

# **Evolution of Attitudes towards AAVE after the Civil Rights Movement: From Discrimination to Cultural Appropriation**

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## **ABSTRAKT**

Tato bakalářská práce zkoumá vývoj postojů vůči mluvčím afroamerické angličtiny. Tato variace americké angličtiny se historicky setkávala s negativními názory a čelila jazykové diskriminaci. Práce považuje hnutí za občanská práva jako významný milník pro změnu postojů, protože přineslo důležité změny v životech Afroameričanů a vyvolalo vlnu lingvistického výzkumu.

Práce je rozdělena na část teoretickou a část praktickou. Teoretická část poskytuje teorie o původu AAVE, představuje lingvistické rysy této jedinečné variace a zkoumá, jak se vyvíjely postoje k jejím mluvčím. Praktická část se zabývá dvěma případovými studii, ve kterých se objevila jazyková diskriminace.

Klíčová slova: afroamerická angličtina, standardní americká angličtina, sociolingvistika, postoje, lingvistická diskriminace

## **ABSTRACT**

This bachelor thesis explores the evolution of attitudes toward African American Vernacular English speakers. This variation of American English has historically been met with negative opinions and linguistic discrimination. In this thesis, the Civil Rights Movement is considered to be a significant milestone for shifting attitudes because it brought about significant changes in the lives of African Americans and sparked a wave of linguistic research.

The thesis is divided into the theoretical part and the practical part. The theoretical part provides theories on the origins of AAVE, presents linguistic features of this unique variety, and explores how the attitudes toward its speakers have evolved. The practical part deals with two case studies where linguistic discrimination was observed.

Keywords: African American Vernacular English, Standard American English, sociolinguistics, attitudes, linguistic discrimination

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I declare that the submitted version of the bachelor's thesis and the electronic version uploaded to IS/STAG are identical.

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## INTRODUCTION

African American Vernacular English is a variation of American English used predominantly, but not exclusively, by African Americans in the United States. This variation has been historically stigmatized and misunderstood. Its validity as a legitimate variation has been questioned by the public and has often been labeled as broken English or nothing more than just slang.

However, scholars and linguists such as Rickford (1972, 1998, 2000), Baugh (1979, 2002, 2018), Green (2002, 2004, 2022), and many more recognize AAVE as a legitimate, rule-governed language variation. This claim supports the chapter dealing with features of AAVE, which proves that it follows its distinct rules, demonstrated in specific examples.

The aim of this thesis is to find out how the attitudes toward AAVE speakers have improved, if at all, and whether the stigmatization and discrimination against its speakers persists. This is done not only by tracking linguistic discrimination but also by racial since these two themes are interwoven. Additionally, the concept of cultural appropriation is addressed as it reflects broader societal attitudes towards AAVE language and identity.

In the analytical part, linguistic profiling and discrimination are introduced in cases from the legal space. The first case dates back to 2013 and concerns disregarding Rachel Jeantel's testimony in a legal proceeding due to her AAVE language variation. The second case to be discussed is from the late 1980s and deals with linguistic profiling in housing, to which linguist John Baugh devoted his research.

## **I. THEORY**

## 1 AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is a variety of American English used by many African Americans across the regions of the United States. It is specific by its unique and consistent system of sounds, meanings, vocabulary, words, and sentence structures (Green 2002, 1). Despite being extensively researched by linguists, AAVE remains probably the most stigmatized variety among other non-standard American English varieties (Cargile, Takai, and Rodríguez 2006, 444). It is often compared to Standard American English (SAE), whose many speakers think that AAVE is its improperly spoken version (Pullum 1999, 39-40). Pullum (1999, 41) objects and asserts that there is a “difference between being an incorrect utterance of one language and being a correct utterance in another.”

If AAVE is often labeled as an incorrect version of SAE, it would be appropriate to set the record straight about what the *standard* there really means (Pullum 1999). Wolfram and Schilling (2015, 9-10) are aware of the inconvenience in defining the notion of Standard American English. In the United States, unlike in France or Spain, there is no linguistic institution responsible for defining what forms are considered *standard* in the language. So, although the term is commonly used, what is meant by the *standard* is the variation of English used by linguistic authorities, in formal settings, and grammar and usage books (Wolfram and Schilling 2015, 9-10).

Another fundamental concept that is frequently used throughout this thesis is *variety*. Meyerhoff (2019, 338) defines *variety* as a neutral term, avoiding possible negative connotations that are often linked to the term *dialect*. To distinguish differences of speakers' pronunciation, the thesis uses the term *accent* (Meyerhoff 2019, 327).

Along with the attitudes, the names labeling AAVE underwent evolution. Given the interest among linguists in AAVE and the ongoing struggle to define the variety with regard to ethnicity, since the 1960s, many different names denoting this variant have been used over the years depending on the social climate of the time (Lanehart 2015, 3; Wolfram and Schilling 2016, 218). Wolfram and Schilling (2015) have listed the labels in chronological order: “Negro Dialect, Nonstandard Negro English, Black English, Vernacular Black English, Afro-American English, Ebonics, African American (Vernacular) English, and African American Language (AAL).” The names were used to connect the variety to its speakers (Lanehart 2015, 3). Therefore, for instance, when AAVE speakers were between 1930s and 1960s referred to as *Negroes*, the term labeling their language was *Negro Dialect* and *Nonstandard Negro English* (Schwarz 1967). Baugh (2018) recalls that between the

1950s and 1960s, the derogatory reference to African Americans was *Blacks*. After the Civil Rights Movement took place, the positions changed, and the term *Negro*, once preferred by African Americans, started to be insulting. In contrast, the referential term *Black people* became the one to be favored (Baugh 2018, 59). The list of labels also includes a controversial term, *Ebonics*, coined in the 1970s (Wolfram and Schilling 2015, 17) to which section 5.3 is devoted, reflecting the attitudes toward African Americans at that time.

Although all these labels refer to the same language system, for the sake of this thesis, the term African American Vernacular English is employed, as the use of *vernacular* aptly highlights it as a spoken language with stigmatized patterns used for everyday interaction in informal settings (Green 2004, 77; Meyerhoff 2019, 338).

## 1.1 Theories on the Origins of AAVE

This section deals with accounts of the origins of AAVE. Focusing on where this variety originated from helps us to understand its cultural significance and grasp why people hold certain attitudes toward this variety.

Despite the vast interest of linguists and historians, the origin of AAVE remains unclear and is still a matter of debate. Many distinct theories on its origins have evolved and undergone fundamental changes in perspective over time, namely “the Anglicist hypothesis, the Creolist hypothesis, the Neo-Anglicist hypothesis, and the Substrate hypothesis” (Nelson, Proshina, and Davis 2020, 318). This section is restricted to only the Anglicist and Creolist hypotheses since these two are the most prevalent among linguists (Mufwene 2014, 349).

### 1.1.1 The Anglicist Hypothesis

The first hypothesis to emerge, dominating mid-1960s to 1970s, was coined by American dialectologists Hans Kurath and Raven McDavid. As the hypothesis’ name suggests, it claims that AAVE originated in the British Isles just like other European American Dialects (Wolfram and Schilling 2015, 226).

According to this hypothesis, the English elements gradually disappeared from the AAVE as the variety evolved. At the same time, the features common for both vanished from Standard American English. The differences between them resulted from years of development (Lanehart 2015, 23).

Linguists fostering this standpoint found evidence in speech communities in the Dominican Republic, which was inhabited by African Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries. The English variety used there is much like the one used by early Africans in America. Another point entitling the hypothesis was found in quantitative research from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, which gathered narratives from formerly enslaved people. The research displays features indicating a closer relationship to English than Creole (Green 2002, 9-10).

