Lexicogrammatical Analysis on African-American Vernacular English Spoken by African-American You-Tubers

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Abstract. African American Vernacular English (AAVE) emerged from the historical context of African American enslavement and represents one of the numerous vernacular languages influenced by English. Today, AAVE is commonly used by African-Americans and non-African-Americans in various media platforms. This research aims to investigate the differences and similarities between AAVE spoken by African American and non-African-American YouTubers in terms of lexicogrammatical features. Additionally, it aims to know the perspectives of Indonesian learners regarding the interpretation and preference of AAVE. The data consist of transcriptions from African American and non-African-American YouTubers speaking in AAVE. The study used a qualitative method, analyzing spoken language in the subjects' YouTube videos, as well as a quantitative approach by collecting opinions from Indonesian learners through a questionnaire. The results show that African-Americans and non-African-Americans speaking AAVE use similar features, such as simplification of Standard English phrases, consonant cluster simplification, copula absence, slang, and gender-specific terms like “bruh”. Indonesian learners prefer AAVE spoken by African Americans due to its advantage in clarity and acknowledge that non-African Americans may use AAVE depending on contextual factors. This research seeks to foster awareness of AAVE as a cultural expression and address concerns related to cultural appropriation.

1 Introduction

Language is categorized into two primary forms; standard language and vernacular language. Standard language is commonly used as a formal form of communication and is typically taught at schools, used for formal situations, while vernacular language is the other form of language that has not been standardized and is commonly practiced in daily situations [1]. All languages have their standardized and vernacular forms, and a form of vernacular language that gained prominence within the English vocabulary is African American Vernacular English (AAVE). AAVE, which, referred to as Black English, Ebonics, Negro dialects is associated to the African Americans.

Every individual possesses unique thoughts and perspectives, with the freedom to think independently. AAVE is a product of the unique thoughts and expressions of vernacular language highlighting the difference and unique qualities of African Americans that should be recognized. In understanding AAVE, discussions focus on the difference, similarities between AAVE spoken by African American and non-African American YouTubers and the measure in which they are receptive to Indonesian learners.

The research discusses the sociolinguistics aspects regarding the usage of AAVEE, highlights the limitation of AAVE usage and investigates their impact on Indonesian learners.

This study also aims to investigate the difference and similarities of AAVE used by African American and non-African American speakers and to find the preference of Indonesian learners regarding the topic.

Unlike most ethnic groups in the Americas, African Americans exhibit less cultural distinctions in terms of linguistic context. AAVE is unique because it has a different way of using particles, auxiliaries, and other verbs. Which distinguishes it from Standard English.

Several of AAVE’s unique features such as the absence of copula verb be, meaning that AAVE does not use auxiliaries from Standard English such as is, was, are, and were. They omit those in equivalent to Standard English speakers using the short form of is, ‘s, that follows subjects/nouns. AAVE also uses be differently. According to Michael Halliday, the father of systemic functional linguistics, there is a relationship between lexis and grammar even though both of them are independent called “lexicogrammar”.

AAVE is believed to be connected to the experiences of African Americans in the era of slavery in the 1700s, where they developed a pidgin, a new language as a mixture of cross-cultural communication. The constructed pidgin was regularized over the course of time into the variety called African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Black English, or Ebonics. The established language rules in AAVE are often deemed as improper grammar which is argued by Sidnell [2] saying that AAVE has its own language rules that is distinc from Standard English. The negative influence of AAVE on

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students in studying have been proven in the previous studies [3-6].

Lexicogrammar refers to a study of language system for making meaning in which word and grammar are considered as mutually independent [7, 8]. Lexicogrammar finds applications in various domains including TV interviews [9], and in the area of academic writing, in which 23 lexicogrammatical characteristics are viewed (i.e. tenses and aspects, passive voice, private, public and suasive verbs, pronouns, downtoners and hedges, possibility, necessity, and prediction modals, synthetic and analytic negations, ‘be’ as main verbs, emphatics, causative subordinations, ‘that’ compliment clauses, wh-clauses, ‘that’ deletion, coordinating conjunctions, sentence adjectives, nouns, average word length, type/token ration, predicative and attributive adjectives, adverbs, split auxiliaries, infinitives, gerunds, and participial clauses) [10] as well as in analyzing recount texts [11].

This essay focuses on investigating the common language rules and grammar of AAVE based on Jack Sidnell’s theory which includes aspects such as Tenses, Simplification of Standard English phrases, Double negation, Absence of copula, and slangs.

