8 Approaches, attitudes and education

Focal point In preceding chapters, general descriptions of constructions in the syntactic and phonological components of AAE were presented. These descriptions may have practical applications if they can be extended to the development of classroom strategies that are used in teaching mainstream English proficiency. Using linguistic descriptions of AAE to develop lessons does not in any way mean teaching AAE to school age children. Such descriptions are useful in substantiating the claim that AAE is rule-governed, but they are not always successful in combating negative attitudes toward the linguistic system. For example, questions about whether it is right or wrong to use markers such as aspectual *be* or resultant state *dən* usually do not just make reference to right or wrong grammatical structure. The evaluations are connected to broader social issues, as the following passage by Walter Mercer suggests.

> Regardless of the "genuineness" of the dialect, regardless of how remarkably it may add flavor and soul to a poem or song or novel, regardless of the solidarity it may lend to a political rally, I say it is illogical, nonsensical, and harmful to teach an innocent black child that it's quite all right to say 'I done gone to school.'
>
> [Walter Mercer, from Brasch 1981]

8.1 Introduction

This chapter considers topics ranging from approaches to the study of AAE to attitudes toward the language system. Different approaches to the study of AAE have been taken over the years. The approach that I take in this book is one that looks at AAE as a distinct system of language that is governed by lexical, syntactic and semantic and phonological rules. Some researchers have focused on the similarities across varieties of nonstandard English and have claimed that there is no distinction between AAE and other varieties of English. In addition, AAE has been represented as consisting of two components, an African American component and a general English component. Finally, AAE has been approached from the standpoint of its relation to African languages. A general overview of these approaches, all of which acknowledge that AAE is systematic, is given in this

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chapter. Researchers' approaches and attitudes toward AAE have not triggered the types of debates that we have witnessed in the general public; however, it is important to know that AAE has been viewed from different angles.

The discussion of attitudes toward AAE in this chapter is divided into attitudes toward AAE as a legitimate variety, attitudes toward AAE and employment and attitudes toward AAE and education. AAE is viewed by some as illogical speech, and even those who do not deny that it is systematic agree that it has no place in certain employment and educational contexts. In discussing attitudes toward AAE and education, I consider teacher attitudes toward AAE and its speakers and classroom strategies that may be employed in teaching mainstream English proficiency. One of the major goals of this section is to highlight the importance of educational implications of studies in AAE and the role general linguistic theory can play in advancing methods that are used in teaching speakers of the variety. This chapter does not suggest that students be taught AAE; but it does suggest that understanding that the variety is valid and operates in systematic ways may be useful.

One of the major issues relating to AAE and education concerns formal instruction, strategies and intervention for teaching speakers of AAE skills that may be useful in mastering reading and mainstream English. The failure of school age children to succeed academically is an indication of the limited progress in the area of education and the need for some intervention. The general reading problems suggest that one of the barriers to success in some areas of education may be that the type of language AAE child speakers take into the classroom is different from mainstream English in systematic ways. In addition, not taking the child's language into consideration as a rule-governed system may lead to problems that could result in academic failure.

When addressing issues related to dialects of English, and in particular AAE, the discussions are seldom ever just about linguistic structure; they become socio-political in nature. Social attitudes toward AAE can be summarized by statements such as the following made by members of a talk show audience: *People should go back to their own country if they can't speak proper English. You can speak your own language, but don't force somebody else to have to suffer and listen to it*. The political side of the discussion is often linked to questions about the status of AAE: is it a dialect or a language? Perhaps concerns about its status as a language are linked to issues about funding and acceptance as a legitimate variety.

Burling (1973), in his chapter "Is Anything Wrong With It," and Labov (1972), in his paper "The Logic of Nonstandard English," set out to provide information that could be used in changing negative attitudes about AAE. In both of these works, the researchers approach AAE from the standpoint of a logical linguistic system. They echo the sentiment that nothing is wrong with AAE, as it follows rules, and is used by people in earnest communication. Nevertheless, data based on linguistic research have not always been successful in changing negative attitudes and dissipating stereotypes about AAE.

No issue related to AAE has ignited more discussion than its legitimacy and acceptance as a systematic form of communication. Specialists and non-specialists alike were engaging in heated discussions in the 1960s and 1970s, even before the explosion

of the now familiar Oakland case (1996); however, the Oakland controversy sparked some of the meanest and most condescending comments about AAE that were never countered in the media. The complex concerns leading to the debates were related, in part, to the acceptance of AAE as a valid form of communication that is governed by rules and to confusion about the language system as a form of slang. There is still some distance to go in linguistic research on AAE and in framing meaningful dialogue about what it means to speak the variety. However, what we have learned about AAE over the years has served as useful information for facilitating lessons and developing intervention strategies in reading, language arts and other areas of education.

8.2 Approaches to AAE

Throughout this book, I have tried to show that speakers who know AAE know set patterns of combining sounds, morphemes and words. In comparing similar constructions and features in AAE and other varieties of English, I noted that it is necessary to study their patterns of use in answering questions about whether they are identical in the varieties or whether they have different properties. The view that I have taken here represents an approach to the study of AAE, but there are also others.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, the period during which AAE was being established as a valid system, not all language researchers were convinced that there existed a separate system of communication used almost exclusively by some African Americans. They maintained that the same features that were claimed to be associated with AAE could also be traced back to earlier stages of English and Southern white varieties. The argument, then, was that what was actually being referred to as black dialect was simply a Southern variety of English used by blacks and Southern whites alike. Williamson (1970) argued against the claim that there was a separate black dialect on the grounds that the same features that were branded as being unique to African Americans occurred freely in sources such as newspaper articles, novels and her personal files on Southern speech. She presented examples in which patterns in the speech of blacks such as the use of zero copula, marked forms of past and future, *ain't* and *don't*, and *they* for *there/their* were clearly present in the speech of white Southerners.

Farrison (1970) voiced a similar concern, noting that there were really no substantial differences between vocabulary and grammar used by black speakers and that in general English. His view was that words argued to be in the purported black dialect were also found in American English at one time or another. Researchers such as Williamson and Farrison rejected the claim that there is unique black speech on the basis that the targeted features could be traced to the speech of white speakers. The implication is that if speakers other than African Americans use the patterns, then the common source must be general English. This view runs counter to the one that suggests that the direction of spread of some features was from African American varieties to other groups in the South. Just this point is made in studies on the historical origin of AAE and features in other varieties of English. Feagin (1979) illustrates with an example of preverbal *done*, explaining the possible sources of the marker in Southern speech. She

concludes the following about the source of preverbal *done* in Alabama: "I suggest that *done* was brought to Alabama by both the poorer settlers from Georgia and the Carolinas and the slaves who came with – or were later sold to – the planters" (p. 149).

Rickford (1986) examines this complex issue of whether identical lexical items in AAE and other varieties were necessarily transferred from other varieties of English to AAE as he traces the sources of the similarity between aspectual *be* in Hiberno English (Irish English, see chapter 2) and AAE. While it has been argued that the similarities are due to influence from British dialects, Rickford is careful to note that "decreolizaton and associated processes which are well-attested from the Sea Islands" may have played a role in the emergence of AAE aspectual *be* (p. 206).[1]

The more we consider linguistic features and patterns in AAE, the more we realize that the issue of its relationship to other varieties of English is very complicated. In addition to the position against a separate black dialect, there is also the claim that while some AAE features and those of other nonstandard varieties of English are similar, the varieties differ in that these features occur at greater frequency in the speech of AAE speakers. As a result, researchers focused on describing the morphological, syntactic and phonological features that were more commonly found to occur at a greater rate in AAE than in other varieties of English.

Labov (1998) delves further into the question about AAE and relation to other varieties of English. He sets up a model that includes AAE, Other American Dialects (OAD) and General English (GE).

> It is proposed that AAVE consists of two distinct components: the General English (GE) component, which is similar to the grammar of OAD, and the African American (AA) component. These two components are not tightly integrated with each other, but follow internal patterns of strict co-occurrence. On the other hand, they are not completely independent structures. On the one hand, GE is a fairly complete set of syntactic, morphological, and phonological structures, which can function independently. Through the GE component, speakers of AAVE have access to much the same grammatical and lexical machinery as speakers of OAD and use it for much the same range of grammatical functions. On the other hand, the AA component allows speakers of AAVE to construct sentence types that are not available in OAD. The AA component is not a complete grammar, but a subset of all of the grammatical and lexical forms that are used in combination with much but not all of the grammatical inventory of GE . . . In the end, we will see that the distinct positive features of AAVE in this AA component are free to develop a specialized semantics that is used primarily in highly affective, socially marked interactions.
>
> [p. 117–118]

Very simply put, Labov's model, in which AA and GE are interdependent and co-existent, is designed to account for the uniqueness of AAE on the one hand and the similarities it shares with other varieties of English on the other. In his view, the uniqueness of AAE falls under the tense-aspect system, which includes a "series of auxiliary particles found in AAVE but not in GE: *be*, *done*, *be done*, *been*, *been done*, *steady*, *come*. The semantics and syntax of those particles show only small overlap with elements found in OAD" (p. 117).

