

《論 文》

黒人英語の特徴とバスケットボールとの 関わりについて

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Black English and Basketball:

The Characteristics of Black English and the Relationships between Black English and Basketball

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[要 旨]

African American English (AAE) has unique and systematic rules in syntax and phonology. Vocabulary is also rich due to the historical influence of some other languages. Namely, AAE is not as a sub-standard form of English, but one of the language varieties.

Furthermore, African American communicative practices, such as improvisation and performativity reflect various black cultures (e.g., jazz, rap, and basketball). Above all, basketball is one of the symbols of black community. This paper describes not only the characteristics of AAE but also relationships between Black English and basketball from the linguistic point of view.

Introduction

English is the lexifier (served as the target) language of African American English (AAE). Thus, linguistically, it has similar characteristics of English. On the other hand, AAE has unique and systematic features

in syntax and phonology because it was influenced by several other languages. In fact, complicated relationships with other languages provide AAE with rich sources of vocabulary. In return, AAE contributes a large number of words and phrases to General American English.

AAE which was developed from the plantation language is now language varieties, not sub-standard English. As some characteristics of AAE, this paper describes the variety of vocabulary, syntax (copula deletion, tense/aspectual markers, and multiple patterns of negative formations), phonology (*th* sound and *r*-lessness) and African American communicative practices. Regarding African American communicative practices, “improvisation” and “performativity” (Spears, 2002) in Black English tie in with black culture, such as black music and sports.

Above all, basketball has become one of the symbols of black culture. Eighty percent of professional basketball players at present are black. From linguistic point of view, it seems that there are some close relationships between some features of AAE and the success of black basketball players.

1. History of African American English (AAE)

According to McCrum, MacNeil, and Cran (2003), three hundred and fifty years ago ancestors of Black English speaking people lived in West Africa (Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Ghana, and the Ivory Coast). They would have spoken their local languages and first heard English from the sailors of the slave ships. It is said that Black English began in the 16th century with the “Atlantic Triangle.” The slave ships loaded with cheap cotton goods and Bibles sailed from Bristol and Liverpool

in Britain for West Africa to exchange their cargo for Black slaves, who were taken to the Caribbean and sold as plantation workers or house servants. Then, the ships with sugar, rum, and tobacco from the Caribbean returned to Britain. This is the “Atlantic Triangle”, which forms a triangle lane where the slave ships from Great Britain sailed to the Caribbean and the Southern United States by way of West Africa. During the long sailing, the slaves who spoke different languages would have needed to communicate with each other in the dire slave ships, and become familiar with the sailors’ speech. So, West African Pidgin English was used as a common communication language among the Blacks, sailors, traders, and masters of slaves. At the beginning of the 17th century, the slave ships began to cross the Atlantic Ocean to the Southern United States (Georgia and South Carolina). Black English was established on the plantations in the South by the 18th century, which is why it is also known as Plantation Creole. In the 19th century, Black English called ‘Nigger English’ and ‘Negro dialect’ was widely recognized. Especially with regard to the plantations of the South, Black English affected the Southern White English. Black and White children grew up together and the Black slave children often outnumbered the Whites. Then, with the great Black migration to the North, Black language and culture began to have a great influence on White American speech in the United States.

2. Characteristics of Black English

2.1. Vocabulary

Interestingly, Green (2004, p.78) points out there are several hypotheses which suggest about the origin of AAE: West African languages brought by slaves (Substratist view); Sharing Jamaican Creole and Gullah (Creolist view); Developed from English base (Anglicist view); The founders of colonial America (Founder principle view); and Created by Europeans and Africans in the 17th century (Settler principle view). Thus, although English served as the target language of AAE, it contains unique vocabulary of its own. Some AAE words have the same sound but different meanings in General American English. Here are examples:

(AAE)	(Meanings of the word)
<i>Ash/Ashy</i>	Dry appearance of the skin.
<i>Kitchen</i>	Nappy hair around the nape of the neck.
<i>Get over</i>	Taking advantage of.
<i>Bad</i>	Good, excellent, and great.

As for some slang, Green (2002) and Rickford and Rickford (2000) describe that it changes rapidly and is used by speakers in particular age groups. They point out features of black vocabulary, especially slang terms, show significant social difference and divide Blacks and Whites. For example, Blacks are more familiar with terms *bougie* “an uppity-acting African American”, *busting out* “looking

good”, and *fresh* “cool”. While Whites are more familiar with terms *schlep* “to drag along”, *bombed* or *smashed* “drunk.” (Rickford & Rickford, 2000, p.93) Furthermore, Green (2002, p.16) says, “African American words and phrases are used by African Americans in different parts of the United States and who are of different age groups and social backgrounds.” That is, knowing about the source and the usage of the words, and the formation of Black slang can tell us about African American culture.