### **1.1.2 The Creolist Hypothesis**

A few years later, a contrasting opinion arose in response to the leading theory. The Creole hypothesis advocates claim that AAVE was created by early interaction between Blacks and Whites (Bergs and Brinton 2017). This hypothesis was developed by scholars such as Dillard (1972) and Stewart (1965). They assumed that if a population adopted a new language that was not originally part of their culture, it would likely be influenced by the language used before (Mufwene 2014, 350).

The theory maintains that AAVE evolved from a creolized form of English that emerged during early interactions between the European colonists and enslaved Africans (Wolfram and Schilling 2015, 227) in the Southeastern US, where most slave plantations were concentrated (Bergs and Brinton 2017).

Creolists presented AAVE similarities to Creole and West African languages, such as the absence of subject-verb agreement or copula absence (Mufwene 2014, 351).

## **1.2 Current State of Development**

Discussions about the contemporary development of AAVE are no less heated than those about its origins. Based on research from the 1980s (Bailey and Maynor 1985; Labov 1987; Labov and Harris 1986), in urban settings like Philadelphia, AAVE does not blend with surrounding varieties. Instead, it is becoming relatively more distinct. Urban linguistic features are amplifying, and usage is increasing; even new structures are being developed (Nelson, Proshina, and Davis 2020, 321).

In the early 2000s, comparative studies emerged indicating that rural Southern linguistic features do not follow the same path of change as those in urban areas. For instance, the speech of elderly African Americans in Hyde County moved towards a more standardized style, retaining the core of AAVE, while younger generations are even more inclined to AAVE features. In contrast, another community of African Americans in the Appalachian Mountains exhibited a decline in core AAVE structures while adopting regional Appalachian speech traits. However, in another Appalachian area of Texana, a mixture of all influences was found, AAVE features, local and urban features. Based on this, a single

theory of contemporary development cannot be implemented as the development is dependent on the area (Nelson, Proshina, and Davis 2020, 321-25).

The second half of the twentieth century began to be fueled by a sense of ethnic identity. Speaking AAVE involves using its distinctive features and consciously avoiding certain traits associated with SAE. If the traits of SAE are adopted, its speakers are referred to as acting white. What is meant by ethnic identity is not only how African Americans perceive themselves but also how they position themselves in white society (Nelson, Proshina, and Davis 2020, 321-25).

## 2 PHONOLOGICAL FEATURES

“What’s a black voice?” was a question posed by O. J. Simpson’s lawyer, trying to undermine a witness’s claim to have heard a black voice while passing the scene of Simpson’s wife’s murder. For the good of his client, he was implying that there is no such thing as a black voice and that the idea of it was just a racial stereotype (McWhorter 2017, 52). As we are not driven by the same incentives as Simpson’s lawyer, we can say that the black voice indeed does exist.

McWhorter (2017) addresses an overlap between AAVE and southern English that one hearing an AAVE speaker and a southern English speaker would assume them to be speaking the same variety as long as they do not recognize AAVE’s typical features (McWhorter 2017, 16).

### 2.1 Stress and Intonation

Prosodic features such as stress and intonation impact larger linguistic elements beyond individual phonemes and are related to pitch and rhythm. Prosody is a very important phonological feature that will help us to shed light on what it means to “sound black.”

Kushins (2014, 237) claims it is possible for a listener to identify the ethnic background of a speaker in his experimental study. He claims that listeners can identify black and white speakers based solely on their voice despite individuals’ capability of communication accommodation with a high level of accuracy.

However, many linguists argue in their 1960s and 1970s works about the accuracy of determining the ethnicity of speakers and about the specific features responsible for this phenomenon. Rickford (1972) saw the cause in stress patterns, tone, and pronunciation; Labov et al. (1968) downplay any ability to identify ethnicity based on voice. They claim listeners are more likely to recognize varieties they are familiar with rather than ethnicity. Wolfram and Fasold (1974) emphasize intonation as the leading cause of ethnic identification (Green 2002, 124).

### 2.2 Consonant Cluster Reduction

*Consonant cluster reduction* is a phonological process in which certain combinations of consonants at the final positions of words are reduced. This might have two possible explanations. The first assumes the consonant cluster reduction process to be the originator.



Under this account, the final consonant clusters are intact and are deleted under certain circumstances. In another account, the origins of AAVE play a role. Given that African languages lack final consonant clusters, it is conceivable that it influenced AAVE in this matter. There are some specific examples of reduction:

- (1)
- a. ct (*contact* → ['kɒntæk]),
  - b. ft (*left* → [lef]),
  - c. ld (*cold* → [kəʊl]),
  - d. nd (*hand* → [hæn]),
  - e. pt (*adopt* → [ə'dɒp]),
  - f. st (*test* → [tes])

(Bailey and Thomas 2022, 95; Green 2002, 107-8)

### 2.3 G-dropping

When the suffix -ing is pronounced as *n* rather than *ng* sound in words than one syllable, AAVE speakers pronounce these words as follows:

- (2)
- a. *checking* → *checkin*
  - b. *feeling* → *feelin*
  - c. *opening* → *openin*

(Green 2002, 121-2)

Although this feature is very widespread not only among AAVE speakers but among English speakers in general, according to Fasold (1981), it is statistically associated with informal speech styles, speakers from lower classes. It is more commonly used in the South than in the North (Fasold 1981, 167).

### 2.4 Devoicing

This phonological feature deals with consonants at the end of words, where voiced consonants (such as *b*, *d*, *g*) become voiceless (*p*, *t*, *k*) as a result of a process called devoicing. Devoicing can very often create ambiguity and result in misunderstandings (Green 2002, 116).

(3)

- a. *feed* → *feet*
- b. *cab* → *cap*
- c. *pig* → *pick*

(Green 2002, 116)

### 3 LEXICAL FEATURES

From a linguistic perspective, understanding the phonology or morphosyntax of the variety is usually brought to the fore. However, in the legal space, addressed in the analytical part, the lexicon and word choice are equally crucial (King and Rickford 2016, 967).

The lexicon of AAVE is often viewed as slang by many Americans, which is not entirely inaccurate, as slang is a natural element of any language variety. However, it occupies only a small part of the lexicon and is used by juveniles, serving them for specific social purposes. Among the sharing lexicons, mostly with SAE, AAVE has its own expressions, which are sometimes unfamiliar to speakers of SAE. (Green 2004, 79-80).

AAVE adjectives *womanish* and *mannish*, as noted in Green (2004, 79-80), relate to such behavior in which the actors perform inadequately for their ages. *Ashy* is the adjective that names very dry skin. Another adjective Green mentioned marks someone's arrogance by the term *saddity*.

King and Rickford (2016, 968) address racial terms in their article, which are *nigga* and *cracker*. The previous term originated from the racially derogatory term *nigger*. Although these terms are very similar in the sense of their pronunciation, their usage isn't interchangeable. The term *nigga* is used as a self-referential term among African Americans, while the term *nigger* remains to be very offensive (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary n.d.). The latter term *cracker* is a pejorative name for a poor white person, often used to refer to the ones from the South (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary n.d.).

As slang is widely affected by African American youth, we cannot omit their contribution to the language. Terms such as *def* and *dope* describe something that is superb, *chillin* or *cool* refer to the state of calmness (Smitherman 2022, 224-6).

The influence of African Americans on popular music and its lexicon is evident from AAVE-based terms such as *jazz*, *riff*, *jam*, *hip hop*, and *rap* (Wolfram and Schilling 2015, 119).

