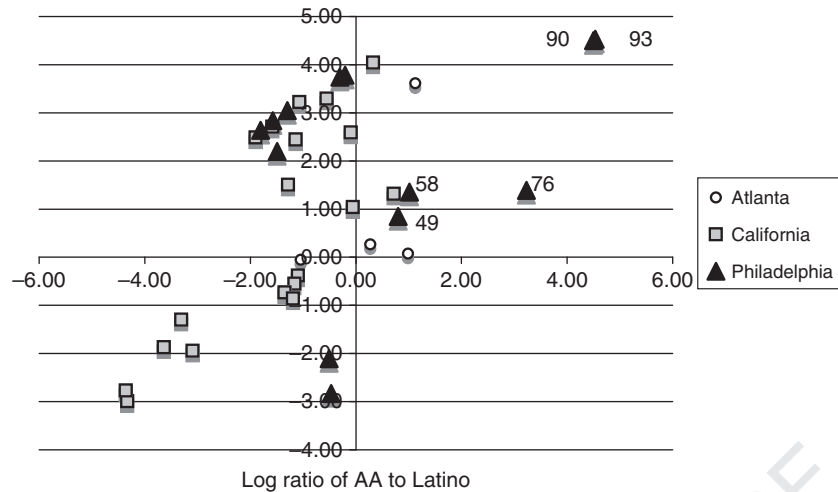


Figure 5. Concentration of African Americans in schools in Atlanta, California and Philadelphia in which the students of figure 1 were interviewed. Numbers next to Philadelphia schools in upper right quadrant are percent African American in the student body.

19 percent for the corresponding population of Latino youth (Eckholm 2006). Unemployment, underemployment, and poverty jointly reduce or eliminate the economic base for the Black family. Inability to participate in the formal, legal economy leads directly to participation in the informal, illegal economy with a rapid increase in crime rates—the link shown at lower left. The incarceration rate of young Black males has tripled in two decades, rising from two percent per year in 1981 to almost six percent in 2002 (Holzer et al. 2004). Coupled with increasing reinforcement of child support laws, young Black males are removed from the formal

economy during and after their prison terms. The economic base of the largely female-headed Black family is then further eroded.

Poverty in the inner city also affects the quality of schooling. Many of the schools we have worked in have a severe shortage of books, texts, and art supplies, and most critical of all, teachers. One school we have worked with most closely in our intervention programs has lost four teachers this year through budget cuts, so that in two classrooms, second and third grade students will be combined. Underfunding of schools plainly contributes to inadequate instruction and—no matter what

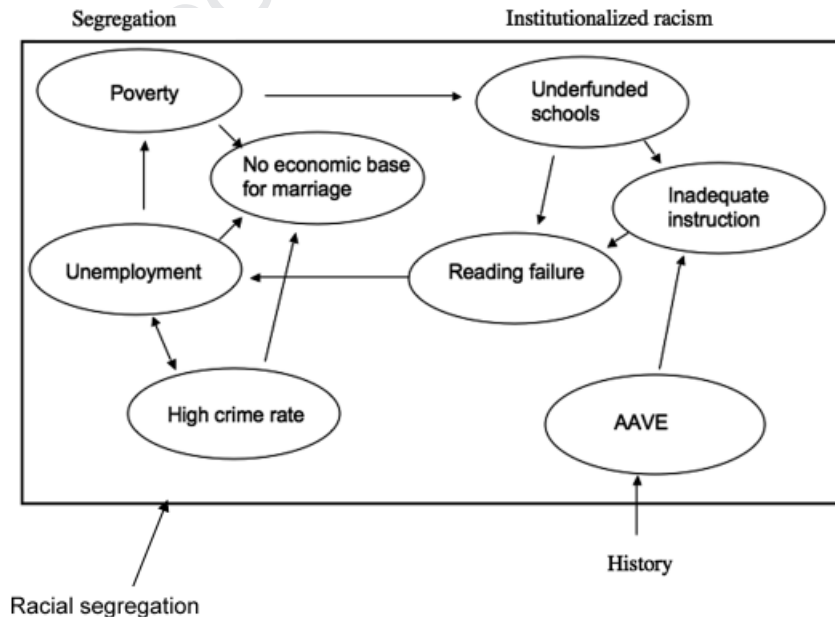


Figure 6. Model of the development of African American Vernacular English in the framework of residential segregation.