The type of system that Labov is proposing has at least two strengths: namely it opens discussion about what is unique in AAE, and it categorizes the aspectual particles

as a group of elements that exhibit similar behavior. However, Labov's model leaves a number of questions unanswered. A fully developed critique of his paper goes beyond the scope of this chapter; however, some points focusing on the shortcomings are in order. Labov is correct in distinguishing markers such as *be*, *done* (i.e., *dən*), *be done* (i.e., *be dən*), *been* (i.e., *BIN*), *been done* (i.e., *BIN dən*), on the one hand, and forms of the auxiliary/copula *be* (e.g., *is*, *am*, *are*, etc.), *will*, *would* and *have*, on the other, on the basis of tense marking such that members of the latter group are marked for tense. (See chapter 2 in this book for further discussion of characteristics of members of these groups.) He suggests that members of both groups "all occur as first members of the verb phrase."[2] Indeed Labov is correct in saying that the aspectual markers can also precede verbs as in *be running*, but he misses an important point in that *have* and *ain't* can occur with *BIN* and in some cases with *dən*. As a result, there are instances in which these markers do not occur as the first members, but auxilaries such as *is*, *am*, and *will* always occur as the initial elements. As Labov agrees, *do* occurs with *be* in specific environments. *Do* also occurs with the habitual resultative *be dən*, but Labov does not make this observation.

A more pressing question is related to the way Labov is able to keep the AA and GE components separate. He notes that auxiliary inversion, tag question formation and negative placement do not occur with the AA elements. (Refer to chapter 2 for a discussion of these processes.) Labov comments that "The absence of these syntactic behaviors from all clauses with AA auxiliary elements contrasts with clauses that have finite tense markers and follow the patterns of GE syntax" (p. 141). But such processes do occur in clauses with the so-called AA elements. If they did not, there would be no way of negating aspectual *be* constructions (*They don't be playing soccer during recess*), and the only way to form questions with aspectual *be* constructions would be with intonation (*They be playing soccer during recess?*); but another option in which the auxiliary *do* precedes the subject *they* is also available *(Do they be playing soccer during recess?*). Perhaps Labov's point is that these markers themselves do not pattern as the auxiliary elements do, so aspectual *be* cannot itself host the contracted *n't* (*not*). This, of course, means that speakers do not say **ben't*; instead they say *don't be*. The point here is that although it is relatively easy to list isolated items such as aspectual markers that are used by some African Americans, it is not so easy to tease apart two systems forming AAE. There is no sharply defined evidence to support a separate AA component, no clear way of drawing such a line of demarcation between components. One question, which cannot be addressed in this chapter, is raised about the way speakers of AAE acquire the separate AA and GE components: Do they acquire the AA component in isolation? This is an important question, and it should be discussed further in the context of Labov's research. The approach to AAE which looks at the variety as consisting of two components is able to account for what distinguishes AAE from other varieties of English, but it also raises questions about how these two components are acquired by AAE speakers and then kept separate.

As noted in the Introduction to this book, AAE has been approached from its ties to African languages. Hilliard (1999) comments on the treatment of AAE by some linguists. His assessment is that "even linguists who have studied the rule-governed

nature of African American speech and language are often uninformed of the antecedents or source of the rules. To understand African rules means to understand African language, history and culture. Only a handful of linguists understand this" (p. 132). If Hilliard's point is that the research necessary for fully characterizing the African origins of AAE has not been completed, then the point is well taken. Linguists working on the synchronic study of AAE simply do not focus on the diachronic aspects of the system, so they have not done the detailed historical research necessary to make strong claims about historical origins of AAE one way or the other. However, I do believe that linguists working in this area understand the type of systematic research and intense studying of documents and linguistic patterns that are prerequisites for classifying languages. Given the ties that African Americans have to Africa, there must also be some relationship between AAE and African languages, but the nature of the relationship has yet to be fully explicated beyond anecdotal comments. When researchers make historical claims without subjecting AAE to rigorous research, one major implication is that the research standards are set lower for this variety.

8.3 Attitudes toward AAE as a legitimate variety

Some members of the lay community maintain that use of AAE is a sign of deprivation – cultural, verbal or intellectual. For many, it is difficult to accept anything other than what is referred to as 'educated' English as a legitimate variety. In effect, such discussions never focus, for any length of time, on the questions about whether something is intrinsically wrong with AAE. The focal point is on the fact that the system simply deviates from the standard. For some African Americans, reference to AAE as a legitimate variety is a source of embarrassment, as it carries with it the stigma of inferiority and the stereotype that African Americans cannot speak (or learn to speak) mainstream English. On their part, the issue is simple: AAE is the incorrect use of mainstream English, and not using the standard correctly suggests that speakers are ignorant, lazy or both. Pullum (1999) addresses this key point, not just in response to African Americans, but in response to views held by the English-speaking population in general. His comment is in line with the theme of this book: "The majority of English speakers think that AAVE is just English with two added factors: some special slang terms and a lot of grammatical mistakes. They are simply wrong about this" (p. 41).

Morgan (1994), in her review of prominent issues in the study of AAE, presents an overview of African Americans' reactions to the use of the dialect. The aim of her study is to show that the reactions go beyond race to include class. She finds that a great deal of opposition to the use and acceptance of the speech variety has come from African Americans themselves. One case in point, according to Morgan, is the King case (*Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children* v. *Ann Arbor School District Board* [1979]). Morgan notes that some of the members of the black middle class argued against the claim that the variety was significantly different from mainstream English to the extent that it serves as a barrier to communication between teachers and students. Some of the same types of arguments were made in the Oakland controversy (1996).[3]

The King case began when the complaint that the MLK Junior Elementary School had not provided students with the education necessary to function in society was brought against the Ann Arbor, Michigan, school officials. The claim was that students (from ages five to eleven) who lived in the Green Road Housing Project in Ann Arbor and who were experiencing academic difficulty at the King School were being placed in programs for the emotionally disturbed, learning disabled and speech impaired, and some were held back or suspended from school. It was also argued that the defendants had failed to take the language of the students into consideration, a factor that contributed to their not learning to read and use mainstream English proficiently. After the students were labeled handicapped, parents responded by seeking legal advice and getting involved in litigation. In addressing communicative competence, the court ruled that the students were using a systematic linguistic variety (referred to as AAE in this book), but that a barrier to learning resulted when the school did not take into account the children's use of language.

In the Oakland controversy, which is similar to the Ann Arbor case, the Oakland School Board resolved to recognize AAE as the primary language of African American children attending schools in that district. Their proposal was to use the children's vernacular in teaching mainstream English by highlighting the contrasts between AAE and classroom English, a strategy that has been used in teaching mainstream English proficiency and improving reading skills.

What do we gain or lose by characterizing AAE as being unique and substantially different from mainstream English? For some, the characterization could suggest that, once again, African Americans are being set apart from other Americans, and this could mean buying into, if not providing more evidence for, the claim that African Americans are inferior, and language is just another deficiency. It would be hard for that group of people to see the linguistic variety as anything other than the result of too little effort and too little intelligence to produce mainstream English structures. An audience member on a 1987 *Oprah Winfrey Show* made the following observation: "Blacks give the impression that they are ignorant because they fail to see that the word is spelled 'ask' and not 'ax'." A strong judgment is levied against a group of people on the basis of the pronunciation of one word, or at least on the surface the judgment is based on some linguistic factor. But if AAE is a unique system (and not isolated occurrences of words that are pronounced differently from mainstream English counterparts), it can be classified as such and not as English mistakes.

