9 The real trouble with Black English

It is not the Black child's language which is despised: It is his experience.
James Baldwin, "If Black English isn't a language, then tell me, what is?" (1979)

The 1990 census reported that the US African American population grew about 10 percent between 1980 and 1990, for a count of 29,930,524, or about 12 percent of the country's total population. A portion of these almost 30 million persons speak the language which is sometimes called African American Vernacular English, for some part of the time.[1] Various authors have put the number of AAVE speakers between 80 and 90 percent of the black population (Smitherman 1977, Baugh 1983), although it seems that this estimate is based on the supposition that AAVE is the language of inner-city communities, specifically of the working class and the poor (Rickford (forthcoming) calls the 80-90 percent figure a *guestimate*). According to Rickford (ibid.) the last important work on comparative use of AAVE in a black community was done in Detroit in the 1960s, a study which indicated that there was some reason to use socioeconomic factors in the estimation of who is more likely to use this language.

It is hard to say with any assurance how many African Americans are native speakers or regular users of AAVE because the term AAVE itself is inexactly defined, as we will shortly see in detail. There are supraregional phonological and grammatical features of AAVE, but there is also social and regional variation, as is to be expected of any spoken language. The language of African Americans living in the rural south is different than that of the Latino and European Americans who live alongside them, but it is also different than the AAVE spoken in urban centers in the south (Cukor-Avila 1995). Morgan and DeBerry (1995) provide insight into the way that African American youth integrated into urban Hip Hop culture must choose among grammatical, lexical, and phonological variables which identify them as aligned with either the west or the east coast. AAVE is, in short, a functional spoken language which depends on structured variation to layer social meaning into discourse.

Close study of it has shown the systematic effects of language-internal and language-external constraints (Baugh 1983, Rickford and Rickford 1995).

Smitherman points out that just as important as the phonological and grammatical components of AAVE are the cultural and stylistic ones, and she provides examples of how these elements work together:

> Think of black speech as having two dimensions: language and style. Though we will separate the two for purposes of analysis, they are often overlapping. This is an important point, frequently overlooked in discussions of Black English . . . Reverend Jesse Jackson preach: "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 Reb 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.
>
> (1977: 3)[2]

Given this perspective, it is hard to claim that only poor or working-class African Americans are speakers of AAVE. 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. These strategies are what Smitherman calls the African American Verbal Tradition (AVT), and include signification, personalization, tonal semantics, and sermonic tone (1995).[3]

Smitherman provides an insightful analysis of the African American community's differing responses to Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas during the congressional confirmation hearings on Thomas's appointment to the Supreme Court. Smitherman's study found cultural differences in discourse style: Hill's rhetorical devices were distinctly white, while Thomas

> capitalized on and ruthlessly exploited the African American Verbal Tradition for all it was worth. He seized the rhetorical advantage, swaying Black opinion by use of the touchstones of the Oral Tradition and sociolinguistically constructing an image of himself as culturally Black and at one with the Folk.
>
> (1995: 238–239)

This analysis of culturally specific rhetorical styles makes one thing very clear: even when no grammatical, phonological, or lexical features of

AAVE are used, a person can, *in effect*, still be speaking AAVE by means of AVT rhetorical devices. Thus, while the core grammatical features of AAVE may be heard most consistently in poorer black communities where there are strong social and communication networks, AAVE phonology (particularly intonation) and black rhetorical style are heard, on occasion, from prominent and successful African Americans in public forums. These may be individuals who grew up in AAVE-speaking communities but who are bidialectal, or others who grew up with a different variety of English altogether, and still chose to try to acquire AAVE and use it on occasion (with differing degrees of success, as seen in Baugh 1992). African Americans who never draw at all on any grammatical or stylistic features of AAVE certainly do exist, although their number would be very hard to estimate. According to Smitherman, Anita Hill is one such African American, at least within the context of her testimony before the Senate confirmation hearings for Clarence Thomas.

For our purposes, it is enough to note that AAVE is a spoken language available in some degree to most if not all African Americans, and that there are grammatical and stylistic features of this language which are constant over space. These grammatical structures sometimes show strong contrast to parallel structures in other US Englishes, but they are consistent and logical within themselves. AAVE has been the focus of formal study for more than thirty years, and linguists have attained a good – but not complete – understanding of its workings.

Nevertheless, in spite of many years of empirical study which establish AAVE as a normally functioning spoken human language, its very existence is often doubted and denied, by African and European Americans alike. The real trouble with Black English is not the verbal aspect system which distinguishes it from other varieties of US English, or the rhetorical strategies which draw such a vivid contrast, it is simply this: AAVE is tangible and irrefutable evidence that there is a distinct, healthy, functioning African American culture which is not white, and which does not want to be white. This is a state of affairs which is unacceptable to many. James Baldwin, who wrote and spoke so eloquently of the issues at the heart of the racial divide in this country, put it quite simply: "the value [of] a black man is proven by one thing only – his devotion to white people" (1988: 5).

These statements will make many people unhappy and others mad. Our common culture tells us constantly that to fulfill our democratic ideals we must be *one nation, indivisible*. In the 1960s we put an official end to racial segregation in schooling, housing, public places, and the workplace. What does it mean then to say that there is an African American culture distinct enough from other American cultures to have its own variety of English, a variety that persists in the face of overt stigmatization? As we look at the way people talk about AAVE below, we will see that the problem is a complex one. European American reaction to AAVE runs

the gamut from indifference to denial and denigration to anger and resentment.[4] For African Americans, the subject of AAVE seems to be particularly difficult because it forces individuals to choose between languages and cultures. For some, AAVE is not a vehicle of solidarity, but the focus of a painful debate on what it means to be black.

NON-BLACK ATTITUDES TOWARD AAVE

Pejorative attitudes toward AAVE by non-blacks are easy enough to document, and the socially constructed complaints about it are very similar to the complaints about other stigmatized social and regional varieties. These complaints tend to fall into two categories: targeted lexical items or grammatical features which cause immediate reaction, and general issues of language purity and authority.

European and African Americans have very different concerns about AAVE: whites seem to be most comfortable voicing overt criticism about phonological matters and sometimes about grammar, but black concerns focus almost exclusively on grammatical issues, as will be seen below.[5]

One of the most salient points of phonological variation which is strongly stigmatized from outside the black community might be called the great *ask–aks* controversy.

