

Future Directions for Research and Engagement on African American Language

A special panel session

Organizers: Tyler Kendall (University of Oregon) & John R. Rickford (Stanford University)

No variety of U.S. English has received more attention than that spoken by African Americans. While African American Language (AAL) has been extensively studied, many research questions remain about AAL varieties and many important social and educational applications await engagement by sociolinguists. 2016 marks the 20th anniversary of the Oakland Ebonics controversy and, thus, represents an especially meaningful moment to look both backwards and forwards at the status, and goals, of research and engagement on AAL. This panel brings together scholars of AAL to discuss where the field has gone and, more importantly, where the field needs to go in the 21st century. In a short presentation, round-table and discussion format, panelists focus on both basic research questions and areas of application and outreach and seek to raise larger discussions that, we hope, can continue beyond NWAU.

Please note that presentations in this session are approx. 7 minutes long and the program is not aligned with breaks in the other parallel sessions.

Introduction

8:30 – 8:35 am

Tyler Kendall (University of Oregon)

This short introduction frames the panel and lays out our agenda. It then sets the stage by highlighting some of the milestones, both positive and negative, that have occurred over the past half century of sociolinguistic research and engagement on language in African American communities.

Panelist #1: Spreading the Word on AAL: Strategic Outreach

8:35 – 8:42 am

Walt Wolfram (North Carolina State University)

While the speech of African Americans has been publically controversial for more than a half-century, adequate linguistic information about varieties of AAL is still largely lagging and often deficient in many public venues. What can linguists do to more effectively disseminate sociolinguistic information to the public? This presentation considers some best-practice strategies. Examples of recent efforts and initiatives are highlighted, including some innovative programs currently in progress.

Panelist #2: On the CUSP of a Breakthrough: Regional Variation and Linguistic Diversity in Education

8:42 – 8:49 am

Minnie Annan (Georgetown University)

Linguists have come a long way creating awareness about linguistic equality and awareness inside the classroom and in the community, but more needs to be done. This talk explores various intervention programs over the last 50 years and the effects on academic performance,

especially for speakers of AAE, but the main focus of this talk is the importance of *cultural understanding and specialized praxis* (CUSP) and the challenges that come from regional variation.

Discussion

8:49 – 8:59 am

Panelist #3: Researching Language Use in the African American Community in the 21st Century

8:59 – 9:06 am

Sonja Lanehart (University of Texas at San Antonio)

It is time for linguists to have a research agenda in AAL that is more responsive to the community it should serve: the people who speak the language, give life to the language, create the language, live the language, are the language. This presentation will provide an overview of what we need to do overall and then outline what we need to do specifically by addressing definitions, communities, methods, and methodologies.

Panelist #4: Keep it Fresh and Come Correct

9:06 – 9:13 am

Taylor Jones (University of Pennsylvania)

If we want our research to be usable for outreach and social justice, we must ensure that it is accessible, relevant, and actionable. This presentation discusses future directions for engagement based on using new media to continue the valorization of AAL, and on challenging assumed comprehension by non-speakers of AAL. I argue we must demonstrate the link between miscomprehension, stigma, and outcomes for AAL speakers in all arenas, that we can do so on new social media platforms, and that the general public has a thirst for such outreach.

Discussion

9:13 – 9:23 am

Panelist #5: African American English Beyond the Working Class

9:23 – 9:30 am

Tracey Weldon (University of South Carolina)

Most research on AAE has been drawn from working class speech communities, while the use of AAE by middle class speakers and other linguistic “lames” has remained remarkably under-examined. However, recent research has shown that middle-class speakers often strategically draw on ethnically marked phonological features and camouflaged but distinctively Black grammatical features (DBGFs) in the construction of race-based and class-based identities. In this talk, I discuss the importance of research on middle class AAE.

Panelist #6: Investigating Social Meaning across AAE

9:30 – 9:37 am

Sharese King (Stanford University)

Sociolinguists are recognizing the diversity across AAE amid growing evidence of regional and class variation. However, the indexicality of these features beyond race and class is understudied. Variables have been shown to indirectly index gender via qualities like coolness or toughness, but there is little work on the social meanings of ethnolectal features. This presentation discusses some ways that future work on AAE can be enhanced through a greater focus on social meaning.

Discussion

9:37 – 9:47 am

Panelist #7: But What Makes Him Sound Black? Explorations in the Production and Perception of Intonational Variation

9:47 – 9:54 am

Nicole Holliday (Pomona College)

The ability of listeners to judge a speaker's race based on their voice has been shown to be important in everything from everyday interactions to linguistic profiling. Despite this fact, the acoustic parameters related to intonation and voice quality involved in these judgments remain understudied in sociolinguistics. This talk discusses some previous work that has provided the basis for the study of intonation in AAE, and the types of future work that will be necessary for understanding the role of suprasegmental features in both the production and the perception of black identities.

Respondent: Things People Don't know about AAVE that we Should

9:54 – 10:01 am

John R. Rickford (Stanford University)

The final presentation reviews and responds to the panelists' presentations, while also recommending new focus on four areas: 1. We need broader and more concentrated study on social stratification in African American communities, and on some neglected aspects of history, like migration via the internal slave trade. 2. We also need work on other aspects of sociolinguistic variation, by character type and other social categories that have been ignored or understudied in the past. 3. We also need to know about AAVE and AAL in other cities and regions of the U.S., like the Midwest, and many parts of the South. 4. Finally, we need a new applied linguistics, extending our concern with education and linguistic profiling to criminal justice, doctor-patient communication and other areas.

Wrap Up and Final Discussion

10:01 – 10:10 am