The attitudes issue is a complex one, and quite frankly, it will be difficult to have meaningful conversations about the systematic nature of AAE if we do not address this topic in a way that gets to the source of some of these attitudes. It is true that negative attitudes have played a major role in the (mis)characterization of AAE; however, linguistic descriptions may have also left room for questions about the legitimacy of AAE in that they have not always thoroughly outlined the rules and patterns that AAE speakers use or exactly what the system looks like. In some cases, these descriptions have been in the form of a list of features without a discussion of the rules governing their use.[4] Continued research on AAE will help to fill the void resulting from limited thorough descriptions. Of course, it would be naïve to think that we could dispel all

stereotypes and negative attitudes by presenting linguistic descriptions of AAE, but such descriptions would be helpful in substantiating the claim that it is a legitimate variety. For example, during the Oakland controversy, while it is true that some linguists were on hand to discuss the linguistic structure of AAE, much of the discussion focused on equating AAE and slang. Perhaps more thorough linguistic descriptions would have been somewhat helpful in responding to the uninformed claims disseminated in the media. One point that this book has tried to make is that the equation is simply wrong. Review the discussions in chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4.

8.4 Attitudes toward AAE and employment

Why speak mainstream English anyway? The most popular response to the preceding question is that it is necessary to use the standard to gain employment. The following two comments from the 1987 *Oprah Winfrey Show* just mentioned summarize this view: (1) "Speaking correctly is an indication, just a slight indication to the person who is going to hire you that perhaps maybe you can do the job. Speaking incorrectly is an indication to them that maybe you cannot. It doesn't mean it's accurate" (comment by Oprah Winfrey). (2) "In corporate America, if you want to put an extra burden, yoke on your neck, then speak slang, speak incorrect English and grammar because you're not going to get the job" (comment by a radio personality). On that same show, an employee explained how a speech consultant helped him use mainstream English more proficiently, thereby getting rid of his dialect features in the workplace – a move, according to him, that helped him enhance his chances for a successful career.

In the passages above, slang and incorrect English and grammar are actually cover terms for AAE. Unfortunately, a general argument is built on inaccurate information, to make a conservative assessment. If nothing else, it is argued that employment and improving one's chances for success in the financial marketplace should be a major incentive for AAE speakers to learn and use mainstream English, the language used in the place of business. Oprah Winfrey and the respondents on the show use speaking correctly to refer to the standard variety which is defined in Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998) in a slightly different way. According to that source, although it is difficult to offer a precise definition of notions such as standard American English and network standard, "they typically refer to a variety of English devoid of both general and local socially stigmatized features, as well as regionally obtrusive phonological and grammatical features. This, however, does not eliminate dialect choices altogether. We have repeatedly noted that it is impossible to speak English without speaking some dialect of English" (p. 283).

As a part of the argument goes, nonstandard English speakers should adjust their speech to the standards of their employers because, after all, they are offering services as representatives of the company, and, as a result, they should strive to be a representative voice of the company. Along these lines, employees have the obligation to speak what the employer deems appropriate for the company, and the employer has the power to demand a particular variety of language. The message is that AAE is not appropriate language for use in a professional setting.

In his review of issues related to AAE and employment, Baugh (1983a) takes a middle-of-the-road approach. On the one hand, he maintains that speaking anything other than standard English in the workplace could be evaluated or perceived as communicating ineffectively, and, on the other, he advises that "just because a person speaks street speech should not imply diminished intellectual potential. By the same token, street speakers must appreciate an employer's needs and strive to take the necessary steps to obtain the appropriate training" (p. 120).[5] According to Baugh's sources, "employers were seeking 'articulate' blacks (and other minorities) to fill management trainee positions . . ." (p. 118), and articulate blacks were those who were proficient in standard English. This translates into a negative judgment about AAE, as it is equated with unintelligible, incoherent, non-fluent and illogical speech. But the point that AAE is logical has been addressed over and over. Once again I refer the reader to chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4 of this book. One of the earliest treatments of this topic is in Labov's classic paper "The Logic of Nonstandard English," as noted earlier in this chapter.

Labov explains that "there is nothing in the vernacular which will interfere with the development of logical thought, for the logic of Standard English cannot be distinguished from the logic of any other dialect of English by any test that we find" (p. 229). To illustrate that a speaker can convey logical thought while speaking AAE, he uses excerpts from (L), an AAE speaker who is being interviewed by JL:

(1) JL: What happens to you after you die? Do you know?
L: Yeah, I know. (What?) After they put you in the ground, your body turns into – ah – bones, an' s---.
JL: What happens to your spirit?
L: Your spirit – soon as you die, your spirit leaves you. (And where does the spirit go?) Well, it all depends . . . (On what?) You know, like some people say if you're good an' s---, your spirit goin' t'heaven . . . 'n' if you bad, your spirit goin' to hell. Well, bulls---! Your spirit goin' to hell anyway, good or bad. (p. 214)

Labov characterizes L as "a skilled speaker with great 'verbal presence of mind', who can use the English language for many purposes" (p. 217). As Labov notes, the speaker "can sum up a complex argument in a few words, and the full force of his opinions comes through without qualification or reservation" (p. 215). As logical as L's speech is, it is not packaged in a way that is accepted in certain environments. For example, while his response is direct and to the point, it would not be judged as a sufficient summary of a complex argument in school and even in some non-educational environments. L's speech is compared to that of C, an African American who speaks general American English:

(2) CR: Do you know anything that someone can do, to have someone who has passed on visit him in a dream?
C: Well, I even heard my parents say that there is such a thing as something in dreams, some things like that, and sometimes dreams do come true. I have personally never had a dream come true. I've never dreamt that somebody was dying

> and they actually died, (Mhm) or that I was going to have ten dollars the next day and somehow I got ten dollars in my pocket. (Mhm). I don't particularly believe in that, I don't think it's true. I do feel, though, that there is such a thing as – ah – witchcraft.

Labov's reaction to the passage in (2) is that C "is obviously a good speaker who strikes the listener as well-educated, intelligent, and sincere. He is a likable and attractive person, the kind of person that middle-class listeners rate very high on a scale of job suitability and equally high as a potential friend. His language is more moderate and tempered than Larry's; he makes every effort to qualify his opinions and seems anxious to avoid any misstatements or overstatements" (p. 218). His overall impression is that the major characteristic of the speaker's language is verbosity, but it is in a form that follows the guidelines of mainstream English. On the other hand, L's presentation is logical, but it is not packaged in a form that is compatible with mainstream environments. An aside that I would like to make is that I do not think that even AAE speakers would use the type of language in L's passage in employment settings. So articulate, as in Baugh's use, encompasses language that is in a form that is accepted by mainstream America, and one would hope, a form that is clear and distinct.

Where does this leave speakers of AAE in the workplace? Baugh consistently maintains that speakers should do what it takes to learn mainstream English, because being proficient in the variety would give them a better chance in those professions that require it. He does note that, for some, learning the standard will not alone open all of the doors that were closed to them or guarantee them jobs, but it will break down the language barrier to employment. Nona Starks in *American Tongues*, a film that addresses dialect differences and attitudes toward dialects, gets to the center of the matter by saying that if speakers use mainstream English, then at least they will not be denied the job for not being able to speak the standard. In short, proficiency in mainstream English is necessary but not sufficient for getting and/or keeping employment. One view is that those AAE speakers who are bidialectal, that is, those who also have command of the standard or mainstream variety, will be able to compete in the professional job market. At this point, the use of standard English in the workplace is non-negotiable. Simply those who hope to participate in and "reap the benefits" of mainstream America are required to use that norm of speaking.

Jones (1982) also agrees that speaking AAE will diminish chances for employment. She notes that "It hurts me to hear black children use black English, knowing that they will be at yet another disadvantage in an educational system already full of stumbling blocks. It hurts me to sit in lecture halls and hear fellow black students complain that the professor 'be tripping dem out using big words dey can't understand'" (p. 98). But big words, especially specialized terminology, have tripped out AAE and mainstream English-speaking students alike and sent both groups running to the dictionaries. In any event, Jones contends that AAE is virtually a handicap to children and that, for her, speaking standard English means being "articulate and well-versed" (p. 97). In her discussion, it becomes clear that there is no consideration of the rules governing the use of AAE when she says, "Studies have proven that the

use of ethnic dialects decreases power in the marketplace. 'I be' is acceptable on the corner, but not with the boss" (p. 98). What are the implications here? Is it that there would be a breakdown in communication between the boss and potential employee if he used 'I be'? Even for those who do not deny that producing a sequence such as 'I be' is as logical as producing 'I am usually' agree that it would still be inappropriate to use the former in a formal setting. One argument against using the former, including other AAE patterns, is that it could be another strike against an employee, and it may reduce an employee's chance of being taken seriously in the 'marketplace.' Furthermore, as I rarely see grammatical glosses of aspectual *be* in the media and other reports – which suggests that many people do not get the meaning of the marker – the employer is likely to misunderstand the speaker who uses it. Jones merely echoes the sentiment of many others, as expressed by Teepen in a *San Francisco Chronicle* article (May 8, 1991). He noted that AAE has "its own consistent usages and grammar, though it sounds merely illiterate to whites and brands every black child reared in it with a disadvantage."