On the other hand, there are many English words which have been borrowed from African languages. According to McCrum et al. (2003) after the First World War (in the 1920's), the movement of the Blacks from the South to the North because of economic reasons had a great influence on White American speech and life. Especially with regard to music, *jazz*, *blues*, and *rock'n' roll* originate from the Blacks. It is said that the word *jazz* was used by the Blacks to mean to speed up, which is of West African origin. Furthermore, the language of the jazz players was known as *jive talk*, which caught on with people quickly. *Jive talk* was full of jargon and unique meanings (i.e., *Groovy*: “fine”, *Hip*: “wise, sophisticated”). The word *Hip* is the origin of the word *Hippies* in the 1960's. In the 1940's, *jive talk* seemed to have gained in popularity among not only the Blacks, but the Whites as the new words.

2.2. Syntax

Copula deletion, tense/aspectual markers, and multiple patterns of negative formations are remarkable characteristics of Creole languages.

2.2.1. Copula deletion

The copula *be* does not occur overtly. Green describes that the auxiliary and copula *be* can be absent or do not have to occur obligatorily in AAE. (2002, p.47) Here are examples:

They a little late. "They are a little late."

Some of them big. "Some of them are big."

You in the store. "You are in the store."

2.2.2. Tense/Aspectual marker

BIN and *dən* are put before the past tense verb (or progressive verb as for *BIN*) when the sentence indicates "remote past" and "resultant." Here are examples:

I BIN called her. "I called her a long time ago."

He BIN running. "He's been running for a long time."

I dən pushed it. "I have already pushed it."

I dən lost my wallet. "I have just lost my wallet."

2.2.3. Negative formations

First, as a unique feature of negation of AAE, multiple negators such as *don't*, *ain't*, *no*, *nothing*, *never* can be used in a single negative sentence. Double negatives in General American

English indicate a positive; however, they do not become positive in AAE. The sentence that has the negative meaning is not affected by the addition of negative elements; the sentence still has the negative sense. Here are examples:

Bruce don't want no teacher telling him nothing about no books.

"Bruce doesn't want any teacher telling him anything about any books."

I ain't never seen nobody preach.

"I have never seen anyone preach."

Second, negative auxiliary is put initial position when the first element of the negative sentence is the indefinite noun phrase, such as *a*, *an*, *some*, *ever*. Here are examples:

Don't no game last all night long.

"No game lasts all night."

Can't nobody tell you it wasn't meant for you.

"Nobody can tell you it wasn't meant for you."

Finally, existential *it* which means 'there is/are' is deleted in negative sentences. Here is an example:

Ain't nothing you can do. ("It" is deleted.)

= *Itain't nothing you can do.*

"There is not anything you can do."

2.3. Phonology

AAE has some characteristics in pronunciation:

changing the sound of *th* into “t/d”, and r-lessness.

In AAE, they produce t/d and f/v in words where the *th* sound occurs. Green shows some generalizations of the rule. First, the voiceless sounds /t/ and /f/ occur in medial and final environments of words in which the voiceless [θ] (th) sound occurs. Second, the voiced sounds /d/ and /v/ occur in the environments in which the voiced [ð] (th) is pronounced. Especially, the word beginning with voiced [ð] (th) is pronounced voiced /d/. (2002, p.118)

Here are examples:

(AAE)	(General English)
<u>d</u> ese	<u>th</u> ese [ð]
<u>d</u> at	<u>th</u> at [ð]
<u>b</u> a <u>f</u>	<u>ba</u> th [θ]
<u>b</u> a <u>v</u> e	<u>ba</u> th <u>e</u> [ð]
<u>t</u> in	<u>th</u> in [θ]
smoo <u>v</u> e	smoo <u>th</u> [ð]

Interestingly, Rickford and Rickford (2000) introduce some arguments of Anglicists. The substitution of “d/f” for *th*, such pronunciation *de*, *dis* and *dat* in AAE came from Southern British dialects (Sussex), rather than African languages. In short, this feature of pronunciation was affected by settlers from Britain who were peasants and spoke non-standard English.

Another feature is r-lessness. The sound /l/ and /r/ after vowels are deleted. Especially with regard to r-lessness, it is said that African American speech had a great influence on the Whites in the South. That is, r-lessness was also a characteristic of Southern White people’s English. Green describes that /l/ and /r/ become more like unstressed vowel sound (ə), or they are not

produced at all. Here are examples:

(AAE)	(General English)
hep	he <u>l</u> p
pia [pɪə]	pi <u>ll</u>
coo [kɔ:]	co <u>ld</u>
bea [bæə]	bea <u>r</u>
afta	aft <u>e</u> r
yo	yo <u>u</u> r

3. The Relationships between Black English and Basketball

In this section we describe the reflection of Black English in African American culture, focusing on basketball.

The first public basketball game was in Springfield, Massachusetts, on March 11, 1892. A Canadian physical education instructor, James Naismith created the game that could be played indoors in a small space. Basketball was dominated by white players for a long time since it was invented. According to the story of the first black professional basketball player in 1902; Harry Haskell “Bucky” Lew said that racism at the time was so strong that the coach refused to let him on the court, and he was insulted verbally by opponents during his playing time.

The all-white National Basketball League began to racially integrate in 1942, and in 1950 the National Basketball Association (NBA) integrated with three black players, who pioneered the integration of professional basketball with their patience and courage. However, at present the game of basketball brings the black player to mind because it is

primarily dominated by blacks. It is said that 80% of NBA players are black.

