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**African American Vernacular English
as a Literary Dialect**
A Linguistic Approach



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English and Beyond

**herausgegeben von Hans Sauer, Gaby Waxenberger
und Monika Kirner-Ludwig**

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1. Introduction

Why do we investigate languages? Through synchronic as well as diachronic analyses, social and political differences can be accounted for and attitudes towards their speakers be explained. Furthermore, knowledge about one's linguistic background, especially when it is different from mainstream varieties, provides a basis for identity and self. Ancestral values can be upheld, celebrated, and rooted further in the consciousness of their speakers.

In the case of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) the matter is not simply resolved by agreeing that it originates from British dialectal and African influences. Ultimately, the social implications its speakers still face today are unresolved. Like other dialects, AAVE and its speakers are prone to stigmatisation and discrimination. In order to find out what it is exactly that causes such perceptions, the driving forces and mechanisms in the background need to be unearthed.

Discovering these mechanisms is what the present study tries to achieve. By analysing AAVE's use in literary prose and by taking into account social and political factors, I have tried to establish the development of AAVE as a literary dialect. Furthermore, by unearthing in what ways AAVE in its written form is different from the spoken variety, I will expose long established social stigmata and stereotypes which have been burned into the nation's consciousness through a (initially) white dominated literary tradition.

A linguistic study of this scope has not yet been conducted. Linguistic analyses of AAVE in literature are rare and usually focus on one, sometimes two works.¹ Generally, linguistic analyses feature as props for literary arguments. Therefore, they are difficult to find, hidden within the literary analysis, and incomplete. The last point stems from the fact that only the most obvious linguistic features are analysed, which are usually restricted to orthographic and phonologic elements, rarely include morphological ones, and generally ignore syntax and vocabulary. On top of that, linguistic analyses have a tendency to describe indications of quantity with vague statements. What does *frequent* mean when it stands next to *often*, and is *often* also *regularly*? Despite noticing this pitfall, even I found it difficult to avoid. However, by providing statistics and counts I have tried to reduce inaccuracies in this respect.

The present study is divided into two main parts. The first part contains the study and analysis, while the second part provides the material and is added as CD-ROM.

Part one starts off with Chapter 3. *Historical Background*. It traces the history of the Atlantic slave trade and ends with a note on the political and social implications for American Slave Descendants today. This chapter not only creates the appropriate socio-historic and political background for the present

¹ Holton (1984) is the only comprehensive study which claims to focus on the linguistic aspects. However, the main interest of this book lies elsewhere and, more importantly, the linguistic analyses conducted for each work are often fundamentally lacking.

study, but it also embeds the topics of the individual works in their historical reality.

Chapter 4. *A Brief History of AAVE* investigates the linguistic research on AAVE. While it also looks at the terminology for its speakers, it mainly outlines some of the linguistic features associated with AAVE.

Chapter 5. *Literary Dialects* is included to embed the present study in the general discussions surrounding literary dialects. Furthermore, it clarifies that AAVE as a literary language can be analysed with linguistic tools.

Chapter 6. *Analyses of Works* forms the main part of this study. In it, a total of fourteen novels and one short story which feature AAVE are analysed using the findings of current linguistic research in the spoken variety as a guideline. The criteria for selecting the works were: the earliest prose appearance of AAVE and one of the most recent publications, the first novel by an African American using AAVE, a balance between black and white, as well as male and female authors, a mixture of well-known works and lesser known ones. Lastly, with regard to the scope of speech acts, the AAVE-speaking character needed to have at least one coherent paragraph or several complete sentences to be deemed useful for analysis. As a result, this study covers over two hundred years of AAVE in prose. Apart from the linguistic analysis, the respective author is introduced and a summary of the work is also provided. The biography was added to provide the individual background setting for the author as well as the work. The analysis proceeds in chronological order.

Finally, Chapter 7. *Summary and Conclusion* brings together the findings from the previous chapters and interprets the results.

The second part, which is added as CD-ROM, contains three appendixes. 9.1 *Features in Individual Works* contains the complete data recorded for each work. Especially for the vocabulary sections, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) and, more importantly, the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (DARE) were invaluable sources.

In order to be able to select works in which authors feature AAVE-speakers I started this research by compiling a list of these works. This survey ends with the year 2014 when I reached the decision which works to include in the present study. Each table contains the author, the title and the year of publication. While 9.2 lists the works chronologically, 9.3 follows an alphabetical order by author. While this survey tries to be comprehensive, it cannot claim completeness.

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