

## AAVE: Dismantling Standard American English (Part 1)

“Purr, chile, sis finna slay the boots down, ya heard?” When you read that sentence, what does that mean to you? Is there value in that string of words that resonates with you, or is it a string of nonsense? All the words or phrases used above are part of a specific English vernacular: African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

### The History of AAVE

African American Vernacular English, also known as Black English or formerly known as “Ebonics,” hails from places across the United States and the Caribbean Islands. It is theorized by language scholars that enslavers often deprived enslaved Africans of access to education (reading, writing, and speaking Standard American English [SAE]). To communicate, enslaved Africans learned by ear or taught themselves and one another how to read and speak their masters’ languages while incorporating West African languages in tandem (Smith). Since then, AAVE has evolved into several regional dialects along with tailored slang and euphemisms among working-class and middle-class African American families.

### Controversy

AAVE has been historically considered “broken” or “incorrect” English. However, quite the opposite has been studied and proven. There are particular rules to AAVE, which function just as well and are as linguistically sound as “standard” English. With negative pejoratives like “ghetto,” “lazy,” and “ratchet” attached to the dialect, AAVE speakers (the majority of whom are black and brown people) are stigmatized, ridiculed, and degraded for using such language. This handout will be describing AAVE’s history and practice in the English language along with addressing myths and misconceptions.

### Examples of AAVE Terms

There are plenty of versions of African American Vernacular English that exist within the United States. In the Bay Area, there are various slang terms that derive from inner-city communities heavily populated by Black Americans. One famous term is *hella*.

This word is said to stem from Oakland, CA with its first recorded use dating back to the late 1970s (Nunberg, rfd. in Eghan). The word has gained popularity among Southern Californians, Southerners, Mideasteners, and even on the East Coast. Functioning as a noun modifier, *hella* can mean a multitude of things, but is commonly used in place of “very” or “a lot.” Another version used as a safer, less-vulgar option is *hecka*.

### Examples of “Hella/Hecka”

Example 1:

I had a **hella** good time last night! (replacement of “very,” modifies the adjective “good”)

Example 2:

I got **hecka** text messages from my mom. (replacement of “a lot,” modifies “text messages”)

Here is a brief list of other Northern California-based slang terms attributed to African American Vernacular English.

1. Slaps (verb) - used to describe something very good (typically music or food)
2. Giggin’(verb) - to dance
3. Hyphy (adjective) - to become hyperactive or excited
4. Juiced (verb) - excited, usually under intoxication
5. The City (noun) - refers to San Francisco

The list of African American Vernacular certainly does not end there, however. Because AAVE is region-based and often indicates origin from several cities or states, the number of terms stretches beyond California. Here is another list of terms broadly used nationally and globally but not consistently labeled as AAVE.

1. For real (phrase) - being serious or not pretending
2. Bae (noun) - term of endearment for one’s romantic interest or partner
3. Pressed (verb) - to be highly upset or angry
4. Cool (adjective) - to be calm and controlled, from Mandingo word “slow” (Sidnell)
5. Woke (adjective) - to be aware of something beyond basic knowledge

### Linguistics of AAVE

This next section will cover unique AAVE linguistic characteristics. Not all linguistic examples can be covered in this handout; however, the examples will provide an expansion of AAVE’s specialized rules.

#### *Habitual ‘Be’*

A well-known example of AAVE is the habitual *be*. When referring to a noun that consistently performs an action, AAVE uses *be* to indicate it as such. For example, to say “He be playing football” is to say that he usually or routinely plays football, whether he is currently playing or not. An experiment conducted in 2005 by University of Massachusetts Amherst then-doctoral student Janice Jackson studied groups of white and black children and their understanding of the habitual *be* in English. Jackson showed a picture of two Sesame Street characters: Elmo eating cookies and a sick, bed-ridden Cookie Monster (who is not depicted eating cookies).

“When [Jackson] asked, ‘Who be eating cookies?’ white kids tended to point to Elmo while black kids chose Cookie Monster. ‘But,’ Jackson relates, ‘when I asked, ‘Who is eating cookies?’ the black kids understood that it was Elmo and that it was not the same’” (Smith).

*Black children can distinguish the difference between questions in this experiment because the habitual “be” refers to the general, constant action of a subject according to AAVE as opposed to SAE’s use of the ‘be’ copula. Cookie Monster is the one usually eating cookies, though not currently eating cookies; Elmo is currently eating cookies but is not known for this action.*

### **Special Auxiliary Verbs**

Let’s take a deep dive into the words *finna* and *come*: two auxiliaries that are unique to the language. African American Vernacular English speakers use specific verbs that play “semantic-pragmatic” roles—having particular uses and meanings when structured correctly. *Finna* indicates a currently planned or future event and a variation of *gonna* or *going to* (Wolfram). *Come* and alike structures are special auxiliary verbs, too. Its application in AAVE indicates the speaker’s irritation or disdain for someone’s actions or an event (Sidnell).