The verb *ask* is commonly defined as meaning to call for information, request a desired thing, or inquire. There are two pronunciations heard commonly in the US: [æsk] and [æks]. In rapid speech, a third pronunciation [æst] is often heard, derived from [æsk]. The *Oxford English Dictionary* establishes this variation between [æsk] and [æks] as very old, a result of the Old English metathesis *asc-*, *acs-*.[6] From this followed Middle English variation with many possible forms: *ox*, *ax*, *ex*, *ask*, *esk*, *ash*, *esh*, *ass*, *ess*. Finally, *ax* (aks) survived to almost 1600 as the regular literary form, when *ask* became the literary preference. Most people know nothing of the history of this form, and believe the *aks* variant to be an innovation of the AAVE community. In fact, it is found in Appalachian speech, in some urban dialects in the New York metropolitan area, and outside the US in some regional varieties of British English.

Non-AAVE speakers are eager and willing to point out this usage, which is characterized as the most horrendous of errors:

> 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 that 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 New York City, to the Chancellor of Education, *Harper's Magazine*, March 1989: 21–22)

> 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)

> My husband came here from Germany and he learned how to say a-s-k, so why can't you?
>
> (overheard)

All of these criticisms of the stigmatized *aks* variant assume that its use is the result of ignorance or stupidity following from lack of education. Why else, this reasoning goes, would someone hold on willfully to such an ugly, contemptuous usage? More disturbing is the simple acceptance of a single variable as a suitable basis for judging not only the content of the message, but also the character and intelligence of the messenger. Former New York Mayor Koch dismisses a presentation which he otherwise finds well done and convincing *on the basis of a single sociolinguistic variant*; *Harper's* prints his letter to the Chancellor of Education without comment.

The authority cited here is the written language: *aks* is wrong because we write *ask*. This kind of criticism is particularly illogical, given the large-scale lack of correspondence between sound and symbol in English. The call-in viewer, citing the authority of the written language, provided excellent proof of this. She spoke what is commonly considered MUSE, and like others who speak unstigmatized varieties of American English, she did not aspirate the *h* in *what*; she pronounced *spelled* [spelt], *different* [difərnt] and *sentence* [seʔəns].

Uninformed criticisms based on the written language are troublesome, but they are overshadowed by other more general condemnations of AAVE which extend to criticisms of African American culture and values. Such criticisms are often openly made, in particular by newspaper columnists, as in a sports column:

> Ungrammatical street talk by black professional athletes, and other blacks in public professions such as the music industry, has come to be

> accepted. Indeed, "Moses, you is a baaad damn shootin' individual" comes a lot closer to proper English usage than many public sentences uttered by black athletes. . . . But there's a problem here. Black athletes – and black musicians and TV performers, etc., – are role models for young black children. We in the media have begun to pass on the street language of black "superstars" verbatim . . . and what this is doing is passing the message to a whole new generation of black children that it's OK to talk that way; more than OK, it's terrific to talk that way . . . the situation is compounded by leading black characters in several network television shows, who use street grammar to advance the feeling that they are young and cool.
>
> The dilemma is that it doesn't make much difference for the black professional athletes, etc., who talk this way – they're wealthy men who are going to live well off their bodily skills no matter if they can talk at all, much less correctly . . . if a black child emulates one of the dumb-talking black athletes he sees being interviewed on TV, he is not going to be thought of as a superstar. He is going to be thought of as a stupid kid, and later, as a stupid adult. . . . They probably aren't talking that way because they think it's right; they're talking that way because it's a signal that they reject the white, middle-class world that they have started to live in the midst of.
>
> (Bob Greene's Sports Column, *Chicago Tribune*, December 3, 1979)

While censure of AAVE is not hard to find, it is not often that such criticisms and the underlying assumptions are so openly and unapologetically voiced.

Greene identifies two professions which he associates with successful African Americans: sports and entertainment. What these people have in common, in his estimation, is the fact that they speak AAVE, that they are in the public eye, and that they have the power to lead the black youth of America astray. His point, and it is factually true, is that with the exception of these two groups, very few African Americans who achieve mainstream economic and social success are able to do it without the necessity of linguistic and, to some degree, cultural assimilation.

What seems to bother Greene so much is the fact that the gatekeeping mechanism is not perfect: it does not extend to all African Americans. Some have successfully evaded the language of what he freely identifies as that of the white middle class. It is irritating to him that these people have managed to become successful without *good language*, but there is something even more upsetting. As a sports journalist, he finds himself compelled to pass on the language he hears from athletes, thus becoming complicit in letting the secret out to black children: not all African Americans give in linguistically, and yet they still get to the top.

Greene makes a series of factually incorrect assumptions. Black children learn AAVE not from television actors and sports figures (as Greene

surmises), but in their homes, as their first and native variety of US English. More importantly, Greene assumes that the only role models that African American children have are these sports and entertainment individuals, and further, that a good role model will not sound black. For him, the two are mutually exclusive. His message is clearly stated:

> If you're a black child, and you're not one of the 100 or so best slam-dunkers or wide receivers in the world, you can go ahead and emulate the way you hear your heroes talk. But the chances are that you'll wind up as the hippest dude passing out towels in the men's washroom.
> (ibid.)

The stereotypes that underlie Greene's assumptions are of course very disturbing, but there are other issues here which are more subtle and perhaps more damaging.

This is a good example of both explicit threat and unfounded promise in one statement. The threat is real enough: black children who don't learn white English will have limited choices; what he claims is demonstrably true. But the inverse of this situation, the implied promise, is not equally true: black children who learn MUSE will not be given automatic access to the rewards and possibilities of the white middle-class world. Greene actually touches upon the fallacy underlying this promise when he acknowledges (later in his column) that successful blacks who wear uniforms (airline pilots, army officers) are often taken for service personnel in public places.

