

# *Language Crossing and Representation: Understanding AAE and Linguistic Minstrelsy*

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**The** English language has grown and transformed for centuries; it is constantly evolving. Robert Burchfield, former Chief Editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, states that “[f]ifteen hundred years ago, Germanic-speaking tribes in north-western Europe intensified their raids and journeys ‘abroad’” (173), leading to the foundation of the English language. The diversity of English has grown exponentially ever since.

In North America, the English language came equipped with all variations of European influence, but the importation of African slaves had perhaps the most significant impact on the evolution of Standard American English. African American English (AAE) is ubiquitous in contemporary culture and is maintained through a variety of media. It is commonly spoken within a large segment of society, regardless of race or ethnic background. But at what point do the linguistic properties of AAE cease to be a solidifying force for community relations and ethnic pride, and instead become an arbiter of racial division and prejudice?

John Updike said in *New Yorker* magazine “since words mean different things to different people...there is no material retaining ground for the imagery that words conjure in one brain or another” (Burchfield xvi), and Mary Bucholtz and Qiuana Lopez assert that problems arise “when language crossing... becomes the focus of linguistic representation” (680). The crux of their argument is that “the use of African American English by European American actors in Hollywood films [constitutes] a complex language-based form of blackface minstrelsy” (Bucholtz 680). Though Bucholtz and Lopez focus on hip-hop era films from 1998 and 2003 to argue that “[m]instrelsy in earlier Hollywood films . . . is excluded . . . because these racial

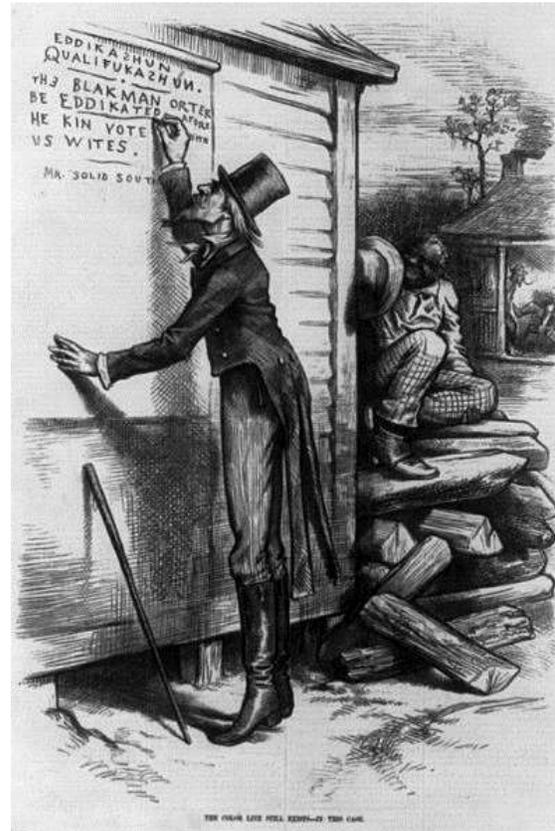


Figure 9 Editorial cartoon criticizing literacy tests as a means to disenfranchise African American voters. In a mockery of white literacy and language use, the white man in the foreground has written, “Eddikashun qualifukashun. The Black man orter be eddikated afore he kin vote with us Wites, signed Mr. Solid South.” Cartoon. *Harper's Weekly* 18 Jan. 1879: 52.

representations predate the Civil Rights Era and therefore warrant a separate treatment” (685), the problem does present itself in both time periods and illustrates the need for continued vigilance and dialogue. Whether a product of the nineteenth century or the twenty-first century, “linguistic minstrelsy contributes to the racial formation of a . . . hegemonic whiteness that incorporates elements of black culture while enforcing essentialized racial difference”

(Bucholtz 681). Though AAE is a legitimate form of Standard American English---its use is ubiquitous and multicultural in contemporary society---the potential for AAE to be used as a device to reinforce racial boundaries and foster stereotyping is alive and well.

The legitimacy of African American English is as well established as the English variants of Scotch-Irish, French, or Native American languages, to name only a few examples. Though as complex and varied as any form of English due to regional dialects and social constructs, some of the “grammatical constructions [of AAE] are similar to the African languages that slaves brought to America” (Rowe 199). Bruce Rowe explains in *A Concise Introduction to Linguistics* that the “Gullah . . . variety of AAE has retained many phonological and syntactic features of West African languages” (200). He goes on to explain that “African Americans living on the coastal plain and Sea Islands of South Carolina . . . have been successful in preserving many facets of African life and language” (Rowe 200). The Gullah dialect is maintained in these areas in order to preserve its historical significance to language and culture and also to maintain a sense of what Rowe calls “ethnic pride and neighborhood solidarity” (200). Of course, the ability for the Gullah community to earn an income from their cultural heritage is an added benefit. As a thriving tourist destination for vacationers from around the globe, the South Carolina coast has in its Gullah culture a living example of the merger between African and English languages that contribute so much to the broad scope of what could be called the American English language.

