

## Back to the Future: Linguistic dexterity and complexity of AAVE, beyond the lexicon

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Labov (1969) challenged a prevailing misconception, once held by many educators and social psychologists, that African American students lacked fundamental linguistic coherence, known as the *deficit hypothesis*. Hart and Risley (1995) have reinvented the deficit hypothesis in their book, *Meaningful Differences*, in which they posit that children living in homes where AAVE is used lack adequate linguistic development resulting from limited exposure to vocabulary, thereby perpetuating academic failure. Their findings are based on a two year longitudinal study where White research assistants observed two groups of children during monthly two-hour visits in their homes; namely, 1) affluent White children whose parents were university professors, and 2) lower middle class African American children whose parents did not graduate from college.

This presentation disputes Hart and Risley's findings as false positive results that have overlooked a combination of linguistic, educational, and economic factors that more accurately explain persistent racial gaps in educational achievement. Variable rule analyses of copula variation, /-U/ and /-d/ absence in monomorphemic and bimorphemic words, as well as suffix /-s/ variation, along with analyses of three distinctive *camouflaged forms* (e.g. aspectual *steady*, habitual *be*, and perfective *be done*) are also described. The present findings, unlike Hart and Risley, result from a four-year longitudinal study of African American adults, revealing a far more complex linguistic environment for AAVE speaking children than that depicted by Hart and Risley.

Primary emphasis in this presentation is placed on analyses of linguistic variation. In so doing we demonstrate that AAVE vocabulary size has not only been misrepresented by Hart and Risley, their interpretation reasserts Bernstein's (1971) formulation of *Elaborated Codes* as being superior to so-called *Restricted Codes*. Although linguists have repeatedly disputed the validity of deficit hypotheses attributed to AAVE for over forty years, many educators who are either unaware or unformed of that compelling linguistic evidence have fallen prey to misguided educational and linguistic opinions that perpetuate the miseducation of African American students across the United States.

The longitudinal variable linguistic results to be presented demonstrate a combination of phonological influences, grammatical influences, and situational variability depending upon the relative formality of the speaking circumstances where the speech has been recorded. The *camouflaged forms* confirm that important historical and semantic differences are relevant to the ways in which AAVE speakers employ aspectual *steady*, habitual *be*, and perfective usage of *be done*, thereby demonstrating that mere vocabulary size should not be viewed as the only source of linguistic difference between dominant varieties of academic English and AAVE, to say little of glaring differences in class size, educational funding, and inferior teacher preparation that collectively harm educational prospect for Black students throughout America. Although Hart and Risley's linguistic analyses regarding limited AAVE vocabulary size are rebuked in this presentation, concluding remarks emphasize the greater importance of more extensive linguistic analyses that will be necessary to support better educational outcomes for students who speak AAVE.

### References:

Bernstein, Basil. (1971). *Class, Codes and Control: Theoretical Studies Towards a Sociology of Language*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

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Labov, William (1969). "The logic of nonstandard English." In James E. Alatis (ed.) *Report of the Twentieth Annual Round Table Meeting on Linguistics and Language Studies*. Pp. 1-44. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.