1 instruction is used—to reading failure. The cycle
2 closes as reading failure leads to further unemploy-
3 ment. Because the majority of children in the schools
4 of figure 6 are reading below Basic level in the fifth
5 grade, and cannot use reading to obtain information
6 content in their other subjects, it is not likely that
7 they will be able to graduate from high school with-
8 out further intervention. Reading failure reinforces
9 the cycle of poverty, unemployment, and crime.

10 A relationship of AAVE to inadequate instruc-
11 tion is indicated on figure 6. Since the Ann Arbor
12 decision (Labov 1982; Smitherman 1981), it has gen-
13 erally been agreed that teachers need to know more
14 about children’s home language to be effective teach-
15 ers of reading. How this can best be done is the major
16 focus of our current research (Labov 2001, 2003;
17 Labov and Baker 2008). Whether our efforts will be
18 effective enough to cut into the pattern shown in figure
19 6 is a question still to be resolved over time. This paper
20 has addressed a distinct, but closely related question:
21 what are the social conditions under which AAVE has
22 developed, flourished and become increasingly differ-
23 entiated from other dialects of American English?

24 A major strategy of our intervention efforts is to
25 respond in a meaningful way to the real-life situation
26 of the children we are dealing with, who are all
27 affected by the cycle of figure 6. Many of the narra-
28 tives I have written for our Individualized Reading
29 Program deal with conflict between students and
30 the school, and the injustice that children see in the
31 world around them. In contrast, most of the standard
32 school-reading materials deal with a happy, anodyne,
33 and irrelevant world in which children take their sand
34 buckets to the beach and dip their toes in the water. By
35 the time they reach the fourth grade, most of our stu-
36 dents are alienated from the reading process as they
37 have known it and from the institution of education as
38 a whole. Their rejection of the school as an institution
39 is similar to the position of the adolescent Jets and
40 Cobras of the 1960s, who saw the school system as a
41 form of institutionalized racism (Labov et al. 1968).
42 There is a generalized level of anger that may surface
43 at any moment, expressed primarily in fighting with
44 their fellow students rather than overt hostility to
45 the teacher. Many of our most promising students
46 were forced to drop out of our program when they
47 were suspended for fighting.

48 It is therefore important to get a clear idea of the
49 social condition that generates these powerful emo-
50 tions. A study of two individuals may be helpful.

51
52 **AN ANGRY FOURTH GRADER**

53 Riana was a fourth grader when she entered the Indi-
54 vidualized Reading Program. She scored in the 35th

national percentile in the Woodcock–Johnson Word
Attack subtest, in the 13th percentile in the Word
Identification sub-test and in the 16th percentile on
Passage Comprehension. On our analysis of decoding
skills, she had more than 10 percent errors for 12 out
of the 20 phoneme/grapheme relations, the bench-
mark we have adopted for remedial instruction. In
addition to these reading tests, we recorded the spon-
taneous speech of all of our students in that year, using
the sociolinguistic techniques that have been found to
stimulate the flow of speech for children everywhere
(e.g., asking such questions as “Did you ever get
blamed for something you didn’t do?” “Is there any
place in your neighborhood that’s really scary?” “Did
you ever get into a fight with someone bigger than
you?”). Riana talked very freely about the fights she
had been in.

I was in my old school and I was used to fightin’
an’ stuff. I only fought two times in this school.
And I ain’t never get in trouble but in the old
school I got suspended three times. That’s when
I was a real fighter and I liked to fight a lot but I
on’t—I try not to fight a lot and I told this—I told
one of the teachers I said I was gonna punch her
in her face. . . . Uh—I say anything when I’m mad.
When I get real real mad I just say anything.
I don’t be meaning it but I just say it. It then come
out—anything comes out my mouth then but no
curse words did . . . Anything else I say I’m going
to do something to somebody but it comes out my
mouth only—only say that when I’m mad I don’t—
like—I don’t mean to say it. It just come out my
mouth when I’m real real angry at people.