## 4 MORPHOSYNTACTIC FEATURES

The sentence structure of AAVE is often mistakenly considered to be wrong by speakers of other English varieties. However, AAVE maintains the same subject-verb-object word order in canonical sentences as other English varieties (Martin and Wolfram 2022, 11). Its distinctiveness lies in the *verbal markers*, which resemble some auxiliary verbs in SAE, in unique *preverbal markers*, and other morphosyntactic features that are discussed in this chapter, such as the *possessive -'s absence*, *plural -s absence*, *zero copula*, and more.

### 4.1 Preverbal Markers

Green (2002, 70) identifies three preverbal markers of AAVE in her book: *finna*, *steady*, and *come*. Each marker is exemplified by the AAVE sentence (a) and its SAE (b) equivalent below (4, 5, 6).

#### 4.1.1 Finna

*Finna* occurs in environments before the verbs in their base form, which are not inflected for tense or subject-verb agreement. *Finna* represents a near future, and its SAE representation would be *going to*, *ready to*, or *about to*. *Finna* is variable, and it can be found in AAVE under the terms *fitna*, *fixna*, or *fixina* (Green 2002, 70-1).

(4)

- a. *I ain't help you, I'm fitna leave.*
- b. *I won't help you, I'm about to leave.*

#### 4.1.2 Steady

*Steady*, on the contrary to *finna*, precedes a verb in its progressive form. The meaning of *steady* intensifies the manner of the verb that follows. There are some exceptions, like the verbs *have*, *know*, and *own*, because they cannot be progressive, nor can their meanings be intensified (Green 2002, 71-2).

(5)

- a. *Amy steady screaming for nothing.*
- b. *Amy is consistently screaming for no reason.*

### 4.1.3 Come

According to Spears (1982), *come* can function as a semi-auxiliary verb reflecting the speaker's outrage when it precedes verbs in the progressive aspect.

(6)

- a. *Don't come telling me it was my responsibility.*
- b. *Don't try to tell it was my responsibility.*

(7) \* *She came wearing a hoodie and sweatpants.*

In sentence (7), *come* does not serve as a verbal marker as it is in the past tense nor provides a sign of indignation (Green 2002, 22).

## 4.2 Verbal Markers

In AAVE, verbal markers, also known as aspectual markers, carry important meanings related to time or how actions are viewed (Green 2002, 44-5).

### 4.2.1 Stressed Been

African American Vernacular English *stressed been* (*BIN*) is a morphosyntactic feature that indicates a remote past. This feature is used to express either (8) a state or habit that started in the remote past and continues up to the present utterance or (9) a completed action that started and ended up in the remote past (Green 2002, 44-5).

(8)

- a. *She BIN seeing him.*
- b. *She has been seeing him for a long time.*

(9)

- a. *Michael BIN forgave her.*
- b. *Michael forgave her a long time ago.*

(10)

- a. *They been waiting for the train.*
- b. *They have been waiting for the train.*

As visible from the examples above, the AAVE verbal marker *BIN* and SAE marker *been* (10) both appear in AAVE. What sets them apart is their stress and meaning. While the variant *BIN* is stressed, *been* is not and appears in perfective contexts (Green 2002, 55).

#### 4.2.2 Be

Pullum (1999, 44-5) refutes the myth that AAVE misuses or omits the copula due to ignorance. Instead, he points out that AAVE can omit the copula under certain circumstances, which will be discussed in the subsequent chapter. To address the “misuse” part, the myth alleges that AAVE employs incorrect forms of the copula when, in reality, it expresses habitual aspects. This verbal marker *be* appears in AAVE language to indicate recurring actions (11a) and conveys the same meaning as SAE adverbs *usually* or *always*, as illustrated in (11b) (Green 2002, 47-52).

(11)

- a. *They be working twelve-hour shifts.*
- b. *They usually/always work twelve-hour shifts.*

#### 4.2.3 Done

The function of the last-mentioned verbal marker *done* (dən) is to indicate the perfective aspect and, according to Dillard (1972), to mark a recently finished action (12) or an action that has just started and is still going on compared to a time reference (13) (Mufwene 1992, 154). Green (2002) refers to this marker as *dən* to distinguish it from the past participle of the verb *do* and to highlight that this marker is unstressed.

(12)

- a. *I dən lost my keys!*
- b. *I have just lost my keys!*

(13)

- a. *The meal dən made me feel sick.*
- b. *The meal has made me feel sick.*

### 4.3 Plural -s Absence

The formulation of the plural is a matter of inflectional morphology. To express a plurality of people or things, SAE attaches *s* to most nouns. Sometimes, AAVE English speakers omit

the inflectional *s* (Rickford and Rickford 2000, 110). After a numeral or any other expression of quantity, which is self-explanatory, variety does not change the noun (Dillard 1972, 61).

(14) *five year, a couple hour, ten bottle*

Although Rickford and Rickford (2000, 110) attribute the tendency to omit plural *s* to a small number of AAVE speakers, I have chosen to address it as it will be relevant in the theoretical part.

#### 4.4 Possessive 's Absence

SAE uses possessive 's to indicate genitive contexts. AAVE doesn't require it because the possessive relation of nouns is demonstrated by the word order itself. If the previous feature was rather rare, ditching possessive 's is for AAVE speakers much more common (Rickford and Rickford 2000, 112).

(15) *That's the church responsibility* (Green 2002, 102).

#### 4.5 Copula Absence

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Pullum (1999, 45-6) dispels the myth of careless omission of the copula *be* and names the conditions under which it must be retained. The copula cannot be omitted if it:

- i. carries emphasis,
- ii. appears at the end of a phrase,
- iii. is negated,
- iv. is in the base form or imperative,
- v. is in the past tense,
- vi. is in the first-person singular,
- vii. is at the beginning of the clause,
- viii. occurs in question tags,
- ix. is in the form of habitual *be* or remote past *been*.

The copula can only be left out if any of these conditions are not met (Pullum 1999, 45-6). According to scholars like Rickford (1998), Baugh (1979), and Holm (1984), this feature

suggests a possible creole heritage of AAVE. They argue that in languages like Jamaican Creole or Gullah, adjectives don't need a preceding copula since they are a subclass of verbs. AAVE shows the same pattern visible in the following examples:

(16) *She nice, They silly, ...*

(Cukor-Avilla 1999, 341)

#### 4.6 Third Person Singular Present Tense -s Absence

In SAE, verbs typically require adding -s suffix to indicate the third person singular subjects, while the base form is used for other subjects (Rickford and Rickford 2000, 111). AAVE follows its rule mentioned in Rickford and Rickford (2000, 112), which says that “present tense verbs with third-person singular subjects should not be treated any differently from verbs with other subjects.”

(17) *She sleep with eyes wide open.*

#### 4.7 Negative Concord

Negative concord, commonly referred to as multiple negation or pleonastic negation, is characterized by the use of multiple negative elements within a single sentence (18a). Such a sentence would be interpreted in SAE with a single negator (18b), as SAE does not permit negative concord (Martin and Wolfram 2022, 18).

(18)

a. *They don't know nothing about no books.*

b. *They don't know anything about any books.*

Geoffrey Pullum (1999) defends this feature against critics of AAVE, who claim that using two negators in a sentence is logically incorrect because they offset each other and make a positive sentence. Pullum opposes this claim, saying it is illogical to assume someone to use two negatives to express the exact opposite. Moreover, along with AAVE, there is a London dialect Cockney, that shows negative concord, and world languages such as Italian, Spanish, Russian (Pullum 1999, 48-9) or Czech.



#### 4.8 Ain't

Negative concord is not as prominent in AAVE as the use of *ain't*. Negative counterparts of the tenses are expressed by the distribution of *ain't*, whose meaning varies depending on the context of distribution (Fickett 1975, 86-9). Rickford and Rickford (2000, 122) list the possible equivalents of *ain't* to SAE as follows “am not, isn't, aren't, don't, hasn't, and haven't.”

