

Real Life Lessons in Language and Literacy: Discovering the Role of Identity for AAE-speakers

By Megan-Brette Hamilton, Auburn University, USA

Real Life Lesson #1: The way we speak is part of our cultural identity

New York City Subway

Little Black girl sees the subway sign for the “Kingston-Throop” stop

Automated subway voice says: “Next stop, Kingston-Throop”

Little Black girl laughs out loud and says to her father: “Ha, they said it wrong! It’s supposed to say Kingston TROOP [laughs again]”

*Father: [chuckles] I know honey, **you’re right.***

And she was right.

My thoughts about language have changed immensely throughout my life. In my earlier years, I never would’ve realized that little Black girl on the subway was actually correct. I would’ve probably thought, poor girl, I wish she knew better. This is because at some point I was what you may call, a grammar elitist. I thought there was only one correct way to speak and that if you didn’t speak this way, well then, shame on you. But in my defense, this is what I was taught, both directly and indirectly. I grew up in a middle-income home and neighborhood where almost everyone spoke the “correct” way, Mainstream American English (MAE). While there were those neighbors who did not speak English as their first language, there was no one who innately spoke any other versions of English but the “right” one. My parents spoke MAE and made sure that their children did as well. I remember vividly saying “ax” one day and my dad very sternly correcting me, “No Brette, we say /ask/, not AX.” Now, in my parents’ defense this is what they were taught too. They both grew up speaking their own version of African American English (AAE). My father’s influence was more from the rural side of South Carolina and my mom’s influence was from the

Geechee-Gullah side of South Carolina. However, my parents went through our educational system and learned that in order to be “successful” in mainstream/White culture, you must learn to speak “correctly.” So, who can blame them for wanting the same for their children? Interestingly, it wasn’t until I was older that I realized they still use certain AAE features in their speaking, be this consciously or unconsciously.

Having worked as a speech-language pathologist (SLP)/communication specialist in New York for 10 years and now as an assistant professor and researcher of literacy, language, and culture, I now know that there is no one way to speak English correctly (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2015). There are different flavors¹ of English and not one of them is better than another. That little Black girl on the subway was speaking her flavor of English. Not only was it correct, but the way she pronounced “Throop” represented a part of her cultural and linguistic identity. It represented how she learned to speak and how she communicated similarly with her community, her neighborhood, and her family. Which brings me to my next life lesson...

Real Life Lesson #2: When you sound like the rest of your speech community, you’re not wrong

Brooklyn, NY: middle school 6-8th graders

Pull-out SLP session with 7th grade African American boys

In the middle of the session Devon says to Omar: “Nah man, that’s mines.”

Omar to Devon: “No it aint, I brought it from home, it’s mines.”

*Me: “Okay, I don’t know whose it is, but **mines is not a word.**”*

Epic SLP fail.

In the early 2000s, I worked as an SLP at a middle school in Brooklyn, NY. Most of the students on my caseload were African American/Black or Hispanic. And most of the African American students spoke African American English (AAE). One year in particular, I remember hearing a few of my students say “mines” when using the possessive. “Dis mines.” “That’s not mines.” “Yo, that’s mines.” I also remember “correcting” them saying

¹ Thank you EZ!

there was no ‘s’ on the end of “mine.” But then, a strange thing happened. I started to “correct” more and more of my students. After a while it felt like I had told almost 30 students that “mines” isn’t a word. I had heard custodial workers use the word. I had heard some teachers use the word as well. Then I took a step back, shook my head, and said, “Umm, you’re the only one not saying “mines” around here.” At what point in time do you realize that *you are the one in the wrong? At what point do you humble yourself and realize that the speech community (Ogbu, 1999) you find yourself in may be foreign to you, but not to the people who are in it? It was clear that “mines” was not just a word. It clearly conveyed meaning to others, and met the criteria for communication.

