Introduction

Goals and structure of the book

What do speakers know when they know African American English (AAE)? One of the goals of this book is to answer this question by presenting a description of AAE and explaining that it is different from but not a degraded version of classroom English (i.e., general American English, mainstream English) or the English which is the target of radio and television announcers. Researchers who study the history of AAE emphasize the importance of comparing AAE to other dialectal varieties of English, especially those spoken in the United States, because AAE is likely to be more similar to other English varieties than it is to classroom English. In this book, I will compare AAE to other English varieties and to classroom English. The comparison to classroom English is important because (1) we have a clear picture of classroom English grammar, and (2) it may be useful for those in the school systems who work with speakers of AAE to see how the variety differs systematically from classroom English.

AAE is a variety that has set phonological (system of sounds), morphological (system of structure of words and relationship among words), syntactic (system of sentence structure), semantic (system of meaning) and lexical (structural organization of vocabulary items and other information) patterns. So when speakers know AAE, they know a system of sounds, word and sentence structure, meaning and structural organization of vocabulary items and other information.

African Americans who use this variety, and not all do, use it consistently, but there are regional differences that will distinguish varieties of AAE spoken in the United States. For example, although speakers of AAE in Louisiana and Texas use very similar syntactic patterns, their vowel sounds may differ. Speakers of AAE in areas in Pennsylvania also share similar syntactic patterns with speakers in Louisiana and Texas; however, speakers in areas in Pennsylvania are not likely to share some of the patterns that the Louisiana and Texas speakers share with other speakers of southern regions. Also, speakers from the three different states have different vowel sounds. That is to say that they will all use the same or similar semantic and syntactic

1

rules for the *be* form that indicates that some event occurs habitually (e.g., *They be running* 'They usually run'), but they will produce the vowel sounds in words such as *here* and *hair* differently, for example.

One of the ways in which this book attempts to show that AAE speakers have acquired a system is by providing extensive verbal paradigms that include verb conjugations and the environments in which certain auxiliaries and other verbal elements occur. The book also presents an overview of the system of lexical and sound patterns that speakers use. In presenting the description of the system, I note the properties that AAE shares with other varieties of English. One point that is made is that while there are superficial similarities, there are subtle differences among these varieties. In the approach that is taken here in showing that AAE is a system, the variety is characterized without addressing the question of whether it is a dialect or a language, a question that does not arise among linguists because (1) both languages and dialects are equally rule-governed, and (2) there are different views of dialects. Take the well-known Chinese case. Both Mandarin and Cantonese, though mutually unintelligible, are considered to be dialects of Chinese as they have a common writing system. Then consider the situation in Yugoslavia, given the split of Serbo-Croat into three languages (not dialects of a language): Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian. Geoffrey Pullum discusses this issue in a paper that can be summarized by its title, "African American English is not Standard English with Mistakes."

The view that I will take here is that AAE is a linguistic system that is not the same as classroom English, nor is it the same as other varieties of English although it shares features with them. This work tries to make clear what AAE is and the ways in which it is different from and similar to general American and other varieties of English. Recognizing that AAE cannot be completely defined by the syntactic, phonological, semantic and lexical patterns alone, in this study I consider speech events that are used in the linguistic system. These speech events, which follow set rules, may be used in secular as well as religious contexts.

The linguistic description of AAE is central because it helps to define the linguistic system and explain that it is based on rules. In addition it is also useful in that it has practical applications. Chapters 1–4 describe regular patterns in AAE and present examples of the types of sound and word combinations in AAE. Chapters 5–7 present an analysis of spoken and written text in which these regular patterns are used. Chapter 8 explains why being familiar with patterns of AAE would be useful in educational contexts, especially in standard English proficiency programs.

Chapter 1 considers the lexicon of AAE, in which unique meanings of words are represented. This chapter surveys the different ways in which the lexicon of AAE has been presented. In addition it also classifies and gives lexical entries for words and phrases in AAE that cross generational boundaries. It is explained that AAE is not slang but that slang plays a major role in the variety. This chapter considers slang terms for labeling people and money, and it also considers a productive process of adding elements to the lexicon.