In no uncertain terms, speakers are evaluated by the language they use. Indeed AAE is rule-governed; however, what is of consequence for Jones and many others is not that AAE speakers use a variety that is systematic, but that they do not consistently use mainstream English. The message is that the AAE linguistic system has no validity as a legitimate communicative system in a society in which the language of power is mainstream English.

There is nothing inherently superior about mainstream English, but it is required in the workplace because it is the language of the people of power. Those who are in power are in the position to determine which variety of a language will be used in conducting business. One choice that AAE speakers have is to be bidialectal, using AAE and mainstream English in respective settings, which does not mean that AAE should be spoken on street corners and mainstream English in other environments. Contrary to Jones's assessment of acceptability of *be* on corners, not all AAE speakers conduct transactions on street corners and those who do would conduct such business in any variety of English – mainstream or AAE. Superficially, at least, discussions such as this one are about certain types and levels of employment, but they make revealing statements about attitudes toward dialects. The topic of education and AAE, which will be addressed next, is inextricably linked to attitudes.

8.5 AAE and education

One of the most commonly discussed topics under the umbrella of AAE is research on education and methods of instruction for school age speakers of the variety. Some strides in research have been and are still being made in this area. Much of the focus has been placed on instruction in reading and language arts; however, new and much needed research is being conducted in the area of communication disorders. First, a word about research in progress in communication disorders, then I will turn my

attention to issues that have been in the forefront of AAE and education over the past thirty years.

8.5.1 Over-diagnosis and assessment

A good deal of research has been conducted on the over-representation of minorities, especially African American males, in special education (Artiles and Trent 1994, Harry and Anderson 1995). These studies have not directly addressed the correlation between referral to special education and AAE although this issue was relevant in the Ann Arbor case.

A related issue is the over-diagnosing and mislabeling child AAE speakers as being communicatively impaired. According to van Keulen, Weddington and DeBose (1998), one of the reasons for mislabeling is that AAE speakers are compared to their peers "outside the developmental range or community" when, in fact, "standards of normalcy should always be the speech and language patterns of other children in the neighborhood who do not have impairments or disabilities" (p. 112). They acknowledge the major role that teachers play in referring children to speech-language pathologists. To this end, van Keulen *et al*. discuss strategies and procedures that could lead to more effective assessment. They go on to note that "the examination of phonology, syntax, and semantics can be accomplished informally or using standardized procedures as long as the child's language is judged according to the rules of the African American culture" (p. 113).

Harry Seymour, Ph.D., in the Department of Communication Disorders at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, is currently leading a research team of communication disorders specialists and linguists whose goal is to develop a language assessment instrument for child AAE speakers. The task for the research group is to identify syntactic, semantic, phonological and pragmatic linguistic behaviors of child AAE speakers and to use the data to develop linguistic experiments that will elicit language samples from this population of speakers. The language samples will be used to establish normative data for child AAE speakers. This type of research has grown out of a response to early deficit models that branded AAE a deficient method of communication, thus children speaking it were thought to have language disorders. The University of Massachusetts project, which brings together theory and practice, is on the cutting edge of research that focuses on ways to identify disorders in the development of AAE. To date, there is limited research on the linguistic inventory of patterns used by normally developing AAE-speaking children, so the data collected in connection with this project will be useful because it will help to show what type of constructions child AAE speakers use and the extent to which it is different from and similar to adult AAE. As a result, there will be appropriate standards of normalcy to which the language of child AAE speakers can be compared. In a word, this data will make it possible to take the steps that van Keulen *et al*. advocate. It is hoped that if children are identified as developing normally linguistically according to their peers in the same speech communities or with the same type of speech patterns, then they

are less likely to be over-diagnosed or mislabeled as being impaired. This research fills a void in the study of AAE, and it will answer a number of questions about the assessment of the language of speakers of AAE.

8.5.2 AAE and education from the 1960s to the twenty-first century

Over the years, work on AAE and education has been from the perspective of educators, psychologists and linguists and has concentrated on linguistics and reading, classroom practice, law and policy, attitudes and education and integrating linguistic theory and teaching AAE child speakers. A major force that served as the impetus for careful deliberation on topics related to AAE and educational issues was the challenge that children faced in public schools, in general, and learning to read, in particular.

The problem that African American youth encounter in reading has been documented in studies that show that reading scores for African Americans in inner cities are well below the mean, below the basic level or reading level for a particular grade. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), in the fourth grade in 1992 67% African Americans were performing below the basic level, in 1994, 69% were performing below the basic level and in 1998, 64% were below the basic level. In the eighth grade in 1992, 55% were below the basic level, in 1994, 56% were below the basic level, and in 1998, 47% were below the basic level. In the twelfth grade in 1992, 39% were below the basic level, in 1994, 48% were below the basic level and in 1998, 43% were below the basic level. While there was improvement in some grades, overall, African Americans still lagged behind their white peers. Compare these percentages to those reported for their white counterparts: In fourth grade in 1992, 29% whites were below the basic level, in 1994, 29% were below the basic level and in 1998, 27% were below the basic level. In the eighth grade in 1992, 22% whites were below the basic level, in 1994, 22% were below the basic level and in 1998, 18% were below the basic level. Finally in the twelfth grade in 1992, 14% were below the basic level, in 1994, 19% were below the basic level and in 1998, 17% were below the basic level.

The April 6, 2001, NAEP report found that African Americans are still falling behind in reading. In 2000, 63% African Americans in the fourth grade were reading below the basic level, and 27% whites were below that level. Eighth and twelfth grade assessments were not completed in 2000 (see Table 1). These data alone cannot answer questions about the extent to which language serves as a factor in the low performance of the large percentage of African Americans, and, more than likely, there are a number of factors that conspire to yield such results. In any case, factors centering around the speech and language patterns of AAE speakers have been strongly suggested to be related to their reading performance. The papers in the Baratz and Shuy (1969) volume connect reading to language as well as do other sources that will be discussed in this chapter. Research on AAE and education should directly address issues related to improving the education and performance of African Americans in reading, in particular, and in other disciplines, in general.

Table 1. *Students reading below the basic level*

Year	Grade	African Americans	Whites
1992	4th	67%	29%
	8th	55%	22%
	12th	39%	14%
1994	4th	69%	29%
	8th	56%	22%
	12th	48%	19%
1998	4th	64%	27%
	8th	47%	18%
	12th	42%	17%
2000	4th	63%	27%
	8th	—	—
	12th	—	—

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress

Baratz and Shuy (1969) introduce the papers in their volume on this issue by noting that "Reports from city after city with substantial numbers of economically deprived black children have indicated that reading achievement for this group is well below the national norm" (p. ix). In his paper in that volume, Baratz maintains that the inner-city African American child was "speaking a significantly different language from that of his middle-class teachers. Most of his middle-class teachers have wrongly viewed his language as pathological, disordered, 'lazy speech'. This failure to recognize the interference from the child's different linguistic system, and consequent negative teacher attitudes towards the child and his language, lead directly to reading difficulties and subsequent school failure" (p. 93). In general, the papers in the volume explain the differences between AAE and classroom English and how they impede reading progress. In addition the papers offer suggestions on how to use children's own language in teaching them reading. The data in these papers are based on linguistic research and/or classroom observation and interaction. Two emerging themes in the book are that the children's speech differs in systematic ways from mainstream English and their speech patterns should be taken into consideration in developing lessons that are used for reading and literacy instruction. The papers do not present fully developed lessons that teachers can use in units on reading, but they do outline specific phonological, syntactic and morphological differences between AAE and mainstream English and explain where these differences may interfere with reading progress. All the papers present ways in which linguistic principles can be used in developing teaching strategies. Also, some of the papers in the volume support the claim that children would benefit from dialect readings, which reflect general features and patterns of AAE. As Wolfram and

Fasold (1969) note in their contribution, "What appears to be needed, then, is a linguistic adaptation or translation of reading materials to a language system which more closely approximates the child's oral language behavior" (p. 141). Linguists still support this view, and I will have more to say about it in the following section. The Baratz and Shuy study marks the beginning of the type of research on AAE and education that has continued over the past thirty years. It is unfortunate that, in spite of this research, some of the same problems persist in educating African American youth.