Regarding tenses, AAVE is similar to Standard English (SE) with slight differences such as the usage of auxiliary and verb forms. AAVE does not recognize the -s behind verbs in the simple present tense (subject-verb agreement) and uses “done” in the perfect tenses. AAVE employs standard words used in a different manner such as, ain’t, gonna’ (gon’), finna’, and be. AAVE often simplifies phrases from Standard English by clustering them into one word. One notable, stereotypical, and stigmatized feature in AAVE is Double Negation which is, hence the name, the use of two negative indicators in a sentence. Copula, the connecting particle between subject and verb, is called auxiliary. In AAVE, the copula is removed, only leaving the subject and verb. This is one of the main reasons AAVE is marked as improper grammar.

Although having a different grammatical features compared to Standard English, African, American Vernacular (AAVE) also has slangs ; a separate type of vocabulary from standard expressions that can be visionary, fun, or demeaning used as the substitutions for existing expressions in the standard language and also expressions that are yet to have a proper name [12]. In some instances, these AAVE slangs intersect with contemporary slang, commonly referred to as “Gen Z slang.”. However, the notion that using these slangs without knowing its history and culture being assumed “cultural appropriation” is still problematic and controversial. Presently millennials including African Americans or non-African Americans use these words along with the AAVE accent and language itself. Some of them are actually derived from AAVE back then.

On the other hand, Standard English (SE) represents another variety of English that is universally agreed on being the lingua franca. It is commonly used in formal environments although it is suitable in various contexts where English is possibly applied since the term Standard English covers both casual to formal. Standard English is one dialect that is discernible from other English dialects due to it having different model and elements in terms of grammatical structure [13]. In the era of digital technology, Youtube is one of the means of communication. Delivering information using U-tube and uploading it in web caused it to spread all over the world. Successful Youtubers are the ones who follows Digital Communication Management in planning, activities, and evaluation. For instance, Suhardi, a YouTuber with 53,000 subscribers, exemplifies the effectiveness of applying digital communication management principles [14].

2 Method

This study uses a combination of qualitative, quantitative and textual analysis methods. The qualitative method of this research involves analyzing transcripts of speeches delivered by the selected Youtubers. On the other hand, the quantitative method of this research is collecting data from a survey about which AAVE is more accepted in their perceptions. The word “accepted” here could mean easier to interpret and be communicated with, and if they could identify AAVE spoken by African American, or non-African American. Indonesian students from various backgrounds, including those in English literature and Visual Communication Design (DKV), were recruited as survey participants. Textual analysis is used to examine the syntactic characteristics of the transcripts.

The two youtubers employed as the subjects are Darren Watkins Jr. and Danielle Bregoli whose respective channel names are IshowSpeed and Bhad Bhabie. Darren Watkins Jr., also known as IshowSpeed, and born in January 2005 in Ohio, is a 5’8” African American male Youtuber and streamer that goes by the name of IshowSpeed. Watkins has always loved to play games and surf through Youtube, and at one point, received motivation from a friend to start doing Youtube. Since June 2020, Watkins has started streaming and consistently gaining engagements, which leads to the channel IshowSpeed managing to reach 100,000 subscribers by April 2021. In playing video games, Watkins is famous for being extremely vulgar and excessive in his reactions, throwing tantrums and rage quits dramatically whenever he loses in a video game.

Another Youtuber selected for the research is Danielle Bregoli, widely known as her alias Bhad Bhabie. Danielle Bregoli is a female Jewish-Italian rapper, songwriter, and media personality born in March 26, 2003 and raised in Boynton Beach, Florida. Her parents had separated when she was an infant, leaving her to be raised by her mother. Bregoli and her mother were interviewed on the television show Dr. Phil to discuss about her “ungovernable” behavior as a daughter. In the show, the stories revolving around Bregoli’s attitude and past events had prompted constant bursts of laughter from the audience, which annoyed Bregoli and caused her to insult them by saying “Catch me outside, how about that?” in an African-American accent. This was the exact instance that had sparked her fame as the “Cash me outside’ Girl”.

The Darren Watkins Jr. videos used are “I’m quitting youtube…” and “Visiting a mosque in Abu Dhabi.
Meanwhile, the Danielle Bregoli videos used are “Danielle Bregoli is BHAD BHABIE Reacts to Fans Art”.

The data collection procedure involves identifying AAVE features from each video and considering them as samples for analysis. The researcher selected videos with coherent speeches by the subjects, choosing one or two videos from each. Subsequently, transcripts of the speeches were created to facilitate a better understanding of the spoken words.

The data analysis comprises two separate discussions. The first focuses on the analysis of AAVE syntactical features, exploring the similarities and differences between the AAVE spoken by the subjects. The researcher utilizes Jack Sidnell’s outline of AAVE grammar to dissect the identified AAVE features and compare the results to determine similarities and differences.