Many of the variations between Standard American English and AAE can be found within the Gullah dialects of South Carolina. Rowe mentions that some of the phonological changes found in AAE are also found outside of the African American variety of the English language. His examples of /r/ deletions and modifications of interdental fricatives, where “the voiceless /θ/ is replaced by /t/ and the voiced /ð/ is replaced by /d/” (Rowe 201), are not only found in AAE but apply to “some

dialects of Boston [and] New York” across a range of ethnicities (Rowe 200). In a glossary of Gullah words found at the Gullah Tours website, the rules of /r/ deletions are illustrated in such words as /'ansʌ/ for *answer* and /'babʌ/ for *barber* (gullahtours.com). Many Gullah words incorporate multiple phonological changes within a single word. For instance, the word /'nida/ for *neither* or /we'nebʌ/ for *whenever* apply the rule of /r/ deletion along with the replacement of the interdental fricative /ð/ with /d/ in *neither* and the replacement of /v/ with /b/ in *whenever* (“Gullah Words”).

Another phonological variation of SAE found in AAE is also a characteristic of the dialects of many Southern whites. Rowe posits that “[m]onophthongization is one of the most prominent characteristics of [AAE and white southern dialects, and] it is always used by comedians and by actors imitating [these] dialects” (201). According to Rowe, the shift in the pronunciation of a diphthong to a monophthong---when /layk/ is pronounced /lak/ and /bəyl/ is pronounced /bəl/--- is often good for a laugh, and thus the potential for stereotyping is high (Rowe 201). But this is true with any linguistic variation utilized by any ethnic group. The phonological differences between SAE and AAE, in conjunction with the morphological and syntactic differences between the two, are just as valid as those linguistic variations utilized by Greek Americans or Jewish Americans.

As with those other linguistic variations based on immigrant histories, the origins of the linguistic variations in AAE are based in part on the dialects of the original Africans brought to America as slaves, but Rowe also asserts that those variations “may simply be the result[s] of the creolization process” (199). Concerning creolization, Rowe explains that “Africans who were enslaved . . . were deliberately kept isolated from others who spoke the same language [and] In order to communicate . . . they developed a pidgin language with the overseer’s language as the superstrate” (209). Therefore, many of the linguistic characteristics of AAE stem from their European origins. One syntactic feature of AAE that is found in many other

varieties of English that originated in Europe is multiple negation (Rowe 203). In Hispanic languages, double negation is the norm, but Rowe presents English literary examples from the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries that show multiple negation was in use in the England of Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare (203). It's easy to understand how England's burgeoning slave trade could have contributed to this particular feature being adopted by its human cargo. As Rowe states, “[many] characteristics, particularly phonological ones, are similar to the variety of English that whites brought with them from England to the American South” (199). Because of these European influences, it seems that the linguistic variables that comprise African American English may be more English than African after all.

Because of the marginalization that can inevitably ensue due to regional dialect or ethnic origin, code switching is practiced by virtually everyone. Code switching is a deliberate shift in one's “manner of speaking to another . . . in order to give an appropriate impression” (Rowe 177). African Americans and other practitioners of variant English forms often utilize code switching in order to function in the professional realm where the use of SAE is most often preferred. There are quite a few literary examples of African-born writers who, due to their intentional targeting of a mostly white English speaking audience, use code switching to facilitate a dramatic change in human consciousness. The story of Olaudah Equiano fits well into this category. An eighteenth-century African who was sold into slavery and survived the Middle Passage, Equiano wrote *The*

*Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African Slave, written by Himself*. In this narrative, it is clear that Equiano intended his audience to be of the mostly-white English speaking variety. In a section describing his voyage to America the diction belies his African origins when he writes:

One day, when we had a smooth sea and moderate wind, two of my wearied countrymen who were chained together . . . preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made through the nettings and jumped into the sea; immediately another quite dejected fellow, who, on account of his illness, was suffered to be out of irons, also followed their example; and I believe many more would very soon have done the same if they had not been prevented by the ship's crew, who were instantly alarmed. (2853-4)

Upon its publication in 1789, and with the diction that Equiano uses, it is easy to imagine that its readers might have assumed the author to be British and white. On the other hand, as Stephen Greenblatt points out in his introduction, “[Equiano's] main purpose [was] to force his readers to face the ordeals a slave must endure---to live in his skin [and to teach] them that a black man could speak for himself” (2853). Equiano's

utilization of code switching in order to capture the attention of a mostly-white audience had the potential to facilitate dramatic social change.