#### *Examples of Special Auxiliaries*

**AAVE:** “Aye, I’m finna go to the park later on.” vs.

**SAE:** “Hey, I’m about to go to the park later on.”

**AAVE:** “They always come in here running around like chickens with they heads cut off.” vs.

**SAE:** “They’re always here running around like chickens with their heads cut off.”

### **Misconceptions of AAVE**

AAVE has risen in popularity and has made itself a path in the modern language often used by younger generations. Albeit its widespread use, African American Vernacular English has retained its own identity; many Black people who speak AAVE are resisting the negative stigma around this language and attempts of appropriation. Online content creators are often the center of controversy surrounding this dialect, and the general public is unconvinced of its importance now knowing that Black Americans hold the origin. AAVE’s stigmas have encroached on the possibility of acceptance without education.

#### **Misconception One**

In recent years, there have been rattling discussions about this particular vernacular as it has spread vastly across English conversations, especially in online spaces and social media. A common misconception is that AAVE is “Gen-Z slang,” “Internet speak,” or “Twitter lingo.”

One notorious example to arise is from a *Saturday Night Live* skit titled “Gen Z Hospital,” a short comedy sketch about a group of teenagers in a hospital waiting room, worried about the status of a hospitalized friend.

*Actor One:* “Yo, if this doctor keeps leaving us on read, he **gon’ catch hands, on gang.**” (Che)

Catch hands (phrase) - to start a physical altercation, often used by the person wanting to initiate

On gang (phrase) - emphasizing or hyperbolizing the truth of a statement

*Actor Two:* “**Nah nah nah nah,** it’s gonna be okay, **bestie** cannot die like this.” (Che)

Nah - a variation of the word ‘no’

Bestie (noun) - a shorthand term for ‘best friend’

Black Americans occupying online and pop culture spaces are left out or discredited for coining popular words or phrases (Lit, cap, periodt, and purr are all famously debated online). AAVE has traces to the transatlantic slave, immediately disproving that this language is from and only exists on the Internet or Twitter.

Implying that AAVE is only applicable to Generation Z—a generation comprised of adolescents, teenagers, and adults under 25—is implying that people above this age range do not use this language. AAVE has been an aspect of Black communities without an age limit; AAVE cannot and should not be considered “Gen Z slang” for this very reason.

#### **Misconception Two**

Rap/hip-hop music is a popular genre and has continually made its way into mainstream music consciousness. While many rappers depict their internal and external struggles living in the United States’ poverty-stricken communities using AAVE, not all rappers do. Assuming all AAVE is simply rap slang is a sweeping generalization that stigmatizes the impact and commonality between Black-diasporic communities. Again, hip-hop and rap have spread terms alongside the Internet but are not the origins of this unique language and its dialects.

#### **Misconception Three**

The N-word is **not** considered AAVE. The N-word is widely categorized as a historically derogatory and contemptuous term used to describe a Black person (Merriam-webster, “N-word,” def 1). Its contemporary variation is a reappropriated pejorative referring to one person or multiple persons of any race, with traceable use to the late 70s and early 80s then popularized during the exponential growth of hip-hop and rap music by the 1990s (Sheinin and Thompson). Because of the historical origin—and despite the use of this word—it is not considered AAVE.

#### **Misconception Four**

The most frequently stated myth of all is the root of AAVE’s degraded reputation: African American Vernacular English is broken or lazy.

AAVE has its own set of grammatical rules and linguistic wonders that make this dialect its own vernacular. The linguistic facets of African American Vernacular establish themselves as grammatically sound according to the consistent, rigid guidelines. AAVE does not allow for certain phrases to be spoken consecutively similarly to SAE because it creates redundancy.

(“I’mma finna go to the store” is a redundant statement; ‘I’mma’ and ‘finna’ are the same verb spelled differently.)

### **Activity**

Use context clues to choose the sentence(s) that uses the habitual ‘be’ from African American Vernacular English.

1. Wow, he be dribblin’ that ball all day today!
2. Lord knows what she be doing at that schoolhouse.
3. Who she talkin’ to like that? Couldn’t be me; no way, no how.
4. How am I gon’ be there when they ain’t tell me the time?
5. I don’t know what she be doing to that food, but it be real good.
6. Did you hear that Diane be making candles for the county fair?

### **Answer Key for Activity**

1. Not habitual
2. Habitual
3. Not habitual
4. Not habitual
5. Habitual
6. Habitual

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