

**African American English (AAE), aka
African American Vernacular English (AAVE):**

It's been defined as having

**supraregional phonological and grammatical features,
[but] there is also social and regional variation, as is to be
expected of any spoken language (Lippi-Green 176).**

What does this mean?

Also, AAE is

a functional spoken language which depends on structured variation to layer social meaning into discourse” (Lippi-Green 176).

Which means what?

Smitherman explains how there is more to AAE than phonological and grammatical components; it is also recognized by cultural and stylistic features:

Think of black speech as having two dimensions: language and style. . . . [T]hey are often overlapping. . . . Reverend Jesse Jackson preaches: “Africa would if Africa could. America could if America would. But Africa cain’t and America ain’t.” Now here Reverend Jesse is using the language of Black Dialect when he says “ain’t” and when he pronounced can’t as “cain’t,” but the total expression, using black rhythmic speech, is the more powerful because the Rev has plugged into the style of Black Dialect. The statement thus depends for full communication on what black poet Eugene Redmond calls ‘songified’ pattern and on an Afro-American cultural belief set. (177 in Lippi-Green)

Lippi-Green adds that

Upper-middle-class blacks may seldom or never use grammatical features of AAVE, but such persons are often heard marking their language in a variety of ways to signal solidarity with the greater African American community. This may mean the use of AAVE intonation, tag questions, and address systems, or, more subtly, rhetorical features and discourse strategies. (177)

The issue tends to be symbolized, outside the community, by “the great *ask-aks* controversy” (Lippi-Green 179).

Etymologically, as the OED shows, the variation between [aesk] and [aeks] can be seen in the OE metathesis *asc-*, *acs-*.

ME developed from this *ox*, *ax*, *ex*, *ask*, *esk*, *ash*, *esh*, *ass*, *ess*.

Until 1600, *ax* survived as the literary form; from 1600 on, *ask* was the literary norm.

It exists as well in some British regional varieties, in the NYC area, and in Appalachian speech.

Yet this alone seems, for many non-AAE speakers, to distinguish AAE from Standard English:

On the last day that I met with my adopt-a-class last year, I told the students that they will have to learn to read, write, do math, and speak English properly if they are going to get a first-rate job and be a success. I told them there was one word that will mark them as uneducated. . . . A young girl raised her hand and said, “The word is ax.” . . . I asked her if she could pronounce the word properly. She said, “Yes, it is ask.” . . . I felt terrific. By simply raising that one word on an earlier occasion, I had focused their attention on something I think is important, and I am sure you do as well. . . . You were present at Martin Luther King, Jr., High School last week when the opening ceremony was conducted regarding the High School Institute for Law and Justice. A young girl in the class was asked to read her essay. The content of her essay was excellent, but at one point she pronounced the word ‘ask’ as ‘ax.’ I believe that everyone in the room recognizing the mispronunciation was distressed and, regrettably, the substance of her essay was [thus made] less important.

Edward I, Koch, Mayor of NYC, to the Chancellor of Education,
Harper’s Magazine, March 1989

and there’s more...

I guess what I'd like to say is that what makes me feel that blacks tend to be ignorant is that they fail to see that the word is spelled A-S-K, not A-X. And when they say *aksed*, it gives the sentence an entirely different meaning. And that is what I feel holds blacks back.

female call-in viewer, *Oprah Winfrey Show*
1987

The standard cited here is what?

An African American journalist says,

What black children need is an end to this malarkey that tells them they can fail to learn grammar, fail to develop vocabularies, ignore syntax and embrace the mumbo-jumbo of ignorance – and dismiss it in the name of ‘black pride.’ (Rowan 1979)

Rowan assumes what, about AAE?

Another African American journalist said, in response to a group seeking validation for AAE in 1995,

In Madison, Wisc, for example, some blacks are trying to push the value of BEV [Black English Vernacular], according to a recent report on the Wisconsin State Journal. They want to change the way professionals, teachers and the government view the lazy verbiage of the ghetto.

The group argues that black English is merely different, not a disability.

I disagree with that. I think it is dysfunctional to promote BEV – or even to legitimate it with an acronym. And the dysfunction exists not much among the students as with their ill-equipped African-American “leaders” and educators. (Hamblin 1995, cited in Lippi-Green 188)

Lippi-Green concludes that AAE

seems to symbolize black resistance to a cultural mainstreaming process which is seen as the logical and reasonable cost of equality – and following from that, success – in other realms. (183)

The reward, she says, and the wish, is this:

There will be no need for a distinct African American (or Mexican, or Vietnamese) culture (or language), because people will have full access to, and control of, the superior European American one. (183)

In 1987, Oprah Winfrey did a show on “Standard and ‘Black’ English.” In it, she defines AAE or ‘Black English’ as being purely a matter of subject-verb agreement:

To me standard English is having your verbs agree with your subject. That’s what standard English is to me. I mean, is that what your definition of standard English is?

[and later:]

Does it mean that you are ashamed because you choose to speak correctly, you choose to have your verbs agree with your subject? Does that mean you’re ashamed?

Oprah explains that she rejects AAE in favor of Standard English based on the way AAE has been and continues to be received.

Yet she defends it when others in the audience attack it:

1st caller: I am sitting here just burning. . . . I believe they put themselves that way to be separate, just like the way they do with . . . radio stations We don't have the White Music Experience, you know, Voice of the Whitey, you know. I mean, they are putting themselves in these categories.

Winfrey: What do you call Barry Manilow?

[later]

2nd caller: . . . What makes me feel that blacks tend to be ignorant is that they fail to see that the word is spelled a-s-k That gives the word a different meaning . . .

Winfrey: Why does it give it a different meaning if you know that's what they're saying?

[later]

9th audience member: . . . You could speak your own language, you could have your own way, but don't force someone else to have to suffer and listen to it.

Winfrey: . . . Why is it causing you to *suffer*?

Lippi-Green concludes that

The last substantive comment [of Winfrey's, on the show] sums up the conflict as it exists for her: "I personally don't understand why if you go to school and you're taught English and you're taught to have the verbs agree with the subject, how that suppresses who you are. I've never understood that." . . . Winfrey would like the issue to be a simple one of grammatical relations, which would allow her to make decisions as any employer which would be free of racial implications. Ideally, she believes, education should neutralize language distinctions stemming from differences in race and class. (196)

Finally, Lippi-Green argues,

The real problem with Black English is a general unwillingness to accept the speakers of that language and the social choices they have made as viable and functional. (201)

[from Rosina Lippi-Green. *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States*. NY: Routledge, 1997.]