Chapters 2 and 3 present a description of syntactic and morphological properties of AAE, as a means of describing some of the patterns that speakers know when they

know the linguistic variety. Many examples are provided in these two chapters to show that speakers follow specific rules in producing sentences. These chapters explain precisely why the assessment that AAE is classroom English with mistakes is incorrect and unfounded. The positive data are often real examples from native speakers, and the negative data (flagged by an asterisk '*') are sentences that are predicted to be ungrammatical in AAE because they do not adhere to the rules of the system. The description of syntactic patterns of AAE includes a discussion of the constraints or restrictions that are placed on certain sequences in generating grammatical sentences. In these chapters, more emphasis is placed on patterns in the language system and less on characterizing AAE by a list of isolated features. For example, instead of concentrating on whether or not the copula/auxiliary *be* occurs in AAE (such as *am* in *I am here*, *I am running* but no *be* form in *She here*, *She running*), these chapters consider the syntactic and semantic distinctions between auxiliaries (e.g., *will*, inflected forms of *be* [such as *is*, *am*, *was*], *do* [*did*], *have*) and verbal markers (*be*, *BIN*, *dən*). They also address the system of past marking and a range of other constructions. In some places, technical details are included in order to give more complete descriptions of the patterns; however, it is not necessary to work through the details to understand the general AAE linguistic patterns. Realizing that some features that are presented here are shared with other varieties of English such as Alabama English and Hiberno English (Irish English), I point out similarities and explain subtle differences where possible.

The goal of chapter 4 is to present a description of the sound patterns of AAE, explaining the types of constraints that are placed on the occurrence of sounds in different positions in the word and in different linguistic environments. For example, this chapter notes properties of groups of consonants at the ends of words and preceding suffixes that begin with vowels and consonants. Some sound patterns and properties of sounds that have not been discussed extensively in the literature on AAE are discussed in this chapter. In addition this chapter reviews various arguments about the origin of AAE that have been based on the inventory of sound patterns in the variety. For instance, it has been suggested that in some contexts, the pattern of final consonant sounds in AAE is similar to the pattern of final consonant sounds in West African languages. Finally, this chapter raises some questions about the extent to which 'sounding black' is related to the different intonational and rhythmic patterns that are used by speakers of AAE. This chapter continues one of the themes in this book: AAE follows set rules.

As a means of capturing the patterns and the rules governing the occurrence of constructions in AAE, I often use descriptive statements such as the following in chapters 2, 3 and 4: In AAE, speakers say *baf* where *bath* would be used in general American English. But I go beyond such descriptive statements by discussing the linguistic environments in which such patterns occur. Of course, it should be made clear that speakers do not always say the same thing the same way or pronounce words the same way all the time, so a person who uses AAE *baf* may also use *bath* in some contexts. As I am concerned with a description of AAE, I focus more on the system of sentence structure and sounds that are different from those in general American English. To this end, structures in AAE, general American English and other varieties

of English are often compared. While there is no question that general American English is accepted in the mainstream and is used in classrooms, AAE and other varieties of English are as structurally sound as general American English.

Where indicated by sex and age (e.g., bf, 30s, 'black female, age 30s'; bm, 50s, black male, age 50s), examples in this book have been taken from speakers of AAE. In some instances, the examples are labeled 'attested' if I did not record detailed information when observing and collecting them. Also, data based on my intuitions as well as the intuitions of other native speakers of AAE are included (obviously without any information about speaker, etc.), as is common in linguistic theory and practice. The data help to show how AAE differs systematically from mainstream English, and they also reflect the way speakers use a number of different rules of AAE in forming a single sentence.

Chapter 5 presents an overview of speech events, for example, the dozens, rapping, marking, signifying, loud-talking, woofing and toasting, and rules of interaction that are associated with AAE and considers the way they are used in conversation. An entire section in the chapter is dedicated to speech events and language use in African American church services. In that section, a sermon collected in 1990 is analyzed as a means of illustrating the rhetorical strategies used by the minister and the rules of inter-action that the congregation and musician adhere to in engaging in verbal and musical call and response. In addition, sections of the sermon are analyzed to determine the extent to which the minister uses syntactic and phonological patterns of AAE in delivering his message. It is the case that while syntactic and phonological features are evident in passages in the sermon, rhetorical strategies outweigh these features. In subsequent sections, braggadocio style, signification and toasts are discussed in rap lyrics. These speech events are an important part of AAE, and they may be used by speakers who do not otherwise use the syntactic and phonological features that have been traditionally associated with the variety. The final section considers communicative competence and the speech of pre-school age children who are acquiring expressive language use.