Having established the legitimacy of AAE as a linguistically accepted form of American English but one that is often socially less powerful, it is worth mentioning the problems that often arise due to its use as a device of parody. Burchfield, an Englishman, describes

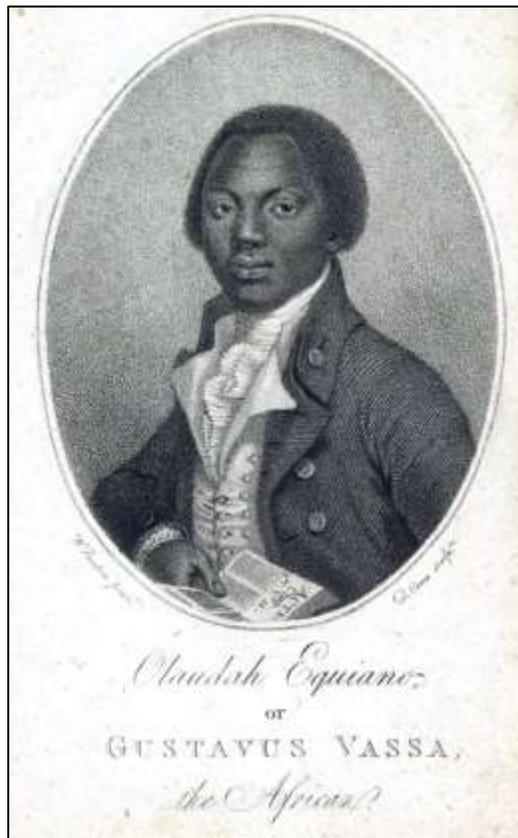


Figure 10 *Equiano* Book Cover/Wikimedia Commons

what he calls “Black English” as “potently political in its animosity towards the structured patterns of [SAE], colourful, animated, fancy, and subversive... a stridently alternative form of American speech... that is richly imagistic, inventive and combative” (178-79). The erudite Burchfield’s use of “subversive” and “combative” in his description of AAE illustrates the precarious nature of this particular variant of English. Combined with the concerns of Bucholtz and Lopez that “the racialization of language [through] linguistic minstrelsy [is a] transgression . . . of the ideology of racial essentialism” (681), Burchfield’s description of AAE takes on an even more disturbing tone. Bucholtz and Lopez assert that the contemporary use of “linguistic minstrelsy [represents] a form of mock language that reinscribes stereotypes about African Americans and their language while participating in a . . . controversial pattern of European American [white male] appropriation of black cultural forms” (681). Though Bucholtz and Lopez intentionally omit the blackface minstrel shows of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the early forms of minstrelsy certainly rate as appropriations of black cultural forms by white European Americans that reinforced racial stereotypes. The modern version is simply repackaged and presented in a different context. In fact, Bucholtz and Lopez argue that this modern minstrelsy is worse than the earlier versions “because racial stereotypes are hidden behind the parody of white male characters whose acts of crossing in turn function as parodies of black language and culture” (702). Though AAE is as legitimate as any variant of English, its use as a comedic device should give us pause. This modern form of minstrelsy in films “suggests that the semiotic resources of blackness are necessary in order for whiteness to claim authenticity and thereby retain its authority” (Bucholtz 701).

Examples of white appropriation of black cultural forms are also found in films and books from the early twentieth century. “Al Jolsen’s much-discussed [1927] blackface performance in *The Jazz Singer*” (Bucholtz 685) is an example of minstrelsy in an early Hollywood film. A literary example of linguistic minstrelsy can be found in a book entitled *Lyrics from*

*Cotton Land*. Published in 1922 with special thanks to the *Charlotte Observer* and *Century Magazine*, it is a collection of poetry by John Charles McNeill who passed away in 1907. As a product of a different era, its language appears jarring through a modern lens. But as an example of white appropriation of a black cultural form—McNeill was white—the poetry’s linguistic properties are almost entirely African American English, or at least a white man’s version of it. Amongst the titles of “Po’ Baby,” “Possum Time Again,” and “Ligion,” a poem entitled “Nigger Demus” contains the following second stanza:

Now, while de hat is pas’ aroun’ by Bill en Poly-  
phemus,  
I’s gwine a tell you supp’n ‘bout dat gre’t man,  
Nigger Demus---  
But watch de hat, my bruddern, when dey goes  
to make deir change:  
Dey’s good folks, but in spite er dat don’t give  
‘em too much range. (15)

There is plenty more where that came from, and it is hard not to read most of the collection as racist in both content and linguistic form. But in 1905, McNeill received the Patterson Memorial Cup: a “Magnificent Trophy as an Incentive to the Development of Literary Talent in North Carolina” (“The Patterson Memorial,” xi), and a review from a magazine entitled *Charity & Children* found in the back of the book praises McNeill’s work. It states that “*Lyrics from Cotton Land* will remain a priceless legacy to the children of the South [and] Joel Chandler Harris is not a whit more lifelike in his portrayal of the language . . . of the old-time darkey than John Charles McNeill” (190). McNeill’s poetry is, of course, a product of his time, and his appropriation of black cultural form appears to have been motivated by the aesthetic linguistic qualities of AAE rather than an attempt to overtly stereotype African Americans. However, Bucholtz’s earlier statement concerning modern films could easily be applied to McNeill’s poetic collection that “the semiotic resources of blackness are necessary in order for whiteness to claim authenticity and thereby retain its authority” (701). Of course, no one was discussing such matters in the early twentieth

century, which is why, in this modern era when people do discuss such matters as semiotic resources of blackness and claims of authenticity and power, it is surprising to see linguistic minstrelsy performed at all.

Fortunately, since the Civil Rights Era, the cultural and linguistic variations of African Americans have become a normative component of a multicultural mainstream American society. But, as with any culturally bound linguistic variation, there remains a fine line concerning the appropriate use of AAE in contemporary society.

Perhaps the concerns over the use of mock language as a device of parody are overstated. The ability for a multicultural society to laugh at itself generates solidarity and a sense of neighborly goodwill. The movies that Bucholtz and Lopez discuss, *Bulworth* and *Bringing Down the House*, both feature strong African American female roles in relation to their white European American male co-stars; the white male playing the role of the “minstrelsy character . . . or ‘wigger’ . . . whose race and class privilege renders him ludicrously inauthentic” (Bucholtz 682). Neither movie is considered to be overtly racist, nor is the minstrelsy humor considered offensive; both seem to have appealed to a broad multicultural American audience. But a sensitive area is approached in these films when “any white speaker’s use of *nigga* as a neutral or affiliative term [is] consistently played for laughs rather than as [a] serious engagement . . . with the racial politics of this extremely charged word” (Bucholtz 691). A closer look at McNeill’s poetry reveals that perhaps the charge of linguistic minstrelsy may be too harsh as well. In the first poem of his collection entitled “Mr. Nigger,” the linguistic form reflects the voice of a Southern white and its tone is one of biting self-accusation; the title suggests the topic, but the subject is all about Southern whites. The following are samples from the third and fifth stanzas and they reveal a slightly different view of McNeill than was presented earlier:

I cannot see, if you were dead...  
How orators could earn their bread...

For they could never hold the crowd  
Save they abused you long and loud  
As being a dark and threatening cloud,  
Mr. Nigger.

You’re a vast problem to our hand...  
Your fame is gone throughout the land...  
The heart of all this mighty nation  
Is set to work out your salvation,  
But don’t you fear expatriation,  
Mr. Nigger.

Apparently, McNeill’s cross-over technique is an attempt at achieving social change for African Americans, and the use of linguistic minstrelsy in his other poems is an attempt to bring the binary of white/black relations into a symbiotic relationship. Perhaps the evolving symbiotic relation between AAE and SAE *requires* “language crossing [to be] the focus of linguistic representation” (Bucholtz 680) in order to heal from the pain endured from years of racial segregation.

Perhaps linguistic minstrelsy in contemporary culture is just a unique Americanism that Robert Burchfield, being British, can’t quite understand. His statements reveal a view of AAE “as a threat to the acceptability of the language handed down to white Americans from the seventeenth century . . . at once deeply impressive and overtly threatening” (178-9); but he is not American, and his view of AAE seems to still be shadowed by the not too distant American Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Whether linguistic minstrelsy and cross-over appropriations between Standard American English (whatever that may be) and African American English are good or bad is a matter for continued discussion. But when utilizing any variant of American English as a form of comic parody, one should keep in mind John Updike’s comment to the *New Yorker*: “words mean different things to different people” (Burchfield xvi).

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