We often ask kids about scary places. Riana’s
answer did not deal with imaginary fears, but with
the real situation.

Tutor: Is there any place that you know about
that’s really scary? Some place you wouldn’t
want to go?
Riana: Jail.
Tutor: How come?
Riana: ‘Cause . . . it’s a lot of people there that—
that—a lot of thieves there and the police don’t
care what they do long as they stay in them jail.
As long as they stay in the bars they don’t care
what they do. And then . . . long as they don’t
call the police in they don’t care what they do
long as they ain’t doing nothing to the police.
And they might take your food like if you there—
you had to go there—they might—and they have
their own food—they own plate of food—they

1 might—they want yours and they snatch yours
2 from you and they'll beat you up there.
3 Tutor: How do you know so much about jails?
4 Riana: My—my dad is in jail.

5
6 The tutor had no intention of talking about jail; up
7 to this point, she did not know that Riana's dad was in
8 jail. Without further reflection, she pursued the point.

9 Tutor: Do you ever go and visit your dad?
10 Riana: I never did . . . [sigh] I never saw him—the
11 last time I saw my dad was . . . I was in second
12 grade and I was going on a trip. He—he brought
13 me money. That was the last time I saw him.

14 Tutor: Do you know does he get out soon?
15 Riana: I don't know.

16 Tutor: You don't know.

17 Riana: I don't think so. I—I've keep writing notes—
18 I wrote my—I wrote—uh—I wrote—we write to each
19 other. . . . He say he gon give me a—he say he gon
20 give me a tape—he gon mail me a tape with him on
21 there reading 'cuz I suh—'cuz at they jail I sup-
22 posed to come there every week so we could do
23 like a parent—a father and daughter—uh—reading.

24
25 Riana's sighs are quite audible. Her style is
26 reflective and sad.

27
28 Riana: So—and—he say he gon send me a tape with
29 him readin' on it. It's cuz instead—since I can't
30 read then—since we can't see each other a lot—I
31 never saw my dad in there—for a long long time. I
32 think I saw—the last time I saw him was last year.
33 My last birthday and it wasn't—not on my June—
34 not on this—the June twenty-seven that already
35 came up. The one the buh—before that . . . And I
36 didn't get—that's the last time I saw him. And he
37 came to my birthday party . . . [sighs]

38
39 Bad as it is, Riana is in a better situation than
40 seven-year-old Latasha. She begins her portrait of
41 her daily life by the conflict with her mother, who has
42 been trying to keep Latasha off the street.

43 I got in trouble because my mom said "Don't go
44 with your friends" and when I came back she
45 said "Where you went?" I said "With my
46 friends" and I got in trouble. Then I was on
47 punishment for a whole week. As soon as I came
48 from school I had to stay in the house. No T.V.
49 No radio. Nothing. I just had to lay on my beds
50 and read books. Then the weeks passed and I
51 started to be good. But then I got bad and I went
52 with my friends again. And I got snatched and I
53 came home breathing and stuff. And my mom's
54 like "What's wrong with you?" I was like "I got

51 chased by somebody." She said "Oh. One more
52 time you do that, you really on punishment."
53 So I had to go in my room again. I started cry-
54 ing. Then I had to come downstairs. Eat dinner.
55 I spilled my juice on the rug, then had to go in
56 my room a extra time, 'cuz she was gonna let me
57 out again but now I had to stay in my room for a
58 whole three weeks. And I just sat on my bed. I
59 sat on my bed and I cried. And I read books.

60 Like Riana, Latasha is considered the worst girl
61 in her class, and she finds herself blamed for many
62 things she did not do.