Around this time period in my career, I was still trying to wrap my head around what it meant to speak a language variation². I had learned about the different ways many Black people spoke but, somehow still equated this way of speaking as “improper.” Now I understand that 1) Mainstream American English, like AAE, is just another dialect of English (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2015) and 2) the way people speak often times reflects their speech community (Ogbu, 1999). When we tell an AAE-speaking child that they speak improperly or wrong or “ghetto,” we are also saying that their entire speech community of mothers and grandfathers, cousins and uncles, daycare teachers and pastors, speak incorrectly too.

At this point, I can imagine the question on most people’s minds— Shouldn’t we still teach AAE-speaking children MAE rules so that they may be successful in mainstream society? Simple answer, yes. More complex answer, it depends...which brings me to my next lesson...

Real Life Lesson #3: The concept of codeswitching is not so black-and-white

Speech and Language session with a high schooler
Black female student/Tonya: *I got an interview on Friday for this job I want.*

Me: *Great, let’s practice for it*
Tonya and I begin a mock interview

² Some readers may be more familiar with the term dialect.

I tell her to say some words differently
I tell her to rephrase a few sentences
She gets frustrated
Tonya: *Ugh, why you tryin' ta make me sound White?*

Like many educators, I used to think the idea of codeswitching was a bit of a panacea (Koch, Gross & Kolts 2001; Wheeler & Swords, 2006). Let's just teach the Black kids how to codeswitch, then they'll be able to "succeed." However, when it comes to codeswitching, I think we need to be very clear about what we are asking our children to do. Codeswitching may be defined as language blending; using more than one linguistic system concurrently in a conversation (Young, 2009). However, as Young (2009) states, educationally we are not asking our students to blend languages. Rather, we are asking them to do language substitution. A request that may impact their identity and perpetuate the racial hierarchy already found in our educational system.

How might one's identity be impacted as a result of teaching codeswitching? Imagine there is a classroom of boys and girls. The girls, who are in the minority, are not progressing as well as the boys academically or socially. It's decided that if the girls add some base to their voice, making them sound similar to the boys, then they would have a chance at being equal to the boys academically and perhaps socially. The girls learn that if they want to do well in the classroom and outside the classroom, they will have to learn how to put some base in their voice. They are told that when they go home they can speak using their natural voice, but in the classroom, they will have to change. Now, I understand I have made this very simplistic and there are a ton of nuances I could unpack, but the point is to understand that it's not so simple to ask a child to change how they naturally speak. Will some children naturally learn MAE and begin to codeswitch on their own? Yes, this happened to me (albeit in reverse) when I left my hometown to go to a historically Black college/university (HBCU). But, will other children feel forced to speak in a way that makes them sound White, like Tonya, infringing upon their own cultural identity? Yes (Hill, 2009).

I think the way we look at codeswitching currently still portrays AAE-speakers as less-than, creating yet another racial hierarchy in the classroom

(Garner & Rubin, 1986). This is because we are asking them to learn another way to speak *not* because we want them to be bidialectal, but because the way they speak is not valued in the space they are in.

Codeswitching may not be the most culturally linguistically responsive pedagogy that we think it is. We need to be mindful of how we choose to add the code of power and privilege to a student's linguistic repertoire. On the plus side, the student may be able to walk through doors that would otherwise not be open. But, on the down side we may be negatively impacting their identity in ways we can't imagine.

Real Life Lesson #4: Consider AAE features when teaching MAE literacy

Department Store: Make-up aisle

School-age Black girl: "*ilf, ilf, ilf, ilf, ilf, ilf...*"

My thoughts: *I'm hearing her say this word consistently and I'm wondering what she is talking about because I have never heard of "ilf."*

School-age Black girl is picking up lipstick and mascara from the E.L.F. brand

My thoughts: *Ahh, I say "elf" she says "ilf" – I wonder what this looks like teaching her to read using MAE linguistic features and rules*

I have learned that you can't talk about literacy without talking about language. Oral language is the foundation to literacy, therefore we need to be mindful of how we are teaching MAE literacy to our AAE-speakers. For a longtime, the task of teaching phonological awareness skills to students seemed very direct - there are phonemes that the child uses in their oral speech and one of my tasks was to teach the graphemes that represent those phonemes. But after listening to numerous AAE-speakers, I began to realize that phoneme-grapheme mapping in AAE can sometimes look different than phoneme-grapheme mapping in MAE. For that school-age Black girl in the department store, her MAE short 'e' manifested in AAE as /ɪ/.