(19)

- a. *She ain't never felt alone.*
- b. *She hasn't ever felt alone. / She has never felt alone.*

#### 4.9 Existential it instead there

In AAVE, existential *it* serves as a substitute for standard English *there* and it states the existence of something or somebody (Green 2002, 85-6).

(20) *It ain't nothing to see.*

## 5 ATTITUDES TOWARDS AAVE SPEAKERS

In the previous chapters, we explored phonological, lexical, and morphosyntactic features. We demonstrated that AAVE is a valid language system following its own set of rules and that “African American Vernacular English is not standard English with mistakes,” as suggested in the essay title by Geoffrey Pullum (1999).

Understanding the historical context and linguistic features of AAVE sheds light on the biases that often shape societal perceptions of its speakers. This chapter considers the white attitudes towards African Americans concerning their language and intelligence from the Civil Rights Movement era to the present day. It includes a section dedicated to how African Americans themselves perceive AAVE, and the last issue addressed is cultural appropriation.

### 5.1 The Civil Rights Movement Era

To the best of my knowledge, there is no well-known literature dealing specifically with the attitudes towards AAVE during this era. However, since white attitudes towards African American speakers and their ethnicity are closely related, the evolution of white perceptions of African American intelligence serves us as a reflection of attitudes towards AAVE speakers.

The Civil Rights Movement, taking place between the 1950s and 1960s, has ended systemic discrimination prevalent in the United States for decades. Enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 became a turning point for African American society because it forbade discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, gender, or national origin (Aiken, Salmon, and Hanges 2013, 383; Dwyer 2000, 660).

Language attitudes research since its onset in the 1930s showed that people tend to judge speakers’ intelligence and social status based on their language variety. Generally, people using standard language varieties are perceived as more competent than non-standard varieties (Cargil, Takai, and Rodríguez 2006, 443-4).

Between the years 1939 and 1965, many surveys were conducted to gauge the opinions of white Americans toward African Americans. The institutions conducting these surveys were The National Opinion Research Center (NORC), the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, and Gallup. These institutions’ surveys explored issues such as intelligence, job opportunities, and housing (Schwarz 1967, 1-2).

In 1939, the Roper Center first measured white American perceptions of African American intelligence by polling over five thousand white participants. The survey asked if they believed African Americans were either more, less, or equally intelligent compared to themselves. Data showed that 71% of respondents perceived African Americans as less intelligent, while only 22% believed they were equal. In 1942, the NORC posed a very similar question. This time, the number of people believing in the equality of their intelligence was 42%. This rising tendency of favorable perceptions climbed up from 70 to 80% by 1964. However, when perceptions of Southern people and non-Southerners were compared, a huge disparity emerged. Although the Southern perceptions reported a rising tendency as well, throughout the years, they viewed African American intelligence less positively than non-Southerners did (Schwarz 1967, 19-21).

## 5.2 Attitudes after the Civil Rights Act

Schwarz's study (1967) proves that White Americans were becoming more liberal and accepting toward African Americans between the 1940s and 1960s. Condran (1979, 463) says that, in general, young, non-Southern, well-educated people tended to be the most liberal because they grew up in a more accepting environment and were more sensitive to the influence of events around them. Their liberality comes from intellectual enlightenment and the fact that they were exposed to different racial socialization and social pressures that shape their attitudes toward race (Condran 1979, 464).

Experimental studies of the 1980s and 1990s showed that the perceptions of speech are influenced by social and linguistic knowledge, in which Bender (2005), cited by Meyerhoff (2019), highlighted the importance of expectations in one's perceptions of someone leaving out the copula. Her test showed that people familiar with AAVE rated the speakers as "uneducated" when they did unexpected things, such as leaving out the copula (Meyerhoff 2019, 75).

## 5.3 The Oakland School Board Controversy

While the literature on the attitudes towards AAVE speakers from the Civil Rights Movement era was limited, there was no shortage of material discussing the Oakland school board controversy, also referred to as *the Ebonics* controversy. As we already know from the first chapter, the term *Ebonics* was used in the past as a referential term for AAVE. It was coined in 1975 but was not fully adopted; however, after this event that parodied and

mocked this term, many African American speakers were discouraged from using it (Pullum 1999, 40).

The Oakland School Board attempted to gain recognition of AAVE within the educational system. This well-intentioned step resulted in controversy, sparked a worldwide media debate, and created a picture of opinions on AAVE of the time.

In 1996, the school board announced that it would be changing educational policies with respect to the linguistic backgrounds of its students. They aimed to recognize AAVE as a distinct language variety of their school. This recognition was reasonable, given that half of Oakland's population was African American.

What made this situation controversial was an upcoming wave of mockery, ridicule, and rage in the media. Many newspapers and magazines, including the *New York Times*, published articles in which they referred to AAVE as black slang and ridiculed the idea of the Oakland School Board, declaring it as a distinct language (Pullum 1999, 39-40). They accused the board of a lack of proficiency in teaching correct grammar and fostering lazy speech (Ronkin and Karn 1999, 361-2), and The newspaper *Economist* used the term Ebonics to create a seemingly humorous headline with reference to at that-time recent virus Ebola: "The Ebonics Virus." The media fed on the controversy for months (Pullum 1999, 39-40).

#### **5.4 Contemporary Attitudes and Cultural Appropriation**

While teaching about AAVE, McWhorter (2017) noticed that White students were confident in claiming that they could speak it. He attributes it to the fact that these kids were the first generation raised during the peak of the hip-hop era. However, McWhorter points out that although these kids may sound black, it is based only on their slang expressions. They lack the grammatical features typical for AAVE, which supports the fact that they perceive AAVE as nothing more than slang (McWhorter 2017).

When addressing contemporary attitudes towards AAVE, we must not omit cultural appropriation, which is a phenomenon that plays a huge role in today's world of social media. On social platforms such as TikTok, Instagram or Facebook, AAVE words such as "slay", "lit", and "lowkey" are often being used by non-African American speakers without them being aware of its origins (Badgotri 2023; Chery 2022). And that is the definition of cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation is "the act of taking or using things from a culture that is not your own, especially without showing that you understand or respect this culture" (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.). Habitually, it happens when dominant cultures adopt

elements of minority cultures (Elmahdi and Hezam 2022, 201). Among words of other cultures, the items that can become objects of cultural appropriation can be traditions, behavior, ideologies, works of arts and stories (Elmahdi and Hezam 2022, 200).

Artists such as singers and actors often incorporate features of other language variation in order to expand their audience or show their ability in speaking different linguistic variations. Elmahdi and Hezam (2008, 201) have highlighted that the determining factor in whether such behavior is considered artistic influence or cultural exploitation is the dominance of the culture in question. For minority cultures such borrowing is according to Nittle (2021) “exploitative because it robs oppressed groups of the credit they deserve”. Among white American artists that were accused of AAVE cultural appropriation in last few years, there are popular names of singers such as Ariana Grande, Iggy Azalea, Olivia Rodrigo or Billie Eilish (Elmahdi and Hezam 2022, 205).

The popularity of social media contributed to growth of cultural appropriation by easier access to other cultures (Elmahdi and Hezam 2022, 200; Young 2008). Generation Z plays a significant role in today’s cultural appropriation of AAVE. Since they are the first generation raised in the internet age with a huge influence of social media, due to their internet hyperconnectivity, the words they use are very quickly spread across the internet and adopted by many other speakers (Badgotri 2023). When this happens, the words used by non-African American speakers that become viral are often inappropriately attributed to gen Z as their lingo (Chery 2022). This has sparked a way of criticism, such as in the case of the *Saturday Night Live* sketch called *Gen Z Hospital*, which tried to parody American teenagers for the way they speak. However, the terms used they considered to be teen slang of SAE were in fact of AAVE origin. Rickford considered the sketch to be an embarrassment and commented on the use of AAVE in comedy that it "negates the powerful, positive ways in which African American English is used in everyday life and by writers, preachers, singers, etc., to capture the vicissitudes and aspirations of everyday life" (Moises 2021).