Baugh's remarks on education and AAE point directly to the relationship between attitudes and the use of this variety of speech in the educational system. He notes that "the majority of black parents whom I have interviewed through the years, spanning both poles of the political spectrum, overwhelmingly stress the past, present, and future role of education as a means of attaining a better life for themselves and their children" (1983a, p. 108). Although AAE is a system with definable patterns, parents are nevertheless unlikely to agree that their children should be taught in an educational system that validates or accepts the variety as a legitimate means of communication by using texts and materials written in it. In fact it is the case that schools are viewed as the very places where children can and should be able to escape the nonstandard language of the street and the less educated. Some of the disapproval may stem from the incorrect assumption that the language of instruction will be strictly AAE, or that AAE will be taught; thus children will not have the opportunity to learn mainstream English, the language that will be useful in helping them become successful. On the contrary, it may be the case that reading literature in AAE would affirm that the students' variety does have a place in certain contexts in educational settings, which may have the result of encouraging them to read more.

One of the strongest criticisms against the validation of AAE is that the people who seem to be most accepting of it as a legitimate form of communication are those whose children are not directly affected by the validation and who, themselves, are speakers of mainstream English. Brasch (1981) includes the following passage from Walter Mercer, then a professor of education at Florida A&M University, a historically black university. A part of this quote is also included at the beginning of this chapter:

> Regardless of the "genuineness" of the dialect, regardless of how remarkably it may add flavor and soul to a poem or song or novel, regardless of the solidarity it may lend to a political rally, I say it is illogical, nonsensical, and harmful to teach an innocent black child that it's quite all right to say 'I done gone to school.' I've also noticed that the black advocates of teaching black dialect all can use impeccable standard English.
>
> [p. 274]

One of Mercer's points is that if the African Americans who are in support of AAE have learned to use mainstream English and are benefiting from it, then the school age children should also learn to speak the standard. Mercer represents the sentiments of many African Americans, and most certainly those referred to in Morgan's study (summarized in section 8.3). In effect, his point is that the proponents of AAE are using mainstream English as successful researchers, and they are not giving child AAE speakers the same opportunity to use the language of the marketplace, a necessary step

in reaping the benefits available to them. But there are two additional issues, and the problem is how to address them both adequately. One issue is that the sequence *dən gone* (in Mercer's example, 'I done gone to school') is not accepted in educational environments, nor is it appropriate in some employment settings. The other is that the *dən gone* sequence is rule-governed and to that end grammatical; it is right, unlike the sequence **dən going*, which is wrong. I think that one of the major problems is the type of descriptions used to characterize AAE and speakers' use of it. Mercer indicates that there is something wrong with suggesting that using the *dən gone* sequence is all right. Adjectives such as *wrong* and *all right* have loaded meanings that can apply to the grammatical patterns as well as to the ethical nature related to allowing a speaker to use language that is not compatible with being upwardly mobile. For Mercer, the fact that *dən gone* is not accepted in mainstream settings overrides the grammatical nature of the construction.

8.5.2.1 *Classroom strategies*

Attitudes toward AAE influence the type of classroom practices and strategies teachers employ in instructing speakers of AAE. In reporting on early research, Labov (1995) notes that "Experimental approaches to the effects of speech on teachers' attitudes show that it is the most powerful single factor in determining teachers' predictions of student performance" (p. 49). He goes on to note that "The main effect of a child speaking AAVE was to affect teachers' attitudes toward the child, with a resultant negative expectation that affected teachers' behavior toward the child in many ways" (p. 49). The discussion will follow with an overview of teacher attitudes and strategies that have been suggested and used for teaching speakers of AAE. From the discussion, it will be clear that the strategies do not involve teaching AAE, a misconception that goes back to debates in the 60s and 70s and resurfaced in the 90s.

Brasch (1981) chronicles the scholarly research and reactions to the identification of AAE as a rule-governed system that should be respected as such. The responses to early work on AAE by linguists such as Beryl Bailey, Ralph Fasold, William Labov, Claudia Mitchell-Kernan and William Stewart ranged from labels such as bad English to a socially unacceptable way of speaking that prevented African Americans from competing in mainstream America. The copious news articles and replies to research on AAE, which began in about 1967, read much like those in response to the 1996 Oakland case. Brasch recalls a response to the Baratz and Shuy (1969) volume that has been discussed above. Gail M. Donovan, an administrative assistant to the superintendent of schools in Philadelphia, sent a memo to senior administrators noting that its contents were "intrinsically sound." It appears that the *Philadelphia Daily News* added content to the memo in an article entitled "Order to OK 'Black English' in Schools Comes Under Fire" (p. 268). The title suggested that the memo sent by Donovan was intended to endorse the use of AAE in the classroom, which was not the case. Another misinformed outcry during this period came from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in response to a Standard English Proficiency (SEP) program at Brooklyn College that was designed to help students become proficient in

mainstream English. The NAACP incorrectly assumed that the program would be used to teach AAE.

AAE has not been endorsed in all classrooms in which it would be relevant, and in fact one method of approaching the variety is eradication, the goal of which is to erase its traces from the speech of children who use it. One method of eradication is subjecting the speaker to constant correction, a method which Smitherman (and others) opposes. In her essay, "English Teacher, Why You Be Doing the Thangs You Don't Do?" (2000), she explicitly shows the relation between teacher attitudes and classroom practice. The question posed in the title may be put another way: English teacher, why do you make a habit of doing what you shouldn't do? The title is essentially rhetorical, as Smitherman basically says that there really is no reasonable explanation for taking the correctionist approach in teaching English courses to speakers of AAE. She suggests that some well-intentioned teachers take such an approach under the assumption that they are equipping dialect speakers with tools that will help them in the real world. According to Smitherman, this is a misguided notion. She goes on to explain that often correcting grammar supercedes focus on and attention to meaning and sense in students' essays.

Reading and speaking instruction for speakers of AAE often includes pronunciation correction that discourages the students and inhibits them in the classroom. Smitherman (1977, pp. 217–218) recounts one case in which constant correction had a negative effect on the student's performance:

(3)

Student (excitedly):	Miz Jones, you remember that show you tole us bout? Well, me and my momma 'nem –
	Teacher (interrupting with a "warm" smile): Bernadette, start again, I'm sorry, but I can't understand you.
Student (confused):	Well, it was that show, me and my momma –
	Teacher (interrupting again, still with that "warm" smile): Sorry, I still can't understand you.
	(Student, now silent, even more confused than ever, looks at floor, says nothing.)
Teacher:	Now, Bernadette, first of all, it's *Mrs*. Jones, not *Miz* Jones. And you know it was an *exhibit*, not a show. Now, haven't I explained to the class over and over again that you always put yourself last when you are talking about a group of people and yourself doing something? So, therefore, you should say what?
Student:	My momma and me – t
Teacher (exasperated):	No! My mother and I. Now start again, this time right.
Student:	Aw, that's okay, it wasn't nothin.

One observation about this unfortunate interaction is that obviously the teacher and student were not communicating, and it is clear that the reason for lack of communication was not the one the teacher gave: "I'm sorry, but I can't understand you." There is no doubt that the message sent to the student was that the teacher was concerned

more about the form of the child's response than the response itself. Evidence that the teacher followed the student and understood what she was saying comes in the form of the teacher's translating the student's 'nonstandard' speech into the more accepted variety that the student was being prodded to use. The end result was that the student eventually became frustrated and lost all interest and enthusiasm for the message she was trying to communicate. From the teacher's standpoint, the student was using an unacceptable code that did not correspond to classroom English. By correcting what was taken to be the aberrant form, the teacher tried to get the student to adjust her speech. As the exchange shows, the form took precedence over the message, so the content of the student's report was never acknowledged because the method of delivery was not in the classroom style. The student gave up and no longer tried to tell her story; the point she was trying to make must have seemed unimportant. It should be noted that AAE patterns were not addressed in particular (at least not in the excerpt); the teacher focused specifically on what was in general non-classroom English.

Also, the message the student received from the teacher probably sent a number of distressing signals to her. The student could have very well interpreted the teacher's response as an indication that what she had to say was unimportant and meaningless unless said in some particular way. In effect, the message to the student could have been that something about her speech prevented the teacher from allowing her to get through her story; her method of speaking evoked a negative response from the teacher. Every time she attempted to speak, the teacher interrupted her. Certainly this must have caused some confusion for the student, as she was relaying something that actually happened, and, no doubt, this was the speech she used in all other environments; and everyone else understood her. This type of response from the teacher could be very instrumental in silencing students in classes in subsequent stages of school years, which could result in dire consequences for children and their role and place as adults in society. John R. Rickford (1999) notes that it is no surprise that students who were interrupted and asked to repeat 'mispronounced' words over and over became withdrawn and hesitated to speak up in class.[6]

Dandy (1991, p. 2) reports a similar incident in which a student teacher, Alice, interacts with a student by engaging in incessant correction, which also silences the child. In this case, the teacher does focus on one pattern that has been identified as a feature of AAE:

(4) At last, Alice called Joey to read. Confidently he began:

"Maxie. Maxie lived in three small rooms on the top floor of an old brownstone house on Orange Skreet.

