Introduction

African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) is a variety of English spoken predominately (but not exclusively) by African-Americans in the United States. The question addressed in this paper is two-fold: is AAVE a dialect of English, or merely a “sub-standard” variety? And, if it is in fact a dialect of English, to what extent should it be present in the classroom, as a language of instruction?

We begin by briefly discussing the (arguably less controversial) opinion that AAVE is in fact a dialect of English, and not some “incorrect” variety; several points are summarized from Geoffrey Pullom’s aptly-titled essay *African American Vernacular English Is Not Standard English with Mistakes* (1999). We then discuss what kind of a presence AAVE should have in the classroom, if any at all, given the goal of Standard English (SE) acquisition. I will argue that the study of AAVE alongside SE helps AAVE speakers in their acquisition of the “standard form”. In particular, I will expand on an approach called contrastive divergence. This technique seeks to teach the target language by comparing and contrasting its linguistic features with the language spoken by the speaker (for our purposes, SE and AAVE, respectively). We summarize successful examples of this language-learning approach detailed in *Linguistics, Education, and the Ebonics Firestorm* (Rickford, 2006)

AAVE as an English Dialect

It is generally agreed upon by linguists that language varieties are dialects of the same language if their speakers can understand one another, and if each variety has systematic differences in grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. It is simple to argue the first point, for the case of AAVE. Consider that opponents of AAVE usage generally consider it some “sub-standard” variety of English; that is, it is still intelligible to these English speakers. Furthermore, “virtually all the words used in AAVE can be clearly identified in Standard English too” (Pullum, 1999). Now, is AAVE in fact some “sub-standard” variety of English? Or does it exhibit these systematic differences that would distinguish it as a dialect of
English? Geoffrey Pullum argues, in his essay of the same title, that “African American Vernacular English is not simply Standard English with mistakes” (Pullum, 1999). He goes further to describe the systematic differences between SE and AAVE grammar (notably the omission of the copula “be” in certain contexts; e.g. “she happy”), and systematic differences between SE and AAVE pronunciation (notably the omission of sounds in certain consonant clusters; e.g. the pronunciation of “left” as \[lɛf\]). Because of this mutual intelligibility and these systematic differences, AAVE is generally considered by linguists to be a dialect of English.

**AAVE in the classroom**

To what extent should this English dialect be used in the classroom? There seems to be a great misunderstanding within this debate: proponents are not looking to “hold classes on how to speak AAVE” but rather to adopt “AAVE as a medium of instruction” (Pullum, 1999). Well-known linguist and opponent of AAVE usage in the classroom (even though agreeing it is an English dialect), John McWhorter argues that such a medium is unnecessary because students are better off learning the standard dialect “via immersion” (McWhorter, 2001, p. 249-250). However, immersion is clearly the current method of instruction in public schools, and its “results . . . are not encouraging” (Rickford, 2006). The following sections will detail how using AAVE as a medium of instruction can actually benefit AAVE speakers when learning Standard English.

**Language Learning and Contrastive Divergence**

Second language learners often transfer rules from their mother tongue into the language they are learning. Many mistakes made by a second language learner can be attributed to negative influence (interference) of this sort. Interference generally causes systematic, often predictable errors in the learned language.

Although it can be argued that AAVE speakers are not learning a new language per
se, systematic differences between AAVE and SE do exist (as discussed previously), and thus AAVE speakers routinely experience interference in their use of Standard English. The argument has been made by linguists that “it is precisely the many subtle differences between the two varieties that cause students difficulty […] when they fail to recognize that they are switching between systems” (Rickford, 2006).

Shouldn’t such systematic errors be addressed in language learning? It usually is, in fact, for foreign language speakers:

Books in grammar and phonetics for foreign students with a particular mother tongue usually focus a lot on differences between the mother tongue […] and the target language […] Being aware of these differences is essential in order to learn the correct and idiomatic use of the foreign language (Johansson, 2008).

One such formalized method of comparison is contrastive divergence—“the systematic comparison of two or more languages, with the aim of describing their similarities and differences […] often [used for] practical/pedagogical purposes” (Johansson, 2008). We discuss the use of contrastive divergence in the context of AAVE and SE.

**Contrastive Divergence Divergence in the Classroom**

University of Chicago professor John R. Rickford details several studies of contrastive divergence used as a tool for Standard English learning for AAVE speakers in “Linguistics, education, and the Ebonics firestorm” (2006). In one of these studies, two groups of Chicago African-American students from the inner-city were observed for 11 weeks; one group “was taught composition through conventional techniques, with no specific reference to the vernacular” (Rickford, 2006), whereas students in the other group were taught to differentiate between AAVE and Standard English using contrastive analysis methods. The results were notable:

[...] the experimental group showed a dramatic decrease (−59 percent) in the use of ten targeted Black English features in their Standard English writing,
whereas the control group in fact showed a slight increase (+8.5 percent) in their use of such features in their writing.”

In another study detailed by Rickford, reading composite scores for two groups of students (primarily African American) in the DeKalb County of Georgia were compared: one group (bidialectal students) had—for several years—been “taught English through a comparative approach” while students in the other group (control students) were offered “no explicit comparison between their vernacular and Standard English” (Rickford, 2006). Students in the bidialectal group showed consistently greater improvement in reading composite scores than control students, over a three year period.

In yet another study, twenty AAVE speakers in Cleveland, Ohio showed a 30% improvement in their ability to convert AAVE text to Standard English after two week course in Contrastive Divergence (Ramirez, 2005).

Although such comparative methods have only been adopted in relatively small, isolated environments, the existing empirical evidence illustrates “the effectiveness of taking the vernacular into account” (Rickford, 2006) when it comes to Standard English learning for AAVE speakers.

**Conclusion**

African American Vernacular English is a dialect of English according to the linguistic definition. As a legitimate dialect, its use in the classroom should not be stigmatized. In fact, as empirical evidence shows, AAVE can be successfully utilized as a pedagogical tool for the acquisition of Standard English language skills. Of course, to have a good understanding of the controversy that continually surrounds AAVE usage, one would have to familiarize themselves with the social and historical contexts in which this controversy emerges. This, of course, is beyond the scope of this paper. The pedagogical argument (discussed here) is only one part of this multifaceted debate.
References


