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# STANDARD ENGLISH IS NOT JUST WHITE ENGLISH'

## Black languages are stigmatized, and experts say they deserve recognition

**N'dea Yancey-Bragg** USA TODAY

**F**or as long as she can remember, Sonja Lanehart has been fascinated by how people speak. In particular, she was interested in the differences she noticed between how white people spoke when compared to the Black people with whom she grew up. • As a result, Lanehart said she, like others, began to believe the way Black people spoke was wrong and this language barrier was preventing them from accessing certain resources.

“When I went to college, I originally started off as a speech pathologist because I wanted to fix how Black people spoke,” said Lanehart, a linguistics professor at the University of Arizona. “And as I took more courses and learned more

about language, I understood that Black people weren't broken, that Black people spoke differently, just like everybody else did.”

In part due to the legacy of slavery and segregation in the United States, African

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**Nicole Holliday**  
Linguistics professor at Pomona College

Americans have developed their own distinct varieties of language, including African American English and Black American Sign Language.

While some parts of Black language have been appropriated and exploited, Black people still face discrimination based on how they communicate, and researchers and native speakers across the country are working to reduce this stigma by studying, highlighting and preserving these languages.

“What we need is for people to register both formal versus informal and to recognize that there's appropriate times and places for different language varieties, but that the way that entire communities speak are not wrong,” said Taylor Jones, a linguist who has researched African American English. “Individuals may have a language impediment, communities do not.”

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# English

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## Slavery, segregation led to creation of Black languages

African American English is an umbrella term for the many different and distinctive varieties of English used predominantly by Black Americans, including vernaculars, or the more everyday, informal version of a language, Lanehart said. Although there are different regional varieties spoken by Black people across the country, African American English is “equally stigmatized regardless of what part of the country you’re in,” she said.

Lanehart and others experts who spoke to USA TODAY described AAE as a variety of English, shying away from calling it a “dialect.”

Tracey Weldon, who worked as a linguist in higher education for nearly 30 years, said African American Vernacular English shares certain features like multiple negation (“she ain’t got no money”) or nasal fronting (walking vs. walkin’) with other varieties like Southern White Vernacular English. Other features, like the habitual be (“I hate going to that café because their coffee be cold”), share similarities with Caribbean English creoles and West African languages, Weldon said.

Many words, including The Oxford University Press’ 2023 Word of the Year “rizz,” come from African American English, she said. But African American English also includes more formal or standard varieties that don’t include any of these features, Weldon said, noting that “standard English is not just white English.”



**Sonja Lanehart, a linguistics professor at the University of Arizona, is part of the team working on “The Oxford Dictionary of African American**

**English.” PROVIDED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA COLLEGE OF EDUCATION**

“It’s also important to recognize that there are more standard ways of speaking by which speakers can also sound Black and a lot of that has to do with pitch, tone, intonation, and word choice,” she said.

There are two competing theories about how African American English developed, according to Weldon. She said some linguists believe it emerged as a dialect of American English, while others say it developed as a creole, a language that emerges when speakers who don’t share a common language come into contact with one another, to facilitate the African slave trade, and then became the primary form of communication among enslaved Africans who were brought to the United States.

The language was preserved in large part due to the isolation of African



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Americans, first on slave plantations and then during segregation, Weldon said.

But it wasn’t until nearly 200 years after the advent of slavery that sign language would begin to expand in America, beginning with the creation of a school in Connecticut in 1817, now known as the American School for the Deaf, according to Joseph Hill, an associate professor at Rochester Institute of Technology’s National Technical Institute for the Deaf. Schools for the deaf spread throughout the 19th century, but many in the South were segregated, causing sign language to develop differently in Black and white communities, Hill said through an interpreter.

It wasn’t until schools began to integrate that Carolyn McCaskill learned she signed so differently she couldn’t understand her white classmates and teachers. McCaskill was one of the first students to integrate the Alabama School for the Deaf in 1968.

“I decided that I had to then learn how to code-switch,” she said through an interpreter. “At the time, I didn’t have that terminology, that language, but that’s what I was doing. You know, we do things just to survive in particular environments.”

Black deaf people typically use two hands for signs that white deaf people may only use one for, Hill said. And while in ASL, signing is usually done between the shoulders, forehead and waist, signers using Black ASL often use more space by signing higher or lower, Hill said.

McCaskill, founding director of the Center for Black Deaf Studies at Gallaudet University, said a majority of young Black signers also incorporate African American English into their vocabulary, citing signs for tripping and whack as examples.

“Language isn’t static,” she said. “We see language evolve in our community and I think it’s actually a beautiful thing. It’s absolutely beautiful.”

### Black languages can draw ‘insidious’ discrimination

Simply sounding Black can make

someone vulnerable to discrimination in various contexts including housing, employment, education and the criminal justice system, according to Nicole Holliday, a linguistics professor at Pomona College.

“This is really insidious in a way that makes my skin crawl because there’s cover for discrimination based on language in a way that there isn’t [for other forms of discrimination],” she said.

Holliday found discrimination and misunderstandings can happen even if a Black person isn’t using the features of African American English that people may perceive as bad grammar. In the case of Sandra Bland, an African American woman found dead in a Texas jail cell in 2015, Holliday hypothesized the officer who stopped Bland perceived her