In the second discussion, the results of the questionnaire are analyzed based on respondents’ answers. The findings determine the version of AAVE favored by Indonesian learners. Three basic questions were asked involving the students’ awareness of AAVE; which video is easier to interpret (the one spoken by African American or by non-African American); which video the students like more. In addition, the researcher examines the participants' comments and opinions on the matter, presenting them individually. Prior to asking the second and third questions, the researcher gave some information about AAVE. Finally, the researchers interpret the responders’ opinions and relate them to the differences between AAVE spoken by African Americans and non-African Americans, as well as the preferences of Indonesian learners.

### 3 Differences between AAVE spoken by African American and non-African American

From watching and creating transcript for the videos, similarities between the speeches of the two subjects, Darren Watkins Jr. and Danielle Bregoli, an African American and non-African American that speak in AAVE were identified. Both of them are fluent in the AAVE, however, their speeches do not contain all of the features in Jack Sidnell’s Outline of AAVE Grammar, though they do feature some of them. The most common and frequent AAVE feature both of them do is the simplification of Standard English phrases such as gonna’, wanna’, and I’mma. In fact, whenever the opportunity arises to express something using these expressions, both subjects consistently use them. The AAVE features found similarly in both of the subjects’ speeches aligned with those of Jack Sidnell’s Outline of AAVE Grammar; simplification of Standard English phrases, consonant cluster simplification, copula absence, and slangs. The use of the words are similar, and the choice of words are similar as well.

To sum it up, Watkins Jr. and Bregoli share similarities in their AAVE speech, from the points of view of the AAVE structures that are featured in their utterances (Table 1)

The two AAVE speakers have a noticeable difference in the use of slang. Watkins Jr. uses the slang “bruh” because it is a commonly used term among men and often directed towards other men, as seen in his interactions with others. On the other hand, Bregoli does not use the slang "bruh". This could be due to Bregoli's age or personality type. In short, the use of slang demonstrates another aspect of the distinctive personalities of Watkins Jr. and Bregoli.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Aspects</th>
<th>Darren Watkins’</th>
<th>Danielle Bregoli’s</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tenses</td>
<td></td>
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<td>The use o bin</td>
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<tr>
<td>English Phrases</td>
<td>wanna’ gonna’ ;</td>
<td>gonna’; I’mma;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Double negation</td>
<td></td>
<td>pro or; wanna’;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copula</td>
<td>they taking a</td>
<td>She thick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slangs</td>
<td>trip; where we</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consonants’</td>
<td>thick</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cluster</td>
<td>quittin’</td>
<td>somethin’</td>
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On an unrelated note, Watkins Jr. stutters a lot in his speech, uttering like between sentences and words as if it’s hard for him to express what he wants to say at the moment, but eager to speak out words. Then again, this could be because of the video chosen from Watkins Jr. is a stream, while for Bregoli’s, the videos were in cuts so that it could possibly elude Bregoli’s stutters.

### 4 Indonesian learners’ opinions on African American vernacular English spoken by African American and non-African American

The question regarding the students’ awareness of AAVE is, “Do you know what AAVE (African American Vernacular Language) is? The result shows that only 58.8% students knew what AAVE is and the other 41.2%. Regarding the easiness to understand and the preference of the AAVE spoken by the African American and the non African American, more students chose the African American, the one spoken by Darren (Table 2).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Easiness</th>
<th>70.6%</th>
<th>29.4</th>
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<td>Preference</td>
<td>88.2</td>
<td>11.8</td>
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Students also wrote some comments regarding AAVE categorized in three areas, i.e. They were not familiar with AAVE although for them AAVE was interesting for varieties of English; they still prefer understood African American more than the non African American. This
might happen due to the influence of American accent so that students could understand Darren’ speaking, and they were not familiar with the style and accent of Danielle Bregoli. Finally, students also said that the clarity of speaking AAVE might also be influenced by the contextual or cultural factors of the speakers.

From the above-mentioned facts, it can be deduced that AAVE has its unique features that separate itself from Standard English. To the people that are not aware of the AAVE language and culture, AAVE may sound like “broken English”. The grammar itself is unique from Standard English. In others’ eyes, it defeats what has been learned in common education of English, such as from school and courses. In this research however, Indonesian learners are able to identify what the speakers are saying to an extent and respect the usage of AAVE by anyone, including non-African Americans.

5 Conclusion
In conclusion, this study demonstrates that African American Vernacular English, spoken by both African Americans and non-African Americans, exhibits similarities with minor differences, such as gender-exclusive speech. Both varieties complies formal AAVE such as in the absence of copula and consonants simplification. Through the questionnaire responses, it was also discovered that Indonesian learners can identify and prefer African American Vernacular English spoken by African Americans over that spoken by non-African Americans in spite of the possibility of the speakers’ background. Additionally, this study also reveals the possibility of the influence of the contextual and cultural aspects including the accents and styles of the speaker that should be investigated further. Participants had voiced that the use of AAVE relates strongly to cultural aspects.

References