"She . . . "

"Not skreet, Joey. Say street."

"Skreet."

"Read the sentence again."

"Maxie lived in three small rooms on the top floor of an old, brownstone house on Orange Skreet. She had lived . . ."

"Joey, you're not pronouncing the word correctly. I'll read it for you.

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'Maxie lived in three small rooms on the top floor of an old brownstone house on Orange Street. She had lived there for many years, and every day was the same for Maxie.' Now continue, Joey."

Joey, looking puzzled, proceeded cautiously: "Every morning at exactly 7:10, Maxie's large orange cat jumped onto the middle windowsill and skretched out . . ."

"No, Joey. You're doing it again, Say 'stretched'."

"Skretched." Joey was speaking in a muffled tone now.

"Go ahead, Joey," coaxed Alice.

But Joey could not be coaxed. He did not read any more of the story. Suddenly, he had lost his place.

The descriptors used to characterize Joey's disposition at the outset when he began to read and when he finished are telltale signs. He began confidently, but as he continued, he "proceeded cautiously," "speaking in a muffled tone"; and ended having "lost his place." Although Alice was not yet a certified teacher, she had already begun to form her teaching philosophy, and more than likely, she had determined that her strategy was a good one. In both instances, the teachers' intentions were well placed, but the results were undesirable, and it is not clear that the students had any concrete idea about what the teachers were objecting to and correcting. Researchers agree that correcting what appear to be language errors can be very ineffective and counterproductive. According to van Keulen *et al.* (1998), "Calling on teachers to desist from correcting students' language errors is not a call for acceptance of poor performance. More than anything, it is a call for teachers to be very careful not to miscommunicate to students a dislike or disdain for an integral part of their identity and self-concept" (pp. 185–186).

Dandy (1991) concedes that mainstream English must be taught basically for similar reasons that people on both sides of the AAE argument have given: It is the language that is used in the marketplace. She contends, however, that "if children are corrected every time they open their mouths, they will become extremely self-conscious and reluctant to speak" (p. 5). According to her assessment, corrections should be made when the student's production interferes with or alters the meaning of a passage or when it distorts the content. Dandy's analysis, however, does not address the issue of non-mainstream phonological patterns such as *skr* in environments in which *str* is used in mainstream pronunciations. (See chapter 4 for a discussion of the use of *skr* in syllable-initial contexts in AAE.) If after having worked with the child, the teacher finds that she is indeed a speaker of AAE who uses rule-governed patterns such as those that have been discussed in chapters 2, 3 and 4 and if the teacher has decided to take an approach that will move the child in the direction of using corresponding mainstream English features, then she can spend some time with the child working on chosen patterns. Notice in the passage from Dandy that the teacher stopped the student when he pronounced *skreet* and *skretched*. Because the pronunciation is regular, occurring in the same environment, the teacher can compile a list of *str*-initial words that are produced with initial *skr* by some AAE speakers and work with the student's pronunciation of these words. In this way, it can be shown that one rule can apply to several words. The key here is that the child uses certain rules in producing these words, so it makes sense to use these rules when pointing out mainstream

correspondences to him. This approach is one that uses AAE to teach mainstream English correspondences. There is nothing here that suggests that AAE would be taught in the classroom in this instance. Because thorough studies on reading and the acquisition of AAE have not been conducted, it is not clear at which stage AAE interferes with reading.

As Wolfram (1999) notes, "The study of various dialects hardly endangers the sovereignty of Standard English in the classroom. If anything, it enhances the learning of the standard variety through heightened sensitivity to language variation." In effect, he also notes that there are beneficial outcomes of acknowledgment of such patterns: "I have witnessed students who studied structural features of language, such as *-s* third person absence in vernacular dialects (e.g., *She go to the store*), transfer this knowledge to writing Standard English" (p. 65).

Labov (1995), based in part on Labov (1969b), explains that the phonological differences between AAE and classroom English are likely to lead to problems with reading. He focuses on the homophony that results from phonological processes in AAE. For example, *told*/*toll*, *mist*/*miss*, and *past*/*pass* are not usually distinguished in pronunciation due to the process of consonant cluster reduction that occurs to the final consonant clusters in the first member of each pair. In his assessment, the sound-spelling correspondences of English present problems for AAE speakers as they are learning to read. He suggests that teachers focus more on word endings (but, of course, not in the way of needless correction when students are reading), as that is often the locus of discrepancies between AAE and classroom English. However, as the passage in (4) shows, some important distinctions are made word-initially between AAE and classroom English, so teachers should be aware of them, too. It is important to know the patterns of pronunciation in AAE that correspond to classroom English regardless of whether the sound occurs initially, medially or finally. The approach that Labov considers is one that requires teachers to be aware of AAE patterns and the reading consequences for speakers using them in the classroom. In addition to focusing on ends of words, Labov gives four other principles (in addition to Principle 2) that may be useful in teaching reading to AAE speakers (pp. 57–58):

Principle 1: *Teachers should distinguish between mistakes in reading and differences in pronunciation*.

Researchers such as Dandy and Smitherman also support this principle, which makes it possible for those educators who use it to focus on content and comprehension. Delpit (1998) expresses a similar view on this issue: "Should they [teachers] spend their time relentlessly 'correcting' their Ebonics-speaking children's language so that it might conform to what we have learned to refer to as Standard English? Despite good intentions, constant correction seldom has the desired effect. Such correction increases cognitive monitoring of speech, thereby making talking difficult" (pp. 17–18).

Principle 2: *Give more attention to the ends of words*.

This principle has already been addressed above. Implementation of this strategy makes it possible to focus on the pronunciation of final sounds that may lead to confusion. Meier (1998) also notes the importance of paying attention to details about word endings. His suggestion is to discuss differences in pronunciation of words in the

vernacular and classroom English and use a variety of vernacular representations and readings as examples.

Principle 3: *Words must be presented to students in those phonological contexts that preserve underlying forms*.

Again here the focus is mainly on final consonant combinations used in environments in which they are more likely to remain intact. For example, final consonant clusters such as *-st* have been argued to be retained more often when they precede a vowel, i.e., a word beginning with a vowel sound.[7] As such, Labov suggests that using a word such as *last* in the environment in which it precedes a vowel would be more beneficial in that the chances of retaining the *-st* cluster would be greater (e.g., *last answer*).

Principle 4: *Use the full forms of words and avoid contractions*.

One reason for using full forms is that they may be helpful in avoiding confusion when teachers address students. Labov notes that contracted forms such as *'ll* for *will* and *'s* for *is* are not always easily perceived, and the auxiliaries are required in mainstream English.

Principle 5: *Grammar should be taught explicitly*.

As do the others, this principle requires some knowledge about rules of AAE; it proposes that teachers offer direct instruction in pointing out and teaching the correspondences between AAE and mainstream English.

The method of pointing out mainstream English correspondences to AAE patterns suggested above as an alternative to the correctionist approach is along the lines of what is referred to as the contrastive analysis approach. Harris-Wright (1999) reports on a program implemented in fifth and sixth grade classes in schools in DeKalb County, Georgia, which incorporates contrastive analysis in the bidialectal program. The program strives "to teach mainstream English and school communication skills to students without devaluing the language skills that they learn at home" (p. 55). In keeping with the aim of the bidialectal strategy, the DeKalb County approach embraces the importance of the child's native variety of speech as well as that of being able to use mainstream English. This program has three goals:

> (1) to create in students an awareness and acceptance of the value of more than one way of communicating; (2) to create in students an awareness that American society values individuals who can use Standard English communication skills in appropriate settings and an awareness of the impact upon educational, social, and economic goals of using the vernacular for all situations; and (3) to provide opportunities for students to practice mainstream communication skills to increase their communication repertoires.
>
> [Harris-Wright 1999, pp. 55–56]

The approach is one that "helps students analyze the differences between 'home language' and 'school language' thus providing the groundwork for integrating informal and formal language knowledge and use" (Harris-Wright 1987, p. 210). One of the tasks that students in this bidialectal program undertake is the identification of AAE and mainstream English constructions. For example, students in the program are asked to consider minimally contrastive pairs in AAE and mainstream English such as *She dən been here* and *She has been here*, respectively.[8] Harris-Wright (1999) reports that

the program, which has been in existence for over ten years, has been successful, as "reading comprehension normal curve equivalent (NCE) scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills show higher gains for students in this program than for comparable Title I students who are not in the program" (p. 58).