## 5.5 Attitudes of African Americans

In Fordham’s (1996, 114) ethnographic study, a daughter commented on her mother’s tendency to switch between accents. She said that her mother would sound white when talking on the phone or interacting with people outside the home, but within the household, she would switch back to her regular black speech. The daughter believed that by this practice, her mother was trying to be someone she wasn't and that she herself spoke the same way all the time. Fordham (1996, 114) noted, that these efforts to conform AAVE speakers

to norms of SAE are often misunderstood by African American children. This practice, called *code-switching*, encompasses changing the style of speech in order to align with different cultural norms and optimize one's comfort (McCluney et al. 2019).

Baugh (1983) and Dillard (1972) have previously addressed this issue and noted that many AAVE speakers tend to change their style of speech to fit their social circumstances. Dillard (1972) further observed that this phenomenon is more common among adults than younger speakers (Baugh 2002, 158).

According to Lippi-Green (2012, 196), African American speakers are aware of the necessity and importance of assimilating to SAE. She further states that it would be very hard to find an AAVE speaker who hasn't assimilated with SAE. The pressure to conform to SAE may stem from societal perceptions, as highlighted by Smitherman (1997) in Lippi-Green (2012, 189). He suggests that African Americans convinced themselves that the only way to succeed is to eliminate AAVE usage. Based on media interviews, people tend to predominantly associate AAVE speakers with poverty, victimization, or criminal activity (Lippi-Green 2012, 189-90).

## **II. ANALYSIS**

## 6 AAVE ON TRIAL

This case study represents how vernacular languages such as AAVE are perceived in American legal space, particularly in courtroom settings, and examines how its speakers are treated. Due to ample interest from linguists and researchers in this specific legal case, a large amount of information was available, only with exception of the official court transcripts.

### 6.1 Introduction

In June 2013, a nineteen-year-old high school student Rachel Jeantel played a pivotal role in the trial of George Zimmerman. She was a key witness in the State of Florida v. George Zimmerman judicial process in which Zimmerman was tried for shooting a seventeen-year-old African American teenager Trayvon Martin with fatal consequences. The night of Martin's killing, Jeantel was reportedly on the phone with Trayvon when Zimmerman approached him, and a fight ensued. Due to the fact that she was the last person to talk with the victim, Jeantel's testimony was crucial for the prosecution (Kurinec and Weaver 2019, 803).

During her testimonies, she used AAVE, and despite speaking in a highly systematic manner, most parties involved found her speech difficult to understand. As a result of this, she was not perceived as credible or vulnerable, which is how she should have been treated (Rickford and King 2016, 948).

Because the jury was predominantly White and mostly not familiar with her speech variety, it caused that her crucial testimony was disregarded and Zimmermann was acquitted of second-degree murder. The impact of her speech on the outcome of this case is a matter of debate (Kurinec and Weaver 2019, 803-804), however, the fact that, according to one juror interviewed after the trial, neither Jeantel nor her testimony was mentioned during the extensive jury deliberations suggests that her dialect had some influence, although unclear to what extent. Rachel's testimony received widespread media attention, and due to its linguistic and race nature, it also drew the attention of linguists advocating for recognition of AAVE (Rickford and King 2016, 950).



## 6.2 The Circumstances of the Incident

A seventeen-year-old high school student, Trayvon Martin, and his father went to the Retreat Twin Lakes in Sanford, Florida, to visit the father's fiancée. On the evening of the 26th of February, Trayvon went shopping at a local corner shop. After a series of break-ins dating back to 2011, the Twin Lake residents formed a community watch program and appointed a twenty-eight-year-old Latino American, George Zimmerman, as a coordinator. Martin's wandering in a hooded jacket attracted the attention of Zimmerman, who was on duty that night. In concern, he called 911 to report a suspicious individual "who is up to no good" (Linder 2017). It was already his sixth report on the same matter, including an incident in which he reported two black men scoping out before a burglary. As Zimmerman made the call to the police, Martin, while talking on the phone with his friend, was heading back to the house, already conscious of being followed.

Regardless of the Sanford Police dispatcher's advice to refrain from pursuing the suspect, Zimmerman kept tracking Martin (Graeff, Stempeck, and Zuckerman 2014). Martin confronted Zimmerman for following him (Kelley 2013), and an altercation ensued, which was audibly witnessed by his friend over the phone. After the connection dropped, they started fighting, which prompted several neighbors to call 911 to report an incident. After this fight, which Zimmerman maintains Martin ignited, he used his gun and shot Martin in the chest.

Upon the police's arrival on the scene of the crime and Martin's declaration of death, injured Zimmerman confessed to shooting Martin in self-defense. After being taken into custody, he underwent a few hours of interrogation before ultimately being released (Graeff, Stempeck, and Zuckerman 2014; Linder 2017).

## 6.3 The Trial of George Zimmerman

In April 2012, a Florida state prosecutor pressed charges against Zimmerman for second-degree murder (Graeff, Stempeck, & Zuckerman, 2014), the trial itself commenced in the summer of 2013 and took about a month (Sullivan 2016, 1).

Rachel Jeantel, the prosecution's key witness, testified for nearly six hours over two days, longer than any other witness (King and Rickford 2016, 950). Her testimony was significant for the prosecution because only she could provide an account of the events leading up to Martin's homicide.

She testified that Martin noticed he was being followed and was attempting to evade Zimmerman by walking faster. She described him as trying to escape so hard that he was breathing heavily on the phone. Rachel's story directly contradicted Zimmerman's, who insisted that Martin wasn't trying to escape him (King and Rickford 2016, 956-7); instead, on Zimmerman's way back to the car, Martin approached him, and the fight ensued. Consequently, after sustaining wounds from the fight, Zimmerman, concerned about his life, used lethal force to kill Martin in self-defense (Brooks 2015, 536).

The prosecution knew they were going to face a difficult task in convicting Zimmerman of murder because of the law surrounding these events called Stand Your Ground (Öhman, n.d., 10), which is Florida's controversial self-defense legislation enacted in 2005. Regardless of whether at home or in public, citizens are allowed to employ lethal force when necessary to protect themselves from potential harm or injury threats (Humphreys et al. 2018, 68).

#### 6.4 Linguistic Characteristics of Rachel Jeantel

This section concentrates on Rachel Jeantel's speech during the proceeding. As a result of her family background, her speech exhibits features of not only AAVE but also other linguistic varieties influenced by her Haitian and Dominican heritage (Sullivan 2017, 51). To analyze Rachel Jeantel's speech, I had access to her two-day testimony, which lasted almost six hours. However, its poor quality made it unreliable. As I couldn't rely solely on this source, I had to mostly depend on the transcripts produced by linguists and previous researchers.

To illustrate Rachel Jeantel's speech, I use excerpts from both official court transcripts and unofficial transcripts. This transcript is taken from Rickford and King's article (2016), where they annotated all three features present in the following excerpt by a single annotation symbol "∅". For greater clarity, I included additional annotation symbols. To represent copula absence, I kept their original symbol "∅", to mark possessive 's absence, I used "●", and to illustrate plural -s absence, "⊖."

- (21) Excerpt from the examination of Rachel Jeantel (RJ) by defense attorney Bernie de la Rionda (BR), recorded by court reporter Shelly Coffey (CR), day 1.