Some researchers insist that basketball becomes a reflection of black culture in the same manner as black music, such as jazz, blues, and rap, etc. Spears (2002) points out “improvisation” and “performativity” in black ways of speaking. These are what he considers to be the black American communicative practices. He notes that these features are outstanding in music and basketball as well as in speech. Improvisation means creating and performing spontaneously or without preparation, which can be related to coinage, music, and drama in African American culture. For instance, coinage, the lexical items of created new words change rapidly, and they are not used repeatedly (i.e., they look like slang). Here are examples:

phat (extremely nice)

emuscultation / emasculation (the physical prowess)

nigger ball / hoops (basketball)

dawg / dog (defeat, loser)

Rickford and Rickford (2000, p.94, p.98) note that “Black” terms, such as the words mentioned above provide secrecy and reflect rebelliousness created in the black community; namely they refer to unique aspects of the black experience, including the physical attributes, social distinction, cultural practices, and tradition of African Americans. Furthermore, Benzon (1997) describes that he can see a thematic similarity between jazz and basketball.

“Basketball uses a smaller number of players, whose roles are less rigorously specialized, and involves a free flowing style of play...a basketball game is improvised.”

“Jazz culture stresses the importance of finding your own voice, your own style, even to the basic sound a player gets from his or her instrument.”

That is, successful players who play either sports or music need to not only exhibit their identity but have an intuition.

On the other hand, Spears says, “performativity is the style and the dramatization of the self for an audience” (2002, p.104), in short, the remarkable self-expression. In addition to that, Tate (2005) defines performativity as “a timely exploration of Black identity and its negotiation.” As some examples of performativity, Green (2002, p.156) states that rhetorical strategies, such as “call and response interaction” that is repetition in the rhythm and tonal contours between the pastor and congregation in church are the overwhelming characteristics of the speech event as AAE. What’s more, rap has also prominent characteristic as performativity. She expresses it as follows: “... bragging and boasting about strengths, possessions and skills in using words.” (Green, 2002, p.156)

Spears (2002) refers to gangsta rap, which associates the bruising style of play of basketball with the Pistons [Detroit’s professional basketball team]. Lyrics of gangsta rap tend to include illegal activities, such as the gang involvement, trouble with the law, and violence,

etc. Gangsta rappers often defend themselves by claiming that they are only depicting the reality of inner-city life and struggles. Meanwhile, Bill Laimbeer's aggressive play of the late 1980s and early 1990s at center for the Detroit Pistons gained him a bad reputation. The team was nicknamed the Bad Boys for the tough, hard-nose, defensive-oriented style. Laimbeer tells his style to the New York Times,

“A lot of basketball is mental. Some people find the way I play very frustrating...I'm playing to win, and I'll use all my tools both physically and mentally to win the game. Other players don't like that and I can't help that. I have to do what I do best. I call it gamesmanship.”

His comment shows his indomitable will. Although he is not a black, his attitude toward the game seems to evoke the black aesthetic, reflecting the fighting spirit against the difficult life in black communities where there are segregation, crimes, and struggles for life. Spears (2002) points out that performativity in language use in the black community cannot separate from African American cultural forms: black music, cuisine, and playing sports. Especially with regard to basketball, speed, rhythm, creation, flexibility, and something in life African Americans will fight for are all necessary for winning the game. The black players can exercise all of them on the court, which would be exactly the black aesthetic.

Conclusion

AAE is formulated from Plantation Creole into full-fledged languages. It has unique and systematic rules in syntax and phonology. Above all, vocabulary is rich due to the historical influence of some other languages, which reflects various characteristics of European languages, not just English. Researchers of AAE point out that a number of grammatical variables distinguishing from General American English need recognizing as the feature of the language. As they mention, the language is the symbol of a culture and a life-style. Thus, AAE should keep the status as a dialect or language varieties although it was often expressed in large objections in terms of bilingual education.

As some characteristics of AAE, it is used by different age groups and used in different social backgrounds, which provide information about the history of the semantic and lexical component of the vocabulary. Especially with regard to the vocabulary of AAE, there are a large number of words which have been incorporated as a part of General American English (e.g., *jazz*, *banjo*, *buckra*, *hippie*, and *high-five*).

The most important point is that AAE is characterized well-defined rules, thus, it is not as a sub-standard form of English, but a respectable language and one of the language varieties which has a rich linguistic history.

Regarding basketball, it is not a mere sport for black people, but the culture that reflects

black style and the black aesthetic. Black basketball players are often said to be superior to white players. One of the reasons is that black kids in inner city play basketball not for the fun of it. That is, basketball gives them a chance to succeed in life. They have an opportunity to express themselves freely, and they learn many things to live strong on the court. Through basketball they would know how to win and how to live, nurturing the extraordinary ambition to succeed in life.

African American communicative practices, such as “improvisation” and “performativity” in black ways of speaking (Spears, 2002) clearly reflect various black cultures. Characteristics of AAE: rhythm, creation, interaction, and flexibility are deeply connected with the tactics of basketball games. Another reason of the superiority of black players would lie in these characteristics that they have made skillful use of in the game.

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