John R. Rickford (1999) and Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998) agree that the contrastive analysis approach has merit. Rickford reports the success of programs such as that conducted by Hanni Taylor (1989) and Parker and Crist (1995).[9] However, he notes that one drawback of the approach is that the type of drills used in the method may be repetitive and boring. Also, there is limited empirical research on the success of the approach, and many of the reports on contrastive analysis are outdated, summarizing studies from much earlier periods.

Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998) place a good deal of emphasis on the contrastive analysis approach, maintaining that it should be the basis for all programs that are designed to assist dialect speakers in becoming proficient in mainstream English. The main reason that they give in support of a contrastive-based approach is that because AAE speakers know the structure and some rules of mainstream English, there is no reason to introduce constructions in mainstream English as if they are from a foreign language with which the speakers have no familiarity. On the contrary, what speakers need are mainstream English correspondences to AAE constructions. Green (1995) considers this strategy in a paper that discusses aspectual markers and traditional auxiliaries. The paper explains the systematic differences between the two classes of items and the way these differences can be highlighted in lessons designed to teach grammatical mainstream English correspondences to AAE speakers. Also, the paper explains that it is important to highlight differences between mainstream English and AAE because the dialects use identical lexical items that may be combined in different ways to indicate different meanings. One example is be *dən*, which may be combined to give different meanings.[10] The type of information presented in the linguistic approach in Green (1995) may be useful in the contrastive analysis approach.

In implementing this strategy, it is important to understand the differences in meaning and the contexts in which lexical items are used. For example, students who use the *dən* sequences in oral responses to questions or in written assignments will understand the meaning associated with the sequence but may not always use mainstream constructions in conveying such meaning. That is to say that *dən* will be used in contexts in which general American English requires 'have usually already' or 'will have already.'

A final strategy that is used in instruction in mainstream English is introducing material written in dialect and gradually moving the vernacular speaker to mainstream English. The most commonly reported example of readings written in the vernacular is the *Bridge* series (Simpkins, Holt and Simpkins 1977). Three levels of stories were introduced in the series: (1) story in the vernacular, (2) story that served as a bridge by introducing mainstream English patterns, (3) story in mainstream English. More recently, Maroney, Thomas, Lawrence and Salcedo (1994) conducted a preliminary study to determine whether reading stories in dialect would be helpful to vernacular speakers.[11] They report that students in their preliminary study performed better on comprehension questions based on vernacular readings than on those based on the stories written in

standard English. They do not present the details of the study, so issues such as the way the students responded to some of the outdated lexical items in the vernacular stories are not addressed in detail.

It is no surprise that the *Bridge* concept worked for the short time it was implemented in the school system, as initially, students were introduced to reading in a variety that was theoretically closer to what they spoke before they moved to classroom language. As Labov (1995) puts it, commenting on the *Bridge* cultural and linguistic approach: "It reduces the cultural distance between the student and his or her first reading materials, and it also reduces cognitive impediments to reading" (p. 53).

The complications that I raise here in relation to vernacular readings place some emphasis on problems with the study of AAE and should be considered carefully. One issue that should be addressed is that relating to the lexical items used in vernacular materials. As explained in chapter 1, some lexical items resist time and keep their place in the AAE lexicon, while others are more ephemeral. One of the striking features of the vernacular stories in the *Bridge* series is the vocabulary, which dates them. If such vernacular readings were used consistently as a part of teaching instruction, it would be necessary to update these stories often, given the way that some of the specialized vocabulary items change. For example, lexical items such as *split* ('leave'), *bread* ('money'), *fox* ('good looking girl') and *pad* ('place of abode') are used in the stories, as illustrated in the following excerpt:[12]

(5) "It's beautiful, Mae. Girl, you a stone fox with your natural hairdo!" say Gloria. ("Dreamy Mae," p. 20)

Another problem with dialect readers is that it would be difficult to capture standard vernacular representations given that there is no recorded standard AAE.[13] What I am referring to here is an established or consistent code of representing words in AAE. The term standard AAE has not been used in reference to an established written form of the variety; in fact, there is no general agreement on uniform representations of written AAE. For example, as explained in chapter 1, there is no uniform spelling of *saditty*. Baugh (1983b) addresses a similar issue, expressing his views against using vernacular readings to teach mainstream English to speakers of AAE. Given the research on AAE and the agreement that researchers working in this area have reached, there is some consensus on what it means to speak AAE; however, we have not moved toward standard or uniform representations of written AAE.

Another area that has not been addressed in detail in relation to dialect readers and other material written in the vernacular is that of acquisition of patterns in AAE. In producing written material for AAE speakers, it is important to know not only the reading level of the speaker, but also the types of linguistic patterns that speakers of a certain age group are more likely to use. Consider the use of existential *it* that has been explained in chapter 3. Existential *it*, which is very salient in current AAE, is not used in "A Friend in Need" or "Dreamy Mae," two stories in the *Bridge* series, and it is not clear whether it was omitted because the feature did not occur regularly in AAE during the time the readers were written or whether it was not used regularly

by speakers who were targeted by the vernacular readers. In "A Friend in Need," the narrator uses existential *there*, not *it*. Because the narrator uses aspectual *be* and *they* as the possessive marker three sentences later, it is clear that the goal was to present the narrator as a speaker of AAE. Nevertheless, the AAE sequence of existential *it* followed by some *be* form is not used. The relevant passage is given below:

(6) "Well, anyway, **there** happen to be a young Brother by the name of Russell. He had his wheels. Soul neighborhood, you know. He had this old '57 Ford. You know how Brothers be with they wheels." (p. 1)

Also, in (7), a passage from "Dreamy Mae," the narrator uses *there*, not existential *it*:

(7) "Mae start checking Gloria out for the first time. Gloria was a good-looking girl. **There** was something kind of different 'bout her." (p. 17)

To my knowledge, there is not a great deal of information on acquisition of AAE, so it is not clear at what ages speakers acquire certain features. Jackson (1998) begins to raise related questions in her research on aspectual *be* in child AAE. This information is tantamount in developing age- and level-appropriate vernacular reading material that will be suitable for reading instruction. There remain a number of questions and uncertainties associated with the use of vernacular readings, not the least of which is the reluctance of parents and communities to accept dialect materials as bona fide teaching material. However, as argued in research by Rickford and Rickford (1995) and John R. Rickford (1999), such material can be useful instruction tools. A beneficial outcome of integrating dialect readers into instruction is that they will legitimize AAE. If students see the language they speak in print, they may become more interested in reading in general. Also, today a wide selection of African American literature (including books, tapes and other material for instruction) is available and can be used in classes in which teachers plan to integrate prose written in AAE in the lesson. The types of questions and concerns raised here in relation to dialect reading material can be addressed in continued research on AAE. More research on AAE is available, and it will, more than likely, have a positive impact on the development of educational strategies for teaching mainstream English to speakers of AAE.

It is important to note that although classroom strategies discussed in this section are very promising, they will not be successful if teachers are not open to changing their attitudes about AAE and the students who speak it.

8.5.2.2 The roles of teachers in implementing classroom strategies for dialect speakers

The previous discussion reviewing different types of strategies that could be used in teaching vernacular speakers to become proficient in mainstream English is intended to show that there are different ways to approach the dialect issue in the classroom. Some teachers may have at least two main concerns in response to and misconceptions about strategies suggested for teaching reading to speakers of AAE. The first is that

the strategies require teachers to teach AAE. This is not the case because children already have command of AAE when they enter school; they have already acquired it as their native form of language. The view that AAE will be taught in schools is completely unfounded especially because standard and uniform representations and rules have not been adopted for the variety. Instead of teaching AAE speakers the variety they have already acquired, teachers would be responsible for understanding and respecting students' language and providing accurate mainstream English patterns that correspond to the patterns in the child's native dialect.