Chapter 6 discusses the representation of AAE in literature and the media. This chapter considers the representation of AAE in literature to the early twentieth century, literature from the Harlem Renaissance to the mid twentieth century and literature from the mid twentieth century to the present. Literary works by authors such as William Wells Brown, Joel Chandler Harris, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, John Edgar Wideman and August Wilson are considered, and questions about the images of characters who are represented as using AAE are raised. Also, this chapter compares the linguistic features used to represent black characters in literature to the syntactic and semantic, phonological and lexical patterns used in current AAE and discussed in previous chapters. Some authors rely heavily on spelling conventions in the representation of the language of black characters, while others do not. The latter authors rely more on syntactic and lexical properties. For example, these authors use words such as *juba*, *womanish* and *mannish* in representing black speech.

Chapter 7 considers the use of AAE in films, and it notes that some characters who are portrayed as speaking AAE use syntactic and phonological features to mark their speech as being nonstandard or black, and others use speech events and other

types of expressive language use as markers. The angle that is taken here is not one that evaluates the authenticity of the language used in the media, but it is one that attempts to determine what types of linguistic features or markers are associated with certain characters. For example, it is noted that the verbal marker *be* that indicates habitual occurrences is associated with certain types of characters in *The Best Man*, yet it is associated with adolescent street language in *Fresh*. In this chapter, I show how linguistic descriptions that have been discussed earlier in the book can be used to comment on the representation of language in the media. In addition one of the themes is that different messages are associated with the use or the approximation of AAE in these works. This point is especially relevant to the discussion of films in this chapter that portray some type of minstrel act.

Chapter 8 takes a brief look at different approaches to AAE over the years and explores issues ranging from attitudes toward AAE to classroom strategies that may be useful in teaching speakers of AAE, especially in standard English proficiency programs. Nothing in this chapter, or in this book for that matter, suggests that AAE should be taught in schools or that programs should be designed to help children learn AAE. Although educational issues have been addressed for over thirty years and progress has been made, some of the same questions regarding strategies for teaching speakers of AAE to read and become proficient in mainstream English continue to be raised. Consider the cycle of events leading to the Ann Arbor controversy in 1979, in which questions were raised about the extent to which the speech patterns of elementary school age children served as barriers to their education, and those resulting in the Oakland debates in 1996–1997. A large part of the confusion was a result of negative attitudes, very limited systematic discussions about linguistic patterns of AAE and thus not being able to distinguish the system from the expressive language that is characterized by change and used by adolescents and young adults. This chapter addresses these issues. It also discusses attitudes toward AAE from a number of viewpoints such as employer and teacher attitudes. The final section of the chapter ends with classroom strategies that take into account the type of linguistic descriptions of AAE that have been presented in this book.

Two preliminary issues that have been raised in the literature about AAE will be reviewed before moving to the main text: (1) various names for AAE and (2) historical origin of AAE.

On naming the variety

From the early 1960s, the initial period of heightened interest in AAE, to the present, many different labels have been used to refer to this variety, and the label has often been related to the social climate. For example, the period during which AAE was referred to as Negro dialect or Negro English was precisely the period during which African Americans were referred to as Negroes. To some extent, the labels have been used to link the variety to those who speak it; the same label that is used to refer to the speakers is used for the variety. The early and very general speaker-based definition is intended to establish this link. The definition refers to the variety as an ethnic and social dialect

spoken by African Americans who are members of the working class. Along these same lines, the labels have served as a general description of the linguistic features that occur in the variety. Take for instance Black communications, which refers to specific communication patterns and features in the speech of black people. The features may refer to the sounds: final consonant sounds do not occur (e.g., *test* is pronounced as *tes*). They may also refer to characteristics of sentences: forms of conjugated *be* such as *is* and *are* do not always occur in AAE (e.g., *She working until 9:00 tonight* may be used instead of *She is working until 9:00 tonight*.).