Non-black discomfort with AAVE is often externalized in this paternalistic voice. It can be seen to work in a variety of forums, including popular fiction. The novel is one of the most interesting points of access to current language ideology, in that the way that characters in novels use language and talk about language can be revealing.[7] The following excerpt from a romance novel titled *Family Blessings* provides a typical social construction of an idealized relationship between a MUSE speaker and an AAVE speaker. Here the hero, a young white police officer, has taken on the job of setting an African American child straight:

> "Yo."
> "What you talkin' like a black boy for?"
> "What *you* talkin' like a black boy for?"
> "I be black."
> "You might be, but no sense talking like a dumb one if you ever want to get anywhere in this world . . ."
> . . . "I could turn you in for dat, you know. Teachers in school can't even make us change how we talk. It's the rules. We got our culture to preserve."
> "I'm not your teacher, and if you ask me, you're preserving the wrong side of your culture . . . listen to you, talking like a dummy! I told you,

if you want to get out someday and make something of yourself and have a truck like this and a job where you can wear decent clothes and people will respect you, you start by talking like a smart person, which you are. I could hack that oreo talk if it was real, but the first time I picked you up for doing the five-finger discount over at the SA station, you talked like every other kid in your neighborhood. . . ."

"I'm twelve years old. You not supposed to talk to me like dat."

"Tell you what – I'll make you a deal. I'll talk to you nicer if you'll talk to me nicer. And the first thing you do is stop using that F word. And the second thing you do is start pronouncing words the way your first-grade teacher taught you to. The word is *that*, not *dat*."

(Spencer 1995: 102–103)

Like Greene's sports column, the hero in this novel has both threats and promises for the African American child. The kind of authority cited is different: Greene draws on his own mastery of middle-class written English, as exemplified in his profession as a writer, whereas this fictional character has nothing more to underscore his pronouncements about language than his own observations and the trappings of his own success. *This is what you can have*, he says, *if you start sounding like me. If you do not, you do so out of stubborness and stupidity, and there is no hope for you.*

Occasionally there is a public outpouring of pure emotion, without any of the common-sense arguments, complex rationalizations, or threats and promises which are such an integral part of more organized institutionalized subordination tactics. Such outpourings are useful, because they get right to the heart of the matter.

I am sitting here just burning . . . the ones that want to speak or care to speak that way, they want to be different. I believe they put themselves that way to be separate.

(European American call-in viewer, *Oprah Winfrey Show* 1987)

For those who cannot overlook the fact that AAVE exists, it 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. Alternately, AAVE evokes a kind of panic, a realization that desegregation has not done its job. The reasoning seems to be that the logical conclusion to a successful civil rights movement is the end of racism *not because we have come to accept difference, but because we have eliminated difference*. There will be no need for a distinct African American (or Mexican, or Vietnamese) culture (or language), because those people will have full access to, and control of, the superior European American one.

When a black woman tells a reporter about the solidifying function of AAVE in her community, his response first acknowledges that language

as viable, but then he rejects her construction of the language as one with a positive function and recasts the language as a willful act of political resistance:

(BLACK WOMAN) So we gotta have our survival mechanism within our community. And our language is it. It lets us know that we all in this thing together.
(REPORTER) Black English is not Standard English spoken badly – Black English is revenge.

(CBS Evening News, December 5, 1985)

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines revenge as "The act of doing hurt or harm to another in return for wrong or injury suffered; satisfaction obtained by repayment of injuries." Thus AAVE is not seen as first and foremost a positive feature of a vibrant black community. Instead it is a wilfull act of rebellion: destructive, hurtful, and primitive in its motivations. The reporter attempts to construct an objective picture and definition of AAVE, but then falls back on more traditional views, seeing it as an excluded and resentful outsider.

This kind of reasoning is seen even from linguists on occasion. The ongoing convergence–divergence controversy (is AAVE becoming more or less distinct? closer or farther away from MUSE?) might be understood as an uneasiness with the idea that the African American community has a healthy, thriving, naturally evolving culture of its own which resists mainstreaming. An example of this is found in Labov and Harris's study of language use in Philadelphia, which established (on the basis of vocalic and verbal system changes) that the city is "separating into two distinct speech communities: white and black" (1986: 20). But that study moves past this empirical finding to make a curious set of suggestions:

> it should be possible to bring children closer to the systems used by other dialects without changing their personalities and their friendship patterns. From everything we have seen so far, this kind of deep-seated change can happen if white and black youth are in contact in the early years. The way will then be open for the group to shift as a whole, with the convergence that is the result of mutual influence. If the contact is a friendly one, and we achieve true integration in the schools, the two groups may actually exchange socially significant symbols, and black children will begin to use the local vernacular of the white community. But even without such a thorough integration, we can expect that the children will learn from each other, and the present trend towards separation may be reversed.
>
> (21)

Here we have the idea that if black children only had enough friendly contact with the white community they would be more than happy to give up their home language; that is, that the loss of AAVE would be the result

of successful and "thorough integration."[8] The possibility that speakers of the white vernacular might be influenced by AAVE language or adopt it is not considered. Housing segregation on the basis of race, an evil, is equated with the persistence and spread of AAVE.

Non-black attitudes toward AAVE are complex, because AAVE taps into the most difficult and contentious issues around race. AAVE makes us uncomfortable because it is persistent, and because it will not go away, no matter what we do to denigrate it and the people who speak it. Even when we acknowledge its existence, our offical policies around this (and other) stigmatized varieties of language are policies of patronage and tolerance rather than acceptance. The irony is that AAVE is the distinct language of a cultural community we don't want to acknowledge as separate; at the same time, the only way we know how to deal with our discomfort about AAVE is to set it apart.

AFRICAN AMERICAN ATTITUDES TOWARD AAVE

Within the African American community, discussions around AAVE seem to embody some of the most difficult and painful issues of identity and solidarity.