RJ: He said he ∅ from—he—I asked him where he ∅ at. An he told me he ∅ at the back of his daddy● fiancée● house, like in the area

where his daddy● fiancée—BY his daddy● fiancée● house.  
Like—I said, ‘Oh, you better keep running.’ *He said, naw, he lost him.*

BR: Okay. Let me stop you a second. This—this lady [the Court Reporter] has got to take everything down, so you make sure you’re—Okay. So after he said he lost him, what happened then?

RJ: And he say he—he Ø by—um—the area that his daddy● house **is**, his daddy● fiancée● house **is**, and I told him ‘Keep running.’ He—and he said, ‘Naw,’ he’ll just walk faster. I’m like, ‘Oh oh.’ And I—I ain’t complain, ’cause he was breathing hard, so I understand why. Soo

BR: What—what happened after that?

RJ: And then, second later—ah—Trayvon come and say, ‘Oh, shit!’

CR: [Unintelligible—requesting clarification] ‘Second later?’

RJ: A couple secondØ later, Trayvon come and say, ‘Oh, shit!’

(King and Rickford 2016, 956)

In this excerpt (21) from the first day of her testimony, we can observe that the most frequently occurring AAVE morphosyntactic feature is the possessive ’s absence. As noticeable, all her eight potential possessive ’s tokens are unmarked, while in SAE, they would be present. Another variant present is the plural -s absence. The only means by which we can determine these tokens as zero plural is the expression of quantity a *couple*.

The last feature typical feature of AAVE that occurred in the excerpt is the copula absence. The retention of the copula in two cases marked in bold in the transcript highlights her systematic omission of the copula *be*. As previously discussed (4.5), the copula cannot be omitted if it appears at the end of a phrase.

Another AAVE feature occurring in other Jeantel’s utterances was *stressed been* (BIN) discussed in the theoretical part (King and Rickford 2016, 974). Her sentence *I was BIN payin’ attention* was challenging for the court reporter and after a few inquiries, she finally transcribed it as *I was been paying attention* (Sullivan 2016, 11-2). But the intended meaning of her utterance with the verbal marker BIN was *I was paying attention and I still am*.

King and Rickford (2016, 967) revealed the influence of Haitian Creole when Jeantel said *I wanted to talk to my mother for I could—for she could agree for me to talk to her*. The meaning of *for* could be translated to SAE as ‘so that’ or ‘in order that’. Another possibility of Haitian influence arose in her pretrial deposition when answering the defense attorney on question whether she is employed. Jeantel answered *No, I live under my mother*. This expression, unintelligible to Don West, is very similar to Haitian ‘live under somebody’s roof’ (King and Rickford 2016, 968).

## 6.5 Errors in The Court Transcripts

As stated earlier, Rachel’s language was difficult for SAE speakers to understand. During her testimony, she was frequently asked to repeat herself by all parties, including the court reporter, which indicates the possibility of a lower quality of the transcripts produced. She, however, was able to comprehend the SAE used by the prosecution, defense, jurors, and other individuals involved in court proceedings without any difficulties, which proves her ability to interact (Öhman n.d., 11) and in some cases, her ability to convert her sentences from AAVE to SAE. This suggests that she was familiar with the language used in the courtroom (Sullivan 2017, 16). This chapter addresses inaccuracies that arose during the transcriptions of Rachel Jeantel’s testimonials.

The words of Rachel Jeantel’s testimony were recorded by a White woman living in Sanford, Florida, speaking SAE, Shelly Coffey (Sullivan 2017, 7). Sullivan analyzed the official audio recording from Jeantel’s two-day testimony and found out that out of the 108 Shelly Coffey’s participation tokens, 107 were addressed to Jeantel. The remaining one token was addressed to the defense attorney while quoting Trayvon Martin verbatim (Sullivan 2017, 7-8).

Challenges in comprehension of Rachel’s speech variety were also evident during cross-examination proceedings, in which witnesses are typically asked to confirm their prior allegations based on the official transcript (Sullivan 2017, 202-203). The problem is that there was no single transcript possessed by all parties, but there were multiple transcripts, which greatly differed from each other. The question inquired by the judge during one stand, “whose transcript do I have?” only justifies this claim (Öhman n.d., 11).

These variations of transcripts resulted in the defense attorney trying to challenge Jeantel’s testimony by presenting her own mistakenly transcribed utterances. As the defense repeated her last testimony inaccurately and she corrected them, defense by saying, “I know that’s what you’re saying today”, tried to demean her credibility even more and accuse her

of contradicting herself. At that point, the prosecution attorney stepped in (Öhman n.d., 11) and showed the defense their transcript confirming Jeantel's claim (Sullivan 2017, 203).

Below, three different renditions of Jeantel's utterance stating that she could hear Trayvon saying *get off, get off me*, are presented:

(22)

- a. *I couldn't hear Trayvon.*
- b. *I coulda hear Trayvon.*
- c. *I could, an' it was Trayvon.*

(Sullivan 2016, 13; 2017, 203)

Example (22a) shows what rendition of Jeantel's utterance was possessed by the defense, (22b) presents the prosecution's version, and (22c) is what Rickford maintains she said. Based on the transcriptions shown, the one produced by Rickford seems to be the most accurate. Not only does his expertise in AAVE surpass that of the other parties, but the transcription he presented is semantically sound, as Jeantel was completely certain that she could hear Trayvon as she had already testified previously. The prosecution's interpretation that she *coulda hear Trayvon* represents a possibility rather than certainty, as the AAVE variant *coulda* means *could have* in SAE. Despite the defense's attempt to catch Jeantel in inconsistency to her previous testimony, she expresses herself by saying, "Trust me, they messed up. I could hear Trayvon" (Sullivan 2017, 203-4).

(23) Excerpt from the cross-examination of Jeantel (Witness) by Don West (Defense), day 2 of Jeantel's testimony.

Defense: On the transcript that Mr. De la Rionda has, in that, your answer was I coulda hear Trayvon.

Judge: We'll complete her answer, please.

Defense: Oh, sure. Could you tell who was saying that. I coulda heard Trayvon.

Witness: I could hear Trayvon.

Defense: Coulda is what this says.

Witness: Trust me. They messed up. I could hear Trayvon.

(Sullivan 2017, 203)

During the cross-examination, the court reporter made yet another mistake when the defense attorney was questioning Rachel Jeantel about Sybrina Fulton, the mother of Martin Trayvon. The defense attorney was questioning Rachel about Sybrina's request to talk to Jeantel's mother to get permission for her to speak with an attorney after Martin's death. This all was because Rachel lied to Martin's mother about her age, so she mistakenly thought Rachel was a minor.

(24) Excerpt from the cross-examination of Rachel Jeantel (RJ) by the defense attorney Don West.

Defense: Your mother was out of the country, though?

RJ: Yes.

Defense: So --

RJ: She don't [ain't] know [that] my mother was out of the country. She don't know my mother [mama].

Defense: No. [You know,] I was just confirming that you knew your mother was out of the country.

RJ: Yes, I knew. [0]

Defense: And you wanted to talk with your mother or she --

RJ: She wanted, she wanted to talk to my mother. She knew my age. [She ain't know my age.]

Defense: You lied to her and said you were 16?

CR: Wait. Wait. Wait. [0]

RJ: Yes.

Judge: Did you take that down?

CR: She wanted to talk to my mother?

RJ: She wanted to speak to my mother before she talked to me.

CR: Did you say she knew my age?

RJ: She knew [don't know] my age.

Judge: She didn't know my age. [She doesn't know my age.]

CR: Thank you.

