

## **Middle class African American language: A self-study**

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For decades, researchers were guided by fairly narrow definitions of African American Language (AAL), which focused almost exclusively on young urban males using a core set of “vernacular” features. With the exception of Wolfram 1969, almost none of the seminal studies on AAL gave serious consideration to its use by middle class speakers, in spite of calls by a handful of scholars for researchers to consider the “totality of language used in the black community” (Taylor 1975: 34). (See also Hoover 1978. Spears 1988). Females, adult speakers, rural speakers, and middle class speakers were systematically dismissed as “lames” who fell outside the limits of the “street” or “vernacular culture” (Labov 1972).

In recent years, however, researchers have begun to question the ways in which “speaker authenticity” is defined (see e.g., Bucholtz 2003) and to paint a broader picture of AAL that brings middle class speakers into the spectrum (see e.g., Debose 1992, Linnes 1998, Weldon 2004, Nguyen 2006, Rahman 2008, Kendall and Wolfram 2009, Scanlon and Wassink 2010, and Britt 2011). The current study aims to contribute to this burgeoning line of research via a self-study on the use of Middle Class African American Language (MCAAL).

In his 1983 study, John Baugh talks explicitly about his decision not to “develop an intuitive account of black street speech” fearing that the standardization of his own speech would “cloud” his intuitions of the vernacular (38-39). However, given the current trend towards broader definitions of AAL and on-going efforts to better understand the nature of variability between standard and vernacular forms (see e.g., Mufwene 1992, Labov 1998, Benor 2010), self-studies of this sort seem not only legitimate, but essential to a fuller understanding of the AAL continuum. Alim 2004 provides an effective model for this type of study, using quantitative and qualitative methods to examine his own styleshifting strategies as a fieldworker.

In the current study, I extend this scope of self-reflection, to consider the full range of styleshifting/codeswitching that I engage in on a daily basis. As a middle aged, middle class, African American female, from the southern U.S. (i.e., a self-proclaimed “lame”), who is a native speaker of AAL and a trained linguist, I bring a unique perspective to the study of MCAAL. Using hours of recordings of my own day-to-day speech and years of self-reflection, I examine the range of phonological, grammatical, lexical, and rhetorical AAL features included in my own linguistic repertoire, considering questions of stigma, prestige, and salience as they are informed by this range (cf. Trudgill 1986). I look at the ways in which my racial and ethnic identity and persona are (or are not) defined by my use of such features. And, focusing on copula variability, as one of the hallmark variables of AAL, I consider the ways in which variation between standard and vernacular forms at this level of the AAL continuum has the potential to broaden our understanding of the nature of the system (or systems) involved.