'English' is included in a number of the labels for AAE, which suggests that some of its characteristics are common to or very similar to those of different varieties of English. Along these same lines, 'English' has been omitted from some of these labels in an effort to highlight African and creole relations (which will be discussed in the next section.)

A list of labels for the variety is given below, in which the last four are more commonly used today. However, those beginning with 'Black' may also be heard:

> Negro dialect
> Nonstandard Negro English
> Negro English
> American Negro speech
> Black communications
> Black dialect
> Black folk speech
> Black street speech
> Black English
> Black English Vernacular
> Black Vernacular English
> Afro American English
> African American English
> African American Language
> African American Vernacular English (AAVE)

By and large, the labels have changed over the years, but they have been used to refer to the same system. The term 'black street speech' was used by John Baugh in his 1983 book, in which he examined "one small slice of black American culture, namely, the common dialect of the black street culture" (p. 1). While the title suggested to some that the variety being referred to was used only in negotiations in street culture, Baugh was actually describing the linguistic system that is being referred to here as AAE. For the most part, the data he used were taken from speakers who participated in that culture. (See note 5 in chapter 8 for Baugh's reasons for adopting the term.) The point is that the features he distinguished are also used by speakers of AAE in small towns in which there are no inner cities and certainly no thriving street culture; in sum, the features he discussed are not limited to street culture.

Black English and African American English have been distinguished from Black English Vernacular and African American Vernacular English, respectively. William

Labov introduced the term "Black English Vernacular" in his book *Language in the Inner City*: *Studies in the Black English Vernacular*. He used the term to refer to "that relatively uniform grammar found in its most consistent form in the speech of black youth from 8 to 19 years old who participate fully in the street culture of the inner cities" (p. xiii). In addition he suggested that the term Black English be used as a general cover term for "the whole range of language forms used by black people in the United States" (p. xiii). Today, while some researchers choose to use African American English, others African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and still others African American Language, they are all referring to the same variety – that which I have defined in the introductory statements in this book and will discuss throughout this work. As should be clear by now, I use African American English (AAE) and do not limit the language to that used by speakers of a certain age group. It will be clear that the data presented in this book are from speakers who cover a broad range of ages, starting at six years and going all the way up to people in their eighties. Also, although I refer to African American and African American community, I do not intend to imply that this linguistic variety is associated with all African Americans – it is not – any more than I intend to suggest that all African Americans are a part of some large abstract community. My goal is to describe the linguistic system that is used by some African Americans, and I have chosen the label AAE to refer to it. As the long list shows, many other labels will work; however, slang, broken English and the like will not work because they do not characterize the variety that I am describing.

The term Ebonics, which was coined by Robert Williams in 1973, but which received considerable attention in 1996 during the Oakland case, has been left off the list of labels of AAE because Williams intended the term to cover the multitude of languages spoken by black people not just in the United States but also those spoken in the Caribbean, for example. In the introduction to *Ebonics: The True Language of Black Folks*, the following definition is given:

A two-year-old-term created by a group of black scholars, Ebonics may be defined as "the linguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represents the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and United States slave descendant of African origin. It included the various idioms, patois, argots, idiolects, and social dialects of black people" especially those who have been forced to adapt to colonial circumstances. Ebonics derives its form from ebony (black) and phonics (sound, the study of sound) and refers to the study of the language of black people in all its cultural uniqueness.

[Williams 1975, p. vi]

The view of Williams and other scholars who discussed this issue was that the language of black people had its roots in Niger-Congo languages of Africa, not in Indo-European languages. However, during the Oakland controversy, the media and general public adopted the term "Ebonics," using it interchangeably with the labels given earlier, thus not using the term as it was intended.

Further explaining the term, Smith (1998) notes that "When the term *Ebonics* was coined it was not as a mere synonym for the more commonly used appellation *Black English*" (p. 55). He goes on to comment that a number of scholars

have consistently maintained that in the hybridization process, it was the grammar of Niger-Congo African languages that was dominant and that the extensive word borrowing from the English stock does not make Ebonics a dialect of English. In fact, they argue, because it is an African Language System, it is improper to apply terminology that has been devised to describe the grammar of English to describe African American linguistic structures.

[pp. 55–56]

In commenting on the misuse of the term *Ebonics*, Smith instructs:

In sum, Ebonics is not a dialect of English. The term *Ebonics* and other Afrocentric appellations such as *Pan African Language* and *African Language Systems* all refer to the linguistic continuity of Africa in Black America. Eurocentric scholars use the term *Ebonics* as a synonym for "Black English." In doing so, they reveal an ignorance of the origin and meaning of the term *Ebonics* that is so profound that their confusion is pathetic.

[p. 57]

Smith protests against emphasizing English similarities and de-emphasizing African structure of AAE, and his points are well taken. The ongoing research on the origin of this linguistic variety is evidence that those working in this area are not oblivious to claims about African and creole contributions. The precise nature of the relationship between this variety and African languages and creoles is the topic of continued research, as only broad generalizations can be made on the basis of a few examples. In addition to labeling the linguistic variety appropriately, we should be engaged in rigorous research that presents accurate descriptions and that provides further insight into its origins.

On accounting for the origin of AAE

Research on the origin of AAE is based on comparative data from other varieties of non-standard English, varieties of English in the African diaspora and Caribbean Creoles. As more data have become available from sources such as ex-slave narratives and hoodoo texts, views about the origin of AAE have expanded. The ex-slave narratives used in linguistic research on the origin of AAE are taken from the narrative collection of the Federal Writer's Project, a collection which consists of over 2,000 interviews (from 1936–1938) with ex-slaves from seventeen states. Ewers (1996) analyzes two sets of hoodoo texts that were collected by Harry Middleton Hyatt during the period from 1936–1940 and in 1970. These texts are on the subject of witchcraft and magic, and the texts collected from 1936–1940 include interviews with 1,605 African Americans and one Caucasian, while those collected in 1970 consist of interviews with thirteen African Americans and one Caucasian. Also, see Viereck (1988) for more information on hoodoo texts.

Historical discussions about the origin of AAE often start at the point at which African slaves were thrust into a linguistic situation in which they had to learn English. Some historical accounts of the development of AAE have taken the position that the distinctive patterns of AAE are those which also occur in Niger-Congo languages such as Kikongo, Mande and Kwa. In effect, the view is that AAE is structurally related

to West African languages and bears only superficial similarities to general English. See Dalby (1972) and Dunn (1976) for more discussion on this view. More recently, DeBose and Faraclas (1993) discuss AAE from this standpoint. The position is often referred to as the substratist hypothesis because it is argued that the West African or substrate languages influenced the sentence and sound structures of AAE. As Goodman (1993) notes, one characteristic of a substratum "is the subordinate social or cultural status of its speakers vis-à-vis those of the reference language" (p. 65). In this case, the reference language would be English.

One of the most hotly debated issues about the origin of AAE centers around the question of whether AAE started off as a creole such as Jamaican Creole and Gullah, which is spoken in the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. The creolist hypothesis has been offered as an explanation of the development of AAE and apparent patterns it shares with creole varieties of English (e.g., Jamaican Creole and Gullah) and with other dialects of English. On the most general account, a creole is a language that develops from a pidgin, simplified means of communication among speakers who do not speak the same languages. Creoles differ from pidgins in that they have native speakers, and they are characterized by a more extensive vocabulary and grammar.

Because of the limited amount of data available on the speech and language of African indentured servants and slaves brought to colonial America and the development of the language of their offspring, linguists have to use a number of different strategies in drawing conclusions about whether AAE was once a creole. For example, linguists have to consider sociohistorical conditions on plantations and factors such as the percentage of Africans to whites, which would have had an effect on the nature of language development. In addition, it is also necessary to study linguistic patterns of creoles and compare them to AAE.

Proponents of the Creolist view note that it is quite possible that slaves from Africa and those imported from the West Indies brought established creoles with them. Rickford (1998) presents a detailed discussion of the issues that come to bear on the creole similarities of AAE. After considering a range of data, he concludes that "there is enough persuasive evidence in these data to suggest that AAVE did have some creole roots" (p. 189). Rickford and Rickford (2000) give an overview of creole patterns in AAE. Another source is *Verb Phrase Patterns in Black English and Creole*, edited by Edwards and Winford (1991), in which one of the themes is that there are interconnections between AAE and creole languages. Also, see Holm (1984) and Singler (1991) regarding these issues.

Other accounts have been cast in an Anglicist or dialectologist frame, maintaining that the characteristic patterns of AAE are actually found in other varieties of English, especially in Southern varieties and earlier stages of English. Linguists supporting the Anglicist view have considered data from speakers in speech communities in Nova Scotia and Samaná (Dominican Republic), areas settled by African Americans during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Settlers in these areas are argued to be good data sources because they may use a variety of English that is very close to the variety used by early Africans in America. Other efforts to link AAE to its original source have

led linguists to ex-slave narratives, which consist of recordings of former slaves who were born between 1844 and 1861. Much of the research from this angle is based on quantitative analysis of certain features used to argue that earlier AAE was more closely related to English than to creoles. Poplack (2000) argues that "the grammatical core of contemporary AAVE developed from an English base, many of whose features have since disappeared from all but a select few varieties (African American *and* British origin), whose particular sociohistorical environments have enabled them to retain reflexes of features no longer attested in Standard English (StdE)" (p. 1). See Poplack (2000) and the bibliographies in that volume for references on this view of the origin of AAE. Also, Schneider (1989) argues against the view that earlier AAE was a creole variety.

Mufwene (2000), a work which considers sociohistorical factors, continues to raise questions about the likelihood of AAE developing from a Gullah-like creole. A theme throughout his work is that linguistic and sociohistorical evidence suggests that the language used by founders of colonial America had a large impact on the language of Africans and their descendants. In supporting this founder principle, Mufwene goes on to suggest that Africans who came to the colonies would have had the goal of adapting local norms of the area as opposed to establishing their own. He points to the segregation of community life on plantations in South Carolina and Georgia as an explanation for the development of Gullah but is skeptical about the development of AAE from such a creole. One reason is that the environment in the colonies (other than in South Carolina and Georgia) was not conducive to "the kind of ethnographic contact ecology that could foster the development of a Gullah-like Creole" (p. 245). The view set forth is that AAE and Gullah, as well as North American English varieties, developed concurrently. They selected linguistic features from North American varieties as well as from African languages.

The line in Winford (1997, 1998) is similar in some respects to the creolist view on the one hand and to the view supported by Mufwene on the other. In his words: "The position I adopt in this paper is a compromise between the traditional creolist view and the more moderate dialectologist position . . ." (1997, p. 307). The position that Winford espouses, like the creolist hypothesis, views the emergence of current AAE as a gradual affair. The changes in the language occurred during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries as the demographics in the Southern colonies changed and as the linguistic contact situations between people of African descent and different groups of settlers changed. The argument here is that AAE was never a creole, but it was created by African slaves. Winford's view is that AAE developed out of contact between Europeans and Africans in the South during the seventeenth century. This variety continued to develop gradually in contact situations with creole varieties and varieties spoken by colonial settlers. Given this view, Africans and their descendants acquired English spoken by settlers in the area, but Winford goes on to argue that the "continuing process of adaptation resulted in a certain degree of substratum influence from other languages spoken by Africans, including African languages and restructured, especially creolized varieties of English" (p. 307). As a result, the variety that we refer to as AAE emerged. In support of this settler principle, Winford gives three kinds of explanations

to account for the features that characterize AAE: (1) several features from earlier varieties of English were adopted into AAE, (2) many features appear to have resulted from imperfect second language learning, resulting in simplification or loss of segments such as certain word endings and (3) several features can be explained as a result of retention of creole structure and meaning.

The accounts summarized here are well documented and they continue to be researched. Throughout this book, I point to various linguistic data that can be considered in discussions about the history of AAE, but see the references given here for full discussions of the hypotheses about the origin of AAE and bibliographies of sources on the topic.