(Sullivan 2017, 204-6)

All the parts underlined don't correspond with what Jeantel had said based on the transcript produced by Sullivan (2017) and serve as an illustration of how many mistakes the court reporter committed in such a short excerpt. Jeantel's actual words are illustrated in the square brackets. The most critical part of this excerpt is when the court reporter misheard Jeantel's answer *She don't know my age* and transcribed it as *She knew my age*, which are two very different sentences.

This paragraph presents the last instance of a transcription error, this time involving racial slur.

(25) Excerpt from an official court transcript by Shelly Coffey (CR) recording the examination of Rachel Jeantel (RJ) by prosecutor Bernie de la Rionda (BR).

BR: Okay. And after he used, pardon my language, he said, oh, shit, what happened then?

RJ: The --

CR: I'm sorry?

RJ: The nigger's – the nigger behind me.

BR: Okay. He used the N word again and said the nigger is behind me?

(King and Rickford 2013)

Shelly Coffey transcribed the N-word used by Rachel Jeantel with *-er* spelling at the end rather than with a vowel *-a*, such as in the word *nigga*. While these words are very similar in their pronunciation, they vastly differ in their semantic meanings. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.), the term used by the court reporter is “an extremely offensive word for a Black person,” whilst the term *nigga* is “a way of saying or writing nigger” (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.).

However, when The Washington Post (2018) was interviewing individuals from diverse backgrounds, including professors, music artists, comedians, college students, and others representing both African Americans and white Americans, with the exception of one White American, they uniformly agreed that the difference between the two terms extends far beyond mere pronunciation. Specifically, comedian Tehran Von Gharsi stated that “nigger is an ignorant person...used to degrade Blacks historically...nigga...it's like the word dude, or the word brother...” (Washington Post 2018). Additionally, many of them

highlighted the importance of the intent behind the word *nigga*. Professor Lanita Jacobs emphasizes that even among African Americans the word *nigga* can be offensive if it is used in a derogatory manner (Washington Post 2018).

So, the word Rachel Jeantel used in her testimony wasn't *nigger*, as it was transcribed by the court reporter, but African American term *nigga*. In the CNN interview conducted by Piers Morgan (PM), Rachel explains what her understanding of the word *nigga* is.

(26) A transcript from the CNN interview of Rachel Jeantel by interviewer Piers Morgan

PM: Was there anything you wished you had said, right, when you finished and you went home and you saw the reaction, and everyone giving you a hard time. So was there anything you wished you have said when you were in there?

RJ: Nigga.

PM: Why?

RJ: People -- the whole world say it's a racist word. Mind you -- mind you, around 2000, that was not. They changed it around, I think. It started spelling it n-i-g-g-a. Nigga.

PM: What does that mean to you, that -- that way of spelling it? What does that word mean to you?

RJ: That means a male.

PM: A black male?

RJ: No, any kind of male.

PM: Black or white?

RJ: Any kind -- Chinese could say *nigga*. That's my Chino *nigga*. They could say that.

PM: And rappers and everything use it in the music? And that's what they mean?

RJ: They all say it. Yes, but *nigger* -- I advise you not to be by black people, because they're not going to have it like that.

PM: Why?

RJ: Because that's the racist word.

PM: They're two different words.

RJ: Yes.

(CNN Transcripts n.d.)



According to Jeantel, the truly racist word is *nigger* which means that she would never say that in her testimony as it is listed in the official court transcript. As it is visible from this excerpt, she perceives the word *nigga* as a universal term labeling any kind of male, regardless ethnicity. Rahman (2012, 162-3) opposes and claims that *nigga* is a word used solely among African American community, because it is derived from the historical suffering experienced by this ethnic group, therefore it is a specific feature of their culture.

## 6.6 Public Attitudes and Treatment of Rachel Jeantel

Starting with her testimony, Rachel Jeantel had to face taunts of her language. Her credibility, language and even intelligence was questioned by the public. She was widely pilloried in the media and on the social media platforms. Some of these remarks were posted beneath a YouTube video recording of the second day of her testimony:

(27) YouTube video comments under the excerpt of video recording posted by CNN:

“Her IQ is the equal to the room temperature in the court room.” (@1971player)

“An example of how our education system has failed.” (@shadowfax0009)

(CNN 2013)

The ethnicity of the victim, defendant and witness was a prominent theme throughout the whole trial, since the defendant was accused of being racially motivated against the victim (Sullivan 2017, 1-2). The very first day of Jeantel’s testimony, she used the term *creepy-ass cracker* to describe George Zimmerman, quoting Martin's own words. This phrase had a very harmful impact on how Jeantel and Martin were perceived by the jurors from that moment on. After the trial, one juror was said to believe that the jurors were done with Jeantel once they heard that (Rickford and King 2016, 969). The offensive term *cracker* was mentioned in the chapter devoted to lexicon. In this particular case, its derogatory meaning is amplified by *creepy-ass*, in which *-ass* serves as an intensifier to *creepy* description (Sullivan 2017, 191-2). The defense attorney exploited this racist phrase of Trayvon Martin to shift the burden of racism onto him (Sullivan 2017, 118).

Some people perceived her as illiterate because she was not able to read hand-written text, which Don West requested her to read. However, it was not like that she was unable to read at all, she struggled specifically with reading handwriting (Rickford and King 2016, 978-9). West responded to her difficulty with a biting remark: “Take as much time as you

want, read the whole thing, if you want. Or maybe we can wait until the morning” (Grossman 2013, 1:57:26). Don West repeatedly tried to mock her, often openly indicating he could not understand her. This was evident the first day of her testimony when discussing Martin’s way back to his father’s fiancée’s home on the night of the incident. After she provided her account, he paused and said, “I don’t follow you, sorry” (Grossman 2013, 46:34). Throughout the trial, the defense concentrated on highlighting Jeantel’s distinctive race, social background, and uncomfortable and rude demeanor to undermine her credibility (Carlin 2016, 479).

Carlin (2016) argues that this strategy comes from the perception of American courtroom as traditionally white space, which excludes people of color. Jeantel challenged this by expressing her black identity during her testimony, which ultimately resulted in the dismissal of her testimony (Carlin 2016, 484).

McWhorter (2013) offers insight in Jeantel’s uncomfortable demeanor by explaining that she comes from a different oral culture, where direct questioning is regarded as confrontational. He defends her intelligence by claiming that she is smart enough to speak Haitian Creole and AAVE and at the same time she understand SAE very well (McWhorter 2013).

## 7 HOUSING DISCRIMINATION

In this chapter, the focus is on the attitudes held towards speakers of AAVE within the context of housing. As a pioneer in the study of housing discrimination based on auditory cues, Baugh (2002) coined the concept of “linguistic profiling” to describe this phenomenon, which he had examined in his previous work (Baugh 1983). This concept parallels visual racial profiling in its auditory form (Baugh 2002, 155). Henderson (2001) also contributes to the topic of “language-focused discrimination” against AAVE speakers, as she names it, by sharing her own experience.

### 7.1 Attitudes Toward Black Housing Opportunities

Before I present Baugh’s study of housing discrimination against African American speakers, I find it beneficial to outline the evolution of white American stances on African Americans’ opportunities for housing. Schwarz (1967) summarized the trends of attitudes on this matter between the years 1944 and 1963 based on research conducted by organizations such as NORC or Roper organization dealing with public attitudes of white Americans toward African Americans. According to Schwarz, the results affected variables such as education or geographical background of respondents.

The first organization that polled White Americans to get their opinions on whether there was something to be done about improving the African American housing situation was the NORC organization in 1944. From the sample, 69% answered positively, 22% negatively, and the rest remained opinionless. An additional survey took place in 1963 in the predominantly white state of Minnesota. This time, respondents were asked to decide if African Americans were treated fairly or unfairly in housing opportunities, whereas unfair treatment was recognized by 47% of respondents. When the same question was posed in mainly black areas, White respondents from 59% believed African Americans were mistreated as well. From the results, it is evident that the white concern with the limitation of black opportunities in housing was slightly growing and that there was some awareness of housing inequality (Schwarz 1967, 51-3).