To begin with, it must be stated that it is hard to find any African American, regardless of profession, politics, or personal belief, who would deny the practical necessity of bidialectalism and selective assimilation to MUSE norms. The fact that black children with aspirations outside their own communities must learn a *language of wider communication* (Smitherman 1995) is acknowledged as a fact of life. Opinions on this range from sober utilitarianism and resignation to righteous anger:[9]

> Pragmatic reality forces the burden of adjustment on groups who are outside positions of influence and power. It does little good to claim that street speech is a valid dialect – which it is – when the social cost of linguistic and other differences can be so high.
>
> (John Baugh, linguist)

> our position is quite clear. We believe that for people to excel they must acquire and use to their advantage the language of power and the language of finance. Standard American English is that. I admit it is not fair, but I did not create those rules. We only assist people in working their way up through them.
>
> (Dr. Bernadette Anderson, accent-reduction therapist)

> The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language. There are certain things I cannot say without recourse to my language. It's terrible to think that a child with five different present tenses comes to school to be faced with those books that are less than his own language. And then to be told things about his

language, which is him, that are sometimes permanently damaging. . . . This is a really cruel fallout of racism. I know the Standard English. I want to use it to help restore the other language, the lingua franca.
(Toni Morrison, author, poet, Nobel Prize winner)

Language is political. That's why you and me, my Brother and Sister, that's why we sposed to choke our natural self into the weird, lying, barbarous, unreal, white speech and writing habits that the schools lay down like holy law. Because, in other words, the powerful don't play; they mean to keep that power, and those who are the powerless (you and me) better shape up mimic/ape/suck-in the very image of the powerful, or the powerful will destroy you – you and our children.
(June Jordan, poet, writer, political activist)

Studies and interviews with African Americans indicate that while anger is rarely openly voiced, arguments for bidialectalism based on personal experience are quite common:

I have some associates that find it very difficult to work and maintain any kind of decent job, because of the fact that they cannot adequately speak, so to speak, the normal language.
(man on the street, CBS Evening News, December 5, 1985)

But my opinion always has been that you have to learn to survive in the real world, and if you speak black English there's no way you're going to survive. There's no way you're going to get a job that you really want. There's no way that you're going to make an income that's going to make you live right.
(female university staff, interviewed for Speicher and McMahon 1992: 399)

Clear and logical arguments for bidialectalism are made regularly, and still this issue does not lay its head. But this cannot be surprising. To make two statements: *I acknowledge that my home language is viable and adequate* and *I acknowledge that my home language will never be accepted* is to set up an unresolvable conflict.[10] Alice Walker, who in her novels about African Americans often uses language issues to illustrate the emotional cost of assimilation, has put it more succinctly: "It seems our fate to be incorrect," she said in a 1973 interview, ". . . And in our incorrectness we stand" (O'Brien 1973: 207). The day-to-day pressure to give up the home language is something that most non-AAVE speakers cannot imagine, and it is here that novelists provide insight into a cultural phenomenon which is otherwise inaccessible.

Darlene tryin to teach me how to talk. She say US not so hot . . . peoples think you dumb. What I care? I ast. I'm happy. But she say I feel more happier talkin like she talk. . . . Every time I say something

> the way I say it, she correct me until I say it some other way. Pretty soon it feel like I can't think. My mind run up on a thought, git confuse, run back and sort of lay down. . . . Look like to me only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind.
>
> (Walker 1983)

> "I done my homework. You already seen it," Shoni said.
>
> "I did my homework. You already saw it," LaKeesha said.
>
> "That too," Shoni said. Both sisters laughed. "Why you all the time be trying to get me to talk white?"
>
> "It's not white; it's correct." She didn't feel as sure as Esther and Mrs. Clark were when they said it. Sometimes she was a little afraid that she was talking white, that she could lose herself in the land where enunciation was crisp and all verbs agreed. And at home, especially on weekends, it was hard to hold on to that language of success and power. . . . "When you go to work, you have to know the right way to speak," she added, looking in Shoni's eyes as if she was sure of what she was saying, even though she wasn't.
>
> (Campbell 1995: 270)

Pressure to assimilate to MUSE norms originates from outside and from inside the African American community. In both of these excerpts, black women are being encouraged by other black women to acquire the white language, a language, they are told, which will bring them not only success and power, but happiness (*But she say I feel more happier talkin like she talk*). To accept this proposition in the face of direct personal evidence to the contrary, is the challenge that these characters, like other AAVE speakers, must somehow meet.

Evidence of real resistance to linguistic assimilation is hard to find. The most cited example is surely James Baldwin's moving editorial "If Black English isn't a language, then tell me, what is?" (*New York Times*, July 29, 1979). The writings of June Jordan call clearly for the recognition of the validity of AAVE, as in her essay on language, empowerment, and subordination, "Nobody mean more to me than you and the future life of Willie Jordan" (1985). Another rare instance is found in the highly autobiographical account of the Simpson murder trial by the African American prosecutor, Christopher Darden:

> [It] isn't to say all black people sound alike; of course not. But who can deny that we have our own dialect and our own accent? . . . It seemed to me that by the time I got to college, we were given a choice. We could learn to speak more mainstream, to sound more white, or we could be proud of our heritage and acknowledge that culture extends to language as well as paintings and books. I was proficient in English. I could read it and write it expertly, and I knew the rules for speaking it. And so I felt no need to change the way I spoke, to ignore

> the heritage and the background that formed my diction, my speech patterns, and the phrases I used.
>
> (1996: 77)

Most efforts to seek public validation of AAVE are less visible, and are met with a great deal of resistance. An African American journalist responds in an opinion piece to such a group organized in Madison, Wisconsin:

> In Madison, Wisc., for example, some blacks are trying to push the value of BEV, according to a recent report in 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 legitimate it with an acronym. And the dysfunction exists not so much among the students as with their ill-equipped African-American "leaders" and educators.
>
> (Hamblin 1995)

We will see in the examples below that people rationalize linguistic subordination in a number of ways. Some successful African Americans (for example, John Baugh and Bernadette Anderson, above) acknowledge the schism between promises and threats, but are resigned to the fact that there is nothing practical to be done about it. Others choose to deny the issue completely by refusing to recognize the language at all: "There is no such thing as Black English. The concept of Black English is a myth. It is basically speaking English and violating the correct rules of grammar" (male audience member, *Oprah Winfrey Show* 1987).