63
64 Well, I used to be bad—I used to be bad in first
65 grade and kindergarten. And then when they
66 come to second grade and stuff they always
67 blame me stuff cuz they know I always do that
68 but I always be good in second grade. I used to
69 be bad in first and kindergarten cuz it wasn't
70 really nothing to do, so I just be bad. And when
71 they come to second grade they always blame
72 stuff on me and it's not fair to me, because the
73 other person that's doing it they get stuff that I
74 posed to get and they get it. And like yesterday I
75 got blamed, because some girl hit somebody and
76 they were jumping her and thought it was me
77 and my friends. Me and my cousin and my
78 friend, they always blame stuff on us and that—
79 and that's not right. And I tell my mom and my
80 mom don't do nothing. She just said "Be good."
81 I try to be good but they always blame stuff on
82 me. It seem like I'm the baddest one in my
83 classroom but I try to be good. And they blame
84 me all the time. And probably on my report card
85 I'll probably get an "F" in behavior 'cuz they
86 always blame me . . . and it's not fair to me.

87
88 Outside of school, neighborhood conflicts are
89 intense. Latasha's brother and her cousin were shot
90 dead a year ago, and she is still obliged to defend
91 their memory.

92 Like my brother and my cousin dead and they
93 kept on talking about them, so I gotta fight
94 with 'em. One of 'em was ten and one of them
95 was nine . . . Well my brother's dead right? And
96 my brother used to smoke cigarettes and it was
97 some little girl, she a fake Muslim. She go to this
98 school. Her name Diamond and her sister is
99 Deborah and they always talk about my brother
100 cuz they said "That's why your brother dead cuz
101 he was smoking cigarettes on the corner and
102 stuff, having guns and stuff." And my brother
103 he do not have guns. All the people they say my
104 brother was a peacemaker. And they kept on

1 talking about my brother and I just got in a fight
2 with ‘em.

3 At seven, Latasha has not lost her hope for some
4 better outcome.

5
6 That’s why I wanna be in some other world—not
7 other world, but I wanna be in some other coun-
8 try ‘cuz around my way, it’s drama around my
9 way and a lot of people don’t like it around there.
10 I’m not a scared of ‘em but I just want to move.

11 Latasha can still imagine a future in the formal
12 economy, if she could make her way through
13 high school.

14
15 I wanna be a doctor but it’s—I be watching T.V.
16 It seem like it’s nasty to be a doctor. I’ll be a
17 nurse. A dentist.

18 Riana and Latasha are not exceptional cases. The
19 uncontrollable anger that they feel, which will inevi-
20 tably lead to their suspension from school, is the
21 product of a despair that is not known to children
22 outside the ghetto, but is commonplace within it. Ma-
23 uer (1995) reports that one in three Black men between
24 the ages of 20 and 29 is either in jail or prison, or on
25 parole or probation: these are their children. The sto-
26 ries that I write for them are quite remote from the
27 happy tales that are written for suburban readers; they
28 reflect—but only to a small degree—the reality of a
29 world where the best we can do is to register a protest
30 against the unfairness of it all.

31 Here is the text of “Grounded,” a story designed
32 to focus on decoding the form and meaning of the
33 past tense—ed suffix.

34 With the Individualized Reading Program
35 (Labov and Baker 2008), we made some progress
36 with the children in Riana’s class in 2001, and the
37 four years that followed. But the size of the problem
38 is staggering. Of the 156 schools in Philadelphia, 141
39 are in the bottom quintile on the state achievement
40 test. So far, we have worked with only a dozen of
41 them. Philadelphia is one of a long list of the hyper-
42 segregated speech communities: this is the norm for
43 all large American cities. And the problem of read-
44 ing failure is everywhere.

45 46 47 **EXPANDING THE INDIVIDUALIZED** 48 **READING PROGRAM**

49 For this reason, we must consider educational pro-
50 grams on a larger scale. The educational
51 establishment has made some progress in the recog-
52 nition of the special problems of African American
53 youth. The California Curriculum Commission has
54 introduced new requirements for language arts pro-

grams to be listed for approval in 2008: “additional
support for students who use AAVE who may have
difficulty with phonological awareness and standard
academic English structures of oral and written lan-
guage, including spelling and grammar” (456). We
need to specify just what is meant here, and what
language features have to be taken into account in
teaching reading and writing. A Summary Statement
on AAVE was submitted in November 2006 to the
Curriculum Commission, signed by myself, H. Samy
Alim, Guy Bailey, John Baugh, Lisa Green, John R.
Rickford, Tracey Weldon, and Walt Wolfram.