Often times we talk about Black children and their lack of proficiency regarding academic reading performance. However, we do not talk about

the fact that they are being taught to read and write in a code that is unfamiliar to them orally. Therefore, for the students who come to school speaking AAE, with a different phonetic inventory, MAE phonological awareness tasks can prove to be more difficult. Even rhyming tasks in MAE can demonstrate these differences. Whereas, a MAE speaker may rhyme words like *gold* and *bold*, due to the rules of AAE, words like *gold* and *bowl* easily rhyme (Schollenbarger, Robinson, Taran & Choi, 2017). I will admit that this lesson became clearer to me with increased exposure to texting and social media. I watched the way that AAE-speakers wrote on social media and you could see the consistent patterns used and rules followed.

I have since learned a variety of other AAE rules which include marking regular plurals by the number preceding the noun (e.g., *two dog*), marking past tense by inflection and context (e.g., *She walk to the sto' yesterday*), marking possession by “owner + thing owned” (e.g., *My mom car*; Wheeler et al., 2012), and pronouncing the written symbol ‘th’ as /d/, /v/, or /f/, in the beginning, middle, or end of words; respectively (e.g., *dis, bruvver, wif*).

I know now that in order for some AAE-speaking children to have a chance at academic success in the classroom, we will need to change our approach to teaching and assessing reading in MAE.

The Journey Continues...

The journey to understanding the link between language, literacy, and identity has been a long and bumpy one...and I'm not done. On this journey, I have learned that in order to better educate AAE-speakers, educational stakeholders themselves need to have knowledge of and an understanding of AAE. I have also learned that the message we are sending to our AAE-speaking children about what is considered natural and correct demands change. We need to be better at validating AAE, and at telling AAE-speaking children that the way they speak is correct and beautiful.

Identity is intricately tied to the way that we speak. To criticize this intimate part of one's identity is to criticize a part of their culture. And my journey has taught me that that is something our sacred educational spaces just cannot afford to do.

References

- Garner, T., & Rubin, D. L. (1986). Middle class Blacks' perceptions of dialect and style shifting: The case of southern attorneys. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 5(1), 33-48.
- Hill, K. D. (2009). Code-switching pedagogies and African American student voices: Acceptance and resistance. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 53(2), 120-131.
- Koch, L. M., Gross, A. M., & Kolts, R. (2001). Attitudes toward Black English and codeswitching. *Journal of Black psychology*, 27(1), 29-42.
- Ogbu, J. U. (1999). Beyond language: Ebonics, proper English, and identity in a Black-American speech community. *American Educational Research Journal*, 36(2), 147-184.
- Shollenbarger, A. J., Robinson, G. C., Taran, V., & Choi, S. E. (2017). How African American English-speaking first graders segment and rhyme words and nonwords with final consonant clusters. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 48(4), 273-285.
- Wolfram, W., & Schilling, N. (2015). *American English: dialects and variation* (Vol. 25). John Wiley & Sons.
- Wheeler, R., Cartwright, K. B., & Swords, R. (2012). Factoring AAVE into reading assessment and instruction. *The Reading Teacher*, 65(6), 416-425.
- Young, V. A. (2009). "Nah, We Straight": An Argument Against Code Switching. *JAC*, 49-76.



Megan-Brette Hamilton is an ASHA certified speech-language pathologist and an assistant professor at Auburn University where she teaches courses on child and adolescent language disorders and clinical problem solving. Using qualitative methods, she examines the educational and clinical experiences of African American English-speakers and explores the cultural-linguistic competence/perspectives of professionals and students. Additionally, Dr. Hamilton provides trainings and professional development to librarians, teachers, and speech-language pathologists. She can be reached at meganbrette@auburn.edu.