We have seen in Part II of this book that AAVE is not accepted, and may never be accepted, as a socially viable language by the majority of US English speakers. Thus, one of the two statements (*I acknowledge that my home language is viable and adequate* and *I acknowledge that my home language will never be accepted*) cannot stand, and must be challenged or amended if the conflict is to be resolved. Extreme examples of this are available, even in print:

> Although we were surrounded in New York by a number of poorly spoken and frequently stereotypical black and poor Southern dialects, my siblings and I soon learned to hear it for what it was – the language of the street, the language of black trash. The language that went right along with Saturday-night knife fights to settle a grudge.
>
> (Hamblin 1995)

Another strategy in resolving the conflict, and it is often used, is to challenge not the existence of AAVE, but its definition. Thus for Rachel

Jones, an African American woman writing an essay for *Newsweek* entitled "What's wrong with Black English" (1990), Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, James Baldwin, Andrew Young, Tom Bradley, and Barbara Jordan don't talk black or not black; they "talk right." This conclusion follows from her (not completely true) observation that none of these people employ or employed AAVE grammar or idiom in their public addresses. For Jones, the fact that most of these African Americans depend on AAVE intonation, phonology, and rhetorical features to mark their spoken language for solidarity with the black community is irrelevant. In this way, the definition of AAVE becomes very narrow: it encompasses only the grammar of the language in as far as syntactical and morphological rules are distinct from MUSE.

Many public statements about AAVE by African Americans combine a variety of approaches to neutralize the conflict inherent to the subordination process. Most of the time there is a great deal of complex rationalization, as well as a great deal of emotion, in these statements. And each of them relies to some extent on the well-established strategies in the language subordination process: appeal to written language norms, mystification of grammar, assumption of authority, and disinformation.

> 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: 36)

Here Rowan, a journalist, has stated his belief that AAVE speakers must be taught grammar because, apparently, they do not acquire any to start with; that they have insufficient lexicons, and that their language functions without syntax. These statements are misinformed, and lean primarily on that part of the mystification process which would have native speakers of a language hand over authority.

> I'm a Northwestern student presently, and I got to be a Northwestern student because of my grammar and because of the way I can speak. Black English may have had its place back in the times of slavery, back in the times when we had no way of educating ourselves . . . now we do have a way of educating ourselves, and I think by speaking the way [an AAVE speaker] speaks, you are downgrading society. You are saying that you don't want to educate yourself. We have a different way to educate ourselves today.
>
> (female audience member, *Oprah Winfrey Show* 1987)

There is an interesting equation in this young woman's statement. She tells the audience that she was able to study at a prestigious university *because* of the variety of English which she speaks; that is, because she does not speak AAVE. From this we might conclude that any MUSE

speaker can gain admittance to Northwestern on that basis alone, which is an obvious error. People are admitted to a university on the basis of grades, test scores, and essays, among other things; performance in school and on standardized tests follows in great part from a command of the written language, a skill not acquired equally well by all MUSE speakers. The audience member has moved from spoken language to written language without consideration, and she then moves on to the assumption that education, if effective, will negate language differences, which must equal poor language, which in turn "downgrad[es] society." It is worth noting that another young African American woman in the audience, an AAVE speaker, points out to this Northwestern student that there is a material difference between written and spoken languages, but her statement is ignored.

The association of AAVE with slavery is not an uncommon one, and it is perhaps the most difficult one to address. The exact origins of AAVE are unclear, and the source of great debate among linguists.[11] That the African American diaspora was crucial in the development of the language is undeniable, but it does not follow from this historical fact that the language is now dysfunctional or has no good purpose. Later in the Winfrey taping, Smitherman points out that the language developed as a vehicle of solidarity in a time of oppression.

The next quotation is a particularly interesting one in ideological terms:

> I do not approve of Black English. In the first place, I do not understand it; in the second place, I think the objective of education is to lead out. I think that in our society – though we ought to take advantage of the cultural differences that really make Americans American – we ought to eliminate those differences which are either the basis or result of divisiveness in our society.
>
> (Donald McHenry, former US Ambassador to the United Nations, in *Jet* 1980, 57(25): 40, as cited in Starks 1983: 99–100)

McHenry's statement is interesting in the way it is similar to the criticisms of non-blacks: it is the only time I have been able to document an African American citing communication difficulties as a reason to reject AAVE. Even those most vehemently negative about the language generally admit that it is comprehensible, or do not touch on this issue at all. McHenry also draws in arguments often heard in the debate around bilingualism and the English Only movement. These include questions about what it means to be an American citizen, and the often-voiced fear that the nation-state cannot survive willful refusal to assimilate to supra-regional norms. This is not a new complaint; in 1966 the superintendent of public instruction of California went on record with his prediction of complete breakdown of communication: "Correct English just has to be taught to the next generation unless we want a replay of the Tower of Babel bit around 1984" (cited in Drake 1977a: 91).

McHenry restates the common belief that the only way to achieve the ideal society is to become a homogenous one, and to this end we must eliminate not all differences, but those which are *divisive*. The conflict between the wants of peripheralized groups and the needs of the majority are raised here quite clearly. But there is a question which is not addressed: the connection between language and those basic human rights which are protected by law from the tyranny of majority rule.

There is no doubt that there is great internal conflict in the African American community centered around AAVE. Those who are bidialectal feel the need to justify their choice to be so; blacks who are not comfortable speaking AAVE are often defensive about their language, and protective of their status as members of the black community. The greater African American community seems to accept the inevitability of linguistic assimilation to MUSE in certain settings, but there is also evidence of mistrust of blacks who assimilate too well:

> Suspicion and skepticism are common Black reactions to Black users of LWC [the *language of wider communication*, or MUSE] rhetorical styles. These perceptions exist simultaneously with the belief that one needs to master LWC in order to "get ahead." I call it "linguistic push-pull"; Du Bois calls it "double consciousness." The farther removed one is from mainstream "success," the greater the degree of cynicism about this ethnolinguistic, cultural ambivalence. Jesse Jackson knows about this; so did Malcolm X and Martin Luther King; so does Louis Farrakhan. The oratory of each is LWC in its grammar but AVT in its rhetorical style.
>
> (Smitherman 1995: 238)

Rickford finds vocal rejection of mainstream language more often in adolescent blacks, as in the case of a teenager from Redwood City, California, who indicates how serious an offence it is to cross the line linguistically: "Over at my school, if they – first time they catch you talkin' white, they'll never let it go. Even if you just quit talking like that, they'll never let it go!" (Rickford 1992: 191). He also provides examples of how angry adolescents can be when pushed on this matter: "It pisses me off when the Oreos – they be tryin to correct your language, and I be like, 'Get away from me! Did I ask you to – correct me? No! No! No, I didn't! Nuh-uh!'" (ibid.).