In order to meet these criteria, I have joined with a
group developing a remedial program for children in
grades four through eight who are two or more years
behind in reading achievement, focusing on all low-
income schools including those with large African
American and Latino populations. This *Portals* pro-
gram is being submitted to the California Curriculum
Commission by Houghton-Mifflin Harcourt this year,
and we hope that it will be widely used.

There are many ways in which what I have
written here may be misunderstood, and I would like
to be clear in the conclusion. I have shown that
AAVE has developed its present form in the frame-
work of the most extreme racial segregation that the
world has ever known. In no way have I suggested
that AAVE is a cause of the problems of African
American people. On the contrary, it is their great
resource, an elegant form of expression that they use
when they reflect most thoughtfully on the oppres-
sion and misery of daily life. “If you love your
enemy, they be done ate you alive in this society”
(African American woman in West Philadelphia,
reported in Dayton 1996).

The great progress of the civil rights movement
has given a large part of the Black population access
to education and jobs, along with the means to move
out of the inner city. There have been great gains.
On the linguistic side, there is standard African
American English in which the major features
are phonological, like the merger of *pin* and *pen*
(Henderson 2001), or camouflaged grammatical
markers like the *come* of moral indignation (Spears
1982). If some forces in American society, perhaps
led by Baugh’s initiative on linguistic profiling
(2000), were to make a major impact on residential
segregation, then we would expect AAVE to shift
some part of the distance toward other dialects, and
we might then observe large scale convergence
instead of continuing divergence.

If the mixed populations of our Philadelphia
schools should actually be integrated, we may even
reach a time when young Black children use elements

1 of the White vernacular, and take part in the radical
 2 sound changes that sweep over the White community.
 3 At that point, AAVE as a whole might be in danger of
 4 losing its own distinct and characteristic forms of
 5 speech. I am sure that many of us would regret the
 6 decline of the eloquent syntactic and semantic options
 7 that I have presented here. But we might also reflect at
 8 that time that the loss of a dialect is a lesser evil than
 9 the current condition of endangered people.

10
 11 **NOTES**

12 1. An earlier version of this paper was delivered
 13 at the Georgetown Round Table 2006 in Washing-
 14 ton, DC. This report develops the educational
 15 implications and programs that follow from our un-
 16 derstanding of the status of AAVE and the speakers
 17 of this dialect.

18 2. Locative and adjectival environments are
 19 here combined, as in the original Harlem study
 20 (Labov et al. 1968) where these were found to be
 21 variable from one group to another. Cukor-Avila
 22 1999 attributes this variability to varying propor-
 23 tions of stative and nonstative adjectives.

24 3. See also Baugh (1983) for a characterization
 25 of the vernacular on these dimensions.

26 4. See however Labov and Baker (2008) which
 27 resolves this problem.

28 5. These mean values are based on the error
 29 rates for 20 problematic relations of phonemes to
 30 graphemes in onsets, nuclei, and codas of a diag-
 31 nostic reading.

32 6. Regional differences in pronunciation are not
 33 uncommon, principally in the degree of r-vocaliza-
 34 tion, and moderate reflections of the Southern Shift
 35 (Labov et al. 2005:chapter 22). See Myhill (1988) and
 36 Hinton and Pollock (2000) for regional differences in
 37 (r). The African American speech of East St. Louis is
 38 well known to have a centralized nucleus of/eh/r/in
 39 there and where.

40
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Q23	AUTHOR: Hershberg et al. (1986) has not been included in the Reference List, please supply full publication details.	
Q24	Author: Figure 6 has been saved at a low resolution of 110 dpi. Please resupply at 600/300 dpi. Check required artwork specifications at http://authorservices.wiley.com/bauthor/illustration.asp	