A second concern is that the burden will be placed on teachers who are expected to adjust the curriculum to accommodate speakers of AAE. Teachers might be concerned that they will be expected to take responsibility for providing special instruction for speakers of every variety of English. A number of questions would follow: Is it realistic to require teachers to learn the rules of AAE? Where does this stop? If AAE gets special privileges, what happens when the majority of children in a classroom speak different varieties of English? According to Meier (1998), if it is the goal of the teacher "to help children become bidialectal or bilingual, teachers must know something about the systematic features of their students' native language" (p. 118). Teachers who know something about the children's native linguistic system are less likely to misclassify their grammatical linguistic patterns as mainstream English errors or disorders and are more likely to understand them as differences. As a result, they will take these differences into consideration when teaching mainstream English. From personal experience as an instructor of future teachers, Meier offers the following:

> Although I do not require that students in my classes memorize a list of phonological and grammatical differences between Black Language/Ebonics and Standard English, we do read about and discuss these differences in some detail as well as reflect upon their implications for effective teaching practice and for the accurate assessment of African-American children's cognitive and linguistic abilities.
>
> [p. 122]

Meier's approach in teaching classroom teachers and future teachers is not one in which teachers get detailed analytical lessons on phonological, syntactic, lexical and morphological patterns in AAE; however, they are exposed to dialect patterns. Such an introduction to AAE may be sufficient for teachers. As more and more research becomes available on AAE and classroom strategies, teachers will have more resources at their disposal that will serve as useful introductions to the study of AAE and different strategies that can be used in teaching vernacular speakers mainstream English.

The literature on suggestions and resources for teachers who work with child AAE speakers in standard language oriented programs is growing in the areas of linguistics, education and cultural studies. Also, teachers and others in the field of education who have firsthand experience in classrooms with students who use AAE have begun to discuss their strategies. Examples are the programs explained in Harris-Wright (1987)

and the Academic English Mastery Program directed by Noma Lemoine in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Also of interest in this area is research and practical approaches to reading in Angela Rickford (1999).

In an interview, Carrie Secret, who teaches in the Standard English Proficiency (SEP) program in the Oakland Unified School District, discusses some of the approaches she takes in the classroom. The SEP program is designed to describe and illustrate the differences between the language children use at home and mainstream English in an environment in which the teachers and school community respect and understand the children's language. One of the questions Secret was asked during the interview was the following: How do you teach children to understand that they may be dropping consonants when they speak? She gave the following response:

> I'm lucky in that I have been with these children five years and at a very early age I engaged them in listening to language for the purpose of hearing and understanding the difference between Ebonics and English. However, by the middle of second grade, they were all readers. So at that point it was easy to go to the overhead and show them exactly what they said and then call for the English translation of what they said.
> Hearing the language is a crucial step. Children who speak Ebonics do not hear themselves dropping off "t" for instance. You have to teach them to hear that. So we do a lot of over enunciation when they are small. I also do a lot of dictation where I will dictate a sentence and the children write what I said, by sound only. I also try to always point out what is Ebonics speech and what is English. Children must first hear and develop an ear for both languages in order to effectively distinguish between the two.
>
> [p. 83]

Secret also spends a great deal of time reading to her students and taking them through word flash card drills, phrase drills and sentence drills. She notes that content and comprehension are also very important in her classroom, so if students mispronounce words during a reading session, she does not stop them. The focus then is on making sure that they are comprehending what they are reading. Secret takes a number of steps to point out contrasts between sound patterns in mainstream English and AAE, but it is probably the case that her most important strategy is respecting the language the students bring to the classroom.

In discussing strategies for teaching speakers of AAE, Alexander (1985, pp. 27–28) suggests some of the same classroom activities that are discussed by Secret. From Alexander's list are the following:

(1) Discuss reasons for the different dialects and why dialectal difference should be respected.
(2) Discuss and role-play different situations in which AAE and standard English dialect would be used.
(3) Use pattern practice drills to help students develop an understanding of both black English dialect and standard English dialect.
(4) Teach new vocabulary words every day. Provide opportunities for practice of these words.

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(5) Dictate passages which contain the language constructions to be reviewed. This activity provides students with practice in punctuation, capitalization and spelling, while enlarging their vocabularies.

In order to implement strategies such as those discussed here, teachers will have to have some knowledge about AAE or access to sources on the linguistic variety, but the most important requirement is that they respect dialectal difference.

Summary

This chapter has considered attitudes toward a number of specific areas in relation to AAE. The discussion ranges from researchers' approaches to attitudes toward the use of AAE in employment and educational settings. Two of the most common topics on AAE and education are teacher attitudes and classroom strategies and instruction used in teaching AAE speakers to use mainstream English consistently in school and other environments. The type of instruction should be determined by the goal, whether it is to help the child become as proficient in mainstream English as she is in AAE or whether it is to help the student use mainstream English in the school environment. The contrastive analysis approach has received support from a number of linguists and practitioners, and it is suggested that this strategy be used as the basis for all instruction. Also, dialect reading material has been used as an instructional tool. While reports of the success of dialect reading material have been positive, its use has been met with opposition from parents and communities at large. As more research on the acquisition stages of AAE and standard representations of the variety becomes available, some of the problems facing dialect readers can be addressed. One of the major points of emphasis in this chapter is that it has not been suggested that speakers be taught AAE; however, it is useful to draw on the linguistic rules and patterns of AAE in developing plans for intervention.

Exercises

1. Edwards (1985) argues that "the teacher should strive to make the speaker bidialectal" (p. 78). He suggests the following as a game plan for teachers of English in inner-city schools where black children speak AAE as their native variety:

   (a) Learn the linguistic rules of AAE.
   (b) Use the linguistic information to predict where such speakers will have pronunciation and grammatical difficulties in speaking and writing mainstream English as it is spoken and written in the region.
   (c) Prepare teaching materials which address the specific difficulties that students will have or have already had.
   (d) Integrate these tactics with regular methods and programs for teaching written and spoken standard English.

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Now that you have considered the points in (a–d), complete the following:

(i) Discuss five linguistic rules of AAE that teachers would have to learn in following the plan proposed by Edwards.
(ii) Discuss the way in which this plan would or would not be helpful in preventing a situation such as the one in the King (Ann Arbor) and Oakland cases. It may also be a good idea to consult the additional sources on the King and Oakland cases that are given in note 3.

2. A group of elementary and junior high school teachers have asked you to discuss with them some issues about the speech used by some African Americans in their classes. The teachers are specifically concerned about sentences such as the following that are produced by their students:

(a) The book not in my des.
(b) The spelling words be too easy.

Furthermore, the teachers are wondering if you can shed some light on why students may utter sentences such as the ones in (c) and (d):

(c) Your mother wear army boots to church.
(d) Your mother wear army boots to come out and play basketball on the court.

Provide a careful discussion of the data in (a–d), explaining the way in which you would address the issues raised by the teachers. Your discussion must include the following:

(i) General description of AAE
(ii) Explanation of the data in (a–d), which clearly shows that the examples are not just random deviations from mainstream English
(iii) Evidence to support the explanations that you give for (a–d)

3. One of the points addressed in the Linguistic Society of America Resolution on the Oakland case issue is about the language/dialect status of AAE. The following is offered in the resolution:

> The distinction between "languages" and "dialects" is usually made more on social and political grounds than on purely linguistic ones. For example, different varieties of Chinese are popularly regarded as "dialects," though their speakers cannot understand each other, but speakers of Swedish and Norwegian, which are regarded as separate "languages," generally understand each other. What is important from a linguistic and educational point of view is not whether AAVE is called a "language" or a "dialect" but rather that its systematicity be recognized.

Explain what is meant by "What is important from a linguistic and educational point of view is not whether AAVE is called a 'language' or a 'dialect' but rather that its systematicity be recognized." In your opinion, is the classification of AAE as a dialect or language important from an educational point of view? Why or why not?

4. As discussed in Chapter 3, preterite *had* is used in narrative contexts to mark an event that occurred in the past. Its use differs from the past perfect *had*, which is used to mark the past before the past. Because preterite *had* occurs in narrative contexts, it is likely that constructions such as the following will occur in the speech and writing of students:

(a) During the summer, I had read three books.
'During the summer, I read three books'
(b) We had went to the library during enrichment period.
'We went to the library during enrichment period'
(c) I had got strep throat on the last day of school.
'I got strep throat on the last day of school'

What strategies would you use in teaching students the mainstream correspondences (given in single quotes) to preterite *had* constructions in AAE? Also, how would you point out the differences between the preterite *had* constructions such as (a–c) above and the pluperfect (past perfect) *had* construction (e.g., *She had eaten when I arrived*).

5. How would you explain to someone with no background in linguistics that AAE exists and that it is not mainstream English with a bunch of errors? Are you actually convinced of the view that AAE results from a failed attempt to produce mainstream English is incorrect and uninformed? Explain your response.

6. It has been suggested that it may be useful to use African American literature in language arts classes, especially in programs with a standard English proficiency component designed to help students master classroom English and also respect and appreciate AAE. Can you see ways in which some of the works presented in chapter 6 would be useful in such programs? Explain your answer.