However, a very different stance was taken when they were asked if they would accept an African American neighbor, as shown in a 1965 study by Frank Westie. The question raised was whether people should be allowed to live where they want, to which 60% of people answered positively. But when the same research sample was asked if they would mind black families moving next door, answers took a different direction. Only 38%

wouldn't mind such a situation. The cause might be in white Americans' feeling threatened by black families moving into their white neighborhood because they feared it would lower the property's financial or symbolic value (Schwarz 1967, 53).

In 1939, the Roper organization raised a question regarding African Americans' right to live where they please, to which only 13% of respondents answered positively. In 1963 (survey by NORC) white residents remained to believe that they have the right to restrict African Americans from their neighborhoods. However, in this 1963 survey question were huge disparities dependent on the region and educational level of respondents. 60% of college-educated Southerners maintained that whites should not exclude blacks from their neighborhoods, while primary-level education or less Northerners agreed with the statement that they are entitled to keep them away. A similar pose to the less educated group of Northerners was taken by the group of educated Southerners, which was the least biased in the South (Schwarz 1967, 58-9).

## 7.2 Housing Discrimination Experiment

The first time John Baugh experienced linguistic profiling was in 1988 when he had to move due to academic issues to Palo Alto, which made him search for a suitable habitation. He made four phone calls to landlords who were advertising their apartments. As a university professor, during these phone calls, Baugh was using his highly professional voice, often referred to as a "white voice" by many. The procedure was the same for all calls. He outlined his situation as a visiting professor at Stanford, relocating to Palo Alto. No landlord, querying him for his race, scheduled an appointment with him. Upon his arrival to see the properties, he was denied seeing them (Baugh 2002, 158-9).

Henderson (2001) shares a very similar experience. As a speaker of AAVE and SAE, she also noticed differences between in-person encounters and those handled by phone. When she was searching for an apartment in Philadelphia, a year after John Baugh made his first phone call, she came to ask for a habitation to a large residential complex. When she got there, she was offered only one, a very unreasonably expensive apartment, with the excuse that no others were available at that time. The very next day, she made a phone call to the same complex and was told there were multiple less expensive apartments available. The reason for this sudden vacancy of several apartments is not coincidental. While speaking on the phone with the landlord, she used SAE (Henderson 2001).

These two experiences share the same baseline of discrimination in housing while dealing with landlords. However, what sets them apart is a reversed sequence of steps. While

there is no doubt that both Henderson and Baugh faced racial profiling, only Henderson can be said to have escaped linguistic profiling by verifying the availability of the apartment over the phone after the previous in-person encounter. Baugh understands that escaping such linguistic profiling is for AAVE speakers rare as not every speaker can switch their voice from “sounding black” to “sounding white” (Baugh 2002, 159).

### **7.2.1 Method for the Experiment**

Baugh hypothesized that landlords discriminate against tenants with undesirable accents based on the phone calls they make to apply for an apartment. To test his hypothesis, he made hundreds of phone calls (Rice 2006) across five cities with diverse racial structures (Baugh 2018, 101).

As already mentioned, this experiment on housing discrimination was instigated by Baugh’s personal experience of searching for habitation as an African American. From an early age, he was exposed to SAE, AAVE, and Chicano English, which ultimately formed his ability to speak three dialects, which were crucial for his experiment (Baugh 2018, 102).

He called each landlord advertising property three times, employing these two minority accents in random sequence and SAE. For the last call he always used SAE to potentially prevent being rejected based on the prior interest shown by a caller using SAE. Rejection in that case would be reasonable, assuming that a landlord has already scheduled an appointment with another person.

Anytime he called a landlord asking for an apartment, he used the same script, “Hello, I’m calling about the apartment you have advertised in the paper,” only changing the language variety (Baugh 2018, 102).

The quantity of calls that were returned was different based on the accent that was used. Another factor impacting the number of call returns was the area in which an apartment was located. The five cities Baugh decided to place his experiment in were East Palo Alto, Oakland, San Francisco, Palo Alto, and Woodside. To compare the results of phone calls with the distribution of ethnicities in the given cities, Baugh (2018) used data from the Census Bureau from the year 1990 (Baugh 2018, 101-3).

### **7.2.2 Results of the Experiment**

Using AAVE, the lowest percentage of confirmed appointments to see the properties Baugh experienced was in Woodside, where only 28,7% of attempts were responded

compared to the 70,1% rate of the potential SAE tenant. This result perfectly corresponds with the fact that Woodside is a predominantly White area with 94,7% of White inhabitants and only 0,3% of African Americans. Briefly summarized, in Woodside, Palo Alto, and San Francisco, responses to the calls of SAE dialect guise outperformed those calls conducted in AAVE, which is again a result of high white settlements in these areas. The response calls from Oakland real estate were surprisingly balanced, given that Oakland's population consists of 43,9% of African Americans. Most calls returned in East Palo Alto obtained AAVE speakers with a 79,3% rate (Baugh 2018, 102-3).

### 7.2.3 Commentary

Based on the findings, the experiment shows signs of potential linguistic discrimination depending on the geographic area. There is a pattern of correspondence between the approved appointments in each locale and its ethnic composition. The study demonstrated that auditory cues serve as triggers for unequal treatment.

Housing discrimination based on auditory cues is a kind of subtle discrimination and is very hard to detect compared to visual racial discrimination. Furthermore, many potential householders are mostly not even aware of being discriminated against.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to evaluate how attitudes towards AAVE speakers have changed since the Civil Rights Movement. Before doing so, it was important to provide a historical and cultural context by presenting two of the most prevalent theories of origin. This offered us the first slight insight into the development of attitudes. There was also visible evolution in naming AAVE as a language variety, which was dependable on the current racial climate and ethnic ideologies. The current state of development was outlined to assess whether long-standing negative attitudes had any effect on the development of this language variety.

The thesis further focused on the most characteristic features of AAVE and demonstrated what linguists have long argued: AAVE is a legitimate, systematic, rule-governed linguistic variation of American English. After this was done, we concentrated on the evolution of white attitudes toward AAVE speakers spanning various historical periods. As the thesis pointed out, it assumes that the significant landmark for changing attitudes was the Civil Rights Movement. Thus, the exploration starts with this period, moving through the post-Civil Rights era, the Ebonics Controversy, and finally delving into contemporary attitudes and considerations of cultural appropriation. The last mention of the attitudes in the theoretical part dealt with the attitudes that African American speakers hold toward AAVE.

From observation of the development of attitudes, we must point out that although the thesis showed there was some serious shift in the perceptions of AAVE speakers from the Civil Rights Movement, AAVE remains undesirable and improper, especially in legal space, such as American courtrooms. This was exhibited in the case study of Rachel Jeantel, to which a bigger portion of the practical part was dedicated. Her AAVE was for a courtroom as a formal setting, unwanted, and probably many other African Americans would know that the courtroom is the place where code-switching is a must. The decision to keep one's vernacular variety in such an environment might be affected by the inability to code-switch, or maybe it is a question of one's identity and ethnic variety pride.

The second case study dealt with linguistic profiling in housing, whose pioneer and term coiner was John Baugh. His experiment on housing discrimination realized by language variety guises found out that prospective landlords discriminate against tenants with undesirable accents.

In conclusion, the thesis demonstrated that attitudes toward AAVE speakers have undergone some serious evolution influenced by historical events and societal changes.

Although this language variety, severely stigmatized in the past, is slowly gaining recognition and appreciation, it still has to face challenges in achieving societal acceptance.



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