On occasion, African Americans have gone on record with their own experiences as bidialectal speakers. Those experiences are seldom benign:

> Hearing the laughter . . . and being the butt of "proper" and "oreo" jokes hurt me. Being criticized made me feel marginal – and verbally impotent in the sense that I had little ammunition to stop the frequent lunchtime attacks. So I did what was necessary to fit in, whether that

meant cursing excessively or signifying. Ultimately I somehow learned to be polylingual and to become sensitive linguistically in the way that animals are able to sense the danger of bad weather.

The need to defend myself led me to use language as a weapon to deflect jokes about the "whiteness" of my spoken English and to launch harsh verbal counter-attacks. Simultaneously language served as a mask to hide the hurt I often felt in the process. Though over time my ability to "talk that talk" – slang – gained me a new respect from my peers, I didn't want to go through life using slang to prove I am Black. So I decided "I yam what I yam," and to take pride in myself. I am my speaking self, but this doesn't mean that I'm turning my back on Black people. There are various shades of Blackness; I don't have to talk like Paul Laurence Dunbar's dialect poems to prove I'm Black. I don't appreciate anyone's trying to take away the range of person I can be.

(Aponte 1989)

It seems that African Americans who speak MUSE are not immune from a different kind of trouble: Aponte's experiences and reactions to those experiences are perhaps the best possible illustration of Smitherman's push-pull, and his story seems to be a common one. Blacks who speak primarily AAVE are subject to ongoing pressure to assimilate to MUSE norms in a number of settings outside their communities; in fact, they are threatened with exclusion if they do not. Blacks who do not speak AAVE may be treated with scepticism and distrust. Language ideology becomes a double-edged sword for those who are monodialectal – threats originate from inside and outside the home language community.

At this point it is necessary to consider that there are many persons of African descent resident in the US who immigrate from the Caribbean and from Africa, and who come to this country speaking another language. Within the indiginous African American community there is a complicated set of reactions to these immigrants which can be overtly negative, in ways which are not always visible to outsiders. Edwidge Danticat's 1994 novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, brought these issues into the consciousness of the public. Her story of the Haitian experience in the US makes clear how important a role language plays in the negotiations between African Americans and immigrants of African descent.

My mother said it was important that I learn English quickly. Otherwise the American students would make fun of me or, even worse, beat me. A lot of other mothers from the nursing home where she worked had told her that their children were getting into fights in school because they were accused of having "HBO" – Haitian Body Odor. Many of the American kids even accused Haitians of having AIDS because they had heard on television that only the four H's got AIDS – heroin addicts, hemophiliacs, homosexuals and Haitians.

> I wanted to tell my mother that I didn't want to go to school. Frankly, I was afraid.
>
> (Hinojosa on National Public Radio, *All Things Considered*, September 30, 1994)

Her experience (as well as documented experiences of other Haitian immigrants) indicates that there is a hierarchy among immigrants who come into the African American community, and the Haitians are very low in the pecking order. How AAVE fits into the complex issue of acquisition of English for native speakers of Haitian Creole and other Caribbean and African languages is something which has not yet been explored, but which deserves to be studied both as a linguistic issue and as a social one.

It would be useful, in this context, to look in depth at the way prominent African Americans deal with the conflict inherent to the choice between languages. Here I consider two examples: a set of statements by Oprah Winfrey during a 1987 taping of a talk show on "Standard and 'Black' English," and an episode related by Shelby Steele in his 1991 book *The Content of Our Characters*.[12]

In the case of Oprah Winfrey, it is important to remember that during this taping she is acting as a host to her invited guests, a facilitator to the audience discussion, and simultaneously as a participant with opinions of her own. The introductions she reads from cue cards are perhaps not entirely her own formulations; her statements may sometimes be made in a spirit of fostering discussion. But in general, it is clear that she is willing to give her opinion on the questions at hand: on occasion she claims the floor when audience members want to speak. Her comments are peppered with formulations such as *I know, to me, I think, I don't understand*. She also uses constructions like *if you don't know, you must know, don't you know*, in those instances where she puts her own opinions forth.

Winfrey's stance on AAVE is a complex and conflicted one. At first glance, it might seem that she stands firmly on the side of standardization and linguistic assimilation. As has been seen with other African Americans, she does not *directly* deny the existence of AAVE (which she consistently calls "so-called" Black English, perhaps because she is uncomfortable with the term rather than the language itself), but she challenges AAVE using many of the strategies seen above.

She first attempts to relegate AAVE to the realm of the secondary: "Are we talking about correct English or are we talking about dialect?" (3);[13] when audience members protest this, she regroups by defining for them the difference between Black English and Standard English, a difference which turns out to rest exclusively on 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?
>
> (3)

> 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? (5)

Like Rachel Jones, Winfrey seems to have a definition of Black English which focuses only on grammatical agreement and excludes phonology and rhetorical devices. She identifies Martin Luther King Jr., Whitney Young, Mary McCleod Bethune as speakers not of Black English, but of Standard English. Once again, Jesse Jackson is raised as an example of someone who speaks AAVE but knows how to shift in his public discourse to a style appropriate for the most formal settings (3). The fact that Jesse Jackson strongly marks his public discourse with AAVE rhetorical devices, and sometimes uses AAVE grammatical strategies *regardless of his audience*, does not come up. She quotes Jackson's famous statement that "excellence is the best deterrent to racism" (12) but fails to discuss her equation between *lack of excellence* and the native language of the African American community.

Winfrey focuses the discussion of Black English on the social repercussions this language brings with it in the world outside the African American community. She seems truly distraught and dismayed when young African Americans in the audience tell her that they want to use their own functional language and reject pressure to assimilate. Here, Winfrey's own status as a successful businesswoman and employer of many seems to push to the forefront. Given her own position, she does not understand young blacks who still voice their resistance to assimilation. In fact, she challenges a white panelist on this count: "Let me ask you, why would you want to tell black people or make black people believe that corporate America is going to change for them?" (12).

Winfrey justifies her rejection of AAVE on the basis of the documented history of its reception. However, when call-in viewers or audience members who agree with this basic premise move on to openly deride AAVE, she momentarily switches allegiance. In four cases there are comments from whites which cause her to pause and come to the defense of AAVE or AAVE speakers. She sometimes does this with humor (the first example below), but there is also tangible uneasiness when the discussion moves beyond grammar to statements which are at the very least intolerant, and in some cases move into the realm of racism.

> 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? (4)

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?

(7–8)

8TH AUDIENCE MEMBER: ... I just think that anybody, Polish, Black, English, Hispanic, should learn to speak the proper English. And I believe if they can't speak the proper English, they should go back to their own country ... [crosstalk]

DR. SMITHERMAN: I would like to know what country do black people go back to. [crosstalk]

WINFREY: What did you say, Dr. [Smitherman]? What did you say?

DR. SMITHERMAN: I said I would like to know what country do black people go back to.

WINFREY: Okay, yes ma'am.

(8–9)

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*?

(9; original emphasis)

Overall, Winfrey's stance is complicated by her own participation in the corporate structures, whose gatekeeping mechanisms she subscribes to and openly propagates. For example, she asserts that employers (of which she is one) have the right to demand that employees represent employers as they wish to be represented (8–9), a right which she believes extends to language.

When audience and panel members point out to her fallacies in common-sense arguments, or present counter-arguments, Winfrey has one of three strategies:

1 She appeals to the authority of those panel or audience members who support her position:

What about what Dr. Anderson mentioned earlier, though – it's about representation.

(8)

PANEL MEMBER, A RADIO ANNOUNCER: In corporate America, if you want to put an extra burden, a yoke on your neck, then speak slang, speak incorrect English and grammar, because you're not going to get the job.

WINFREY: You're not. You are not.

(12)

2 She responds herself with more common-sense arguments:

> This is the point that needs to be made here, and for all you children who decide not to do your homework and that it's not important, that speaking correctly is an indication – just a slight indication – to the person who is going to hire you that perhaps maybe you can do the job. Speaking incorrectly is an indication to them that maybe you cannot. It doesn't mean that it's accurate. (11)

3 Or she cuts away completely:

> 3RD AUDIENCE MEMBER: This is a fact. White America use black dialect on commercials every day. Be observant, people. Don't let nobody tell you that you are ignorant and that you don't speak right. Be observant. They started off Channel 7 Eyewitness news a few years ago with one word: whashappenin. So what's happening, America?
>
> WINFREY: We'll be right back. (9–10)

Winfrey's discomfort with the underlying conflict reaches it peak when audience members attempt to use her and her language as an example of the necessity of assimilation and the rewards which follow. It is interesting that the African American guests who hold up Winfrey's language as a model never point out that Winfrey herself, like so many other blacks prominent in the public eye, is often heard to use AAVE intonation when speaking with black guests, and that she relies on AAVE rhetorical devices on many occasions.

The last substantive comment 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" (13). Winfrey would like the issue to be a simple one of grammatical relations, which would allow her to make decisions as an employer which would be free of racial implications. Ideally, she believes, education should neutralize language distinctions stemming from differences in race and class. She has the best interest of her community and people in mind, and a clear picture of the steps necessary for African Americans to achieve economic and social equality. She seems to see a role for herself here, in educating those who come after as a part of the process called *dropping knowledge* within the African American community. She has traveled this road herself, after all. She has made choices, some of which raise hard questions: "Does it mean that you are ashamed because you choose to speak correctly, you choose to have your verbs agree with your subject?" (5). When she is confronted with evidence that there is a connection between identity and language choice, that negative reactions against

AAVE have to do not with the message, but the messenger, her ability to rationalize her choices and the reality of linguistic assimilation is challenged.

Shelby Steele provides very different insight into the conflicts which face African Americans. Steele is one of a group of prominent scholars and writers who form the core of an African American conservative thinktank, who have been public in their criticism of the civil rights establishment. Some of the central ideas of this body of work include the supposition that human nature is more important than race, and that national interest is more important than ethnic affiliation. His *The Content of Our Character* is interesting here because he addresses, in a limited way, the issue of language. His discussion illustrates the way that rationalization works in the language subordination process. Steele's current position on AAVE, although never clearly stated, seems to be assimilationist. What he relates in his essay is the logic which allows him to make the transition from accepting his own language as viable and functional, to rejecting it.

As a teenager, Steele was a speaker of AAVE in public situations which included non-AAVE speakers. The story he tells here is probably a fairly typical experience for young blacks when they establish social contacts outside the African American community. Here, an older white woman continually and repeatedly corrects both AAVE grammatical and phonological features in his speech.

> When I was fourteen the mother of a white teammate on the YMCA swimming team would – in a nice but insistent way – correct my grammar when I lapsed into the black English I'd grown up speaking in the neighborhood. She would require that my verbs and pronouns agree, that I put the "g" on my "ings," and that I say "that" instead of "dat." She absolutely abhorred double negatives, and her face would screw up in pain at the sound of one. But her corrections also tapped my racial vulnerability. I felt racial shame at this white woman's fastidious concern with my language. It was as though she was saying that the black part of me was not good enough, would not do, and this is where my denial went to work.
>
> (58)

Steele's initial reaction is anger at the woman's rejection of "the black part of me [as] not good enough." This episode seems to have been his first direct experience with language-focused discrimination. Thus he confronts the conflict between the experience of being discriminated against and his experiences with AAVE as a viable and functional language. As a 14-year-old, then, Steele was not yet convinced that AAVE was an inappropriate or bad language. Corresponding to his anger toward the woman is a recognition of the link between it and his race ("the black part of me"). On this basis, his early conclusion is that the woman who has corrected him is racist.

Now, he does something perhaps unusual. He confronts the woman through her son, and she seeks him out angrily to have a conversation about her motives in correcting his language.

> A few days later she marched into the YMCA rec room, took me away from a Ping-Pong game, and sat me down in a corner. It was the late fifties, when certain women painted their faces as though they were canvases . . . it was the distraction of this mask, my wonderment at it, that allowed me to keep my equilibrium.
>
> She told me about herself, that she had grown up poor, had never finished high school, and would never be more than a secretary. She said she didn't give a "good goddamn" about my race, but that if I wanted to do more than "sweat my life away in a steel mill," I better learn to speak correctly. As she continued to talk I was shocked to realize that my comment had genuinely hurt her and that her motive in correcting my English had been no more than simple human kindness. If she had been black, I might have seen this more easily. But she was white, and this fact alone set off a very specific response pattern in which vulnerability to a racial shame was the trigger, denial and recomposition the reaction, and a distorted view of the situation the result. This was the sequence by which I converted kindness into harassment and my racial shame into her racism.
>
> (59)

First we must note that his original position has reversed on a number of levels:

Prior to confrontation	*After confrontation*
her racism	her simple human kindness
his anger, resentment	his racism
wrongdoing denied	acceptance of wrongdoing
acknowledges AAVE	rejects AAVE
draws a link between race and language	denies a link between race and language

This is an interesting example of how ideology functions to keep participants from becoming aware of the place of subordination or dominance they themselves occupy in the social structure. Steele is recounting the way in which he was made aware of his position as subordinated, and chose to change his allegiance to the dominant group. There is no doubt that he is sincere about the story that he tells, or that he truly believes the common-sense arguments he puts forth. But he uses a number of coercive strategies to manufacture consent from his audience, and they bear consideration. One is the way that Steele attempts to make his readers believe that there is a commonality of opinion regarding language. He knows, as they surely do, that AAVE is an inadequate language:

> If she had been black, I might have seen [the truth] more easily. But she was white, and this fact alone set off a very specific response pattern in which vulnerability to a racial shame was the trigger, *denial and recomposition* the reaction, and a *distorted view of the situation* the result.
>
> (emphasis added)

Steele assumes that his readers will share some basic beliefs:

- that there is a right and a wrong way to use English;
- that it is appropriate for more established and knowledgeable persons to direct younger ones to that better language;
- and that questions of right and wrong in language move beyond race.

He explains his inability to see these facts as a function of his immature view of the world and his unwillingness to accept personal responsibility (*If she had been black, I might have seen this more easily*). His youthful AAVE-speaking self relies on denial of the basic truth about language; his mature and reasonable self (the one who is like his readers) knows the truth of the matter. Thus, by linking the last logical proposition (questions of right and wrong move beyond race) to the first two (there is a good and a bad language, and it is appropriate to censure users of bad language), he coerces a certain degree of acceptance of his language ideology.

Steele relates this conversation with the mother of a friend as a kind of epiphany, in which he becomes aware of truths not just about himself, but about people in general. Thus we see how both Steele himself and this woman function as *imaginary formations*. Imaginary formations are understood as the way the subject (Steele), his interlocutor (the readers), and the object of their discourse (the woman who corrected him, and her motivations) are represented not as individuals, but as symbols of larger groups or types. In this analytical approach, people perceive and project themselves primarily as a representative of their specific place in the social structure. Thus, Steele represents himself as a successful African American who has moved beyond denial and racism to take responsibility for his own life.

More interesting, perhaps, is the imaginary formation of the white woman who leads him to accept the necessity of rejecting his home language. This woman is by her own account (and one he obviously does not disagree with) someone with little to recommend her: she has never finished high school and will never achieve a great deal of economic success; she even looks clownish. She has no conventionally accepted or recognized sources of authority or knowledge, beyond a history of personal difficulty and sacrifice. But because she is a MUSE speaker, she feels authorized to correct his language because if she does not do so, he is doomed to a life "in a steel mill." She tells him these things not because

she has any investment in him (she denies such a motivation), but out of some greater urge to do good, an urge which is sufficient authority for Steele. This woman represents the hard-working, well-meaning Middle American MUSE speaker who knows best, and whose authority is not to be questioned. She was the mother of a friend, but she has transcended that role to become an imaginary formation.

We have seen various approaches to neutralizing Smitherman's "linguistic push-pull" and Du Bois's "double consciousness," but Steele's is a unique step which moves beyond denying or limiting AAVE. Whereas Winfrey was clearly unable to go along with criticisms of AAVE which devalued the messenger rather than the message, Steele accepts the criticism of the messenger as appropriate, along with rationalizations and safeguards which anticipate challenges. If you question or reject the common-sense arguments which underlie his position, you are practicing denial and recomposition. The rejection of arguments for linguistic assimilation is thus projected as racist.

What do Oprah Winfrey and Shelby Steele, along with all the other African Americans who have spoken out on the matter of the languages of the African American community have in common? Perhaps only two things can be pinpointed with any surety: the need to resolve the conflict, and the complexity of their responses. In every case opinions are formed by personal experiences outside the African American community which are often overtly negative. It cannot be denied that some of the most scornful and negative criticism of AAVE speakers comes from other African Americans.

One issue of great interest and importance is the differing perceptions of what actually constitutes AAVE. Some prominent and successful African Americans, in their criticism of the language and rejection of it, seem to be focusing exclusively on those grammatical features which distinguish it from other, non-black varieties of US English. Oprah Winfrey insists on MUSE verb paradigms, for example, but it seems that she would not insist on the abandonment of all AAVE rhetorical features, intonation or lexical choice, as she herself uses these on occasion and she points to other African Americans who do the same as good language models. MUSE speakers, on the other hand, in particular non-black MUSE speakers, have a much lower tolerance for non-grammatical features of AAVE than some seem to realize. This is an area which requires further study and research, because it isn't until speakers become aware of differences in perceptions that the underlying conflicts can be addressed.

AAVE is a source of controversy between the African American community and the rest of the country, and within the African American community itself, because it throws a bright light on issues we don't want to face. Equal rights and equal access are good and important goals, but we demand high payment. Perhaps it is too high; certainly, AAVE persists

in spite of stigmatization of the most direct and caustic kind, and despite repercussions in the form of real disadvantage and discrimination. Clearly, AAVE speakers get something from their communities and from each other that is missing in the world which is held up to them as superior and better. But the conflict remains. "We're not wrong," says an exasperated AAVE speaker in response to criticism. "I'm tired of living in a country where we're always wrong" (*Oprah Winfrey Show* 1987: 7).

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. Instead we relegate their experiences and capabilities to spheres which are secondary and out of the public eye. We are ashamed of them, and because they are part of us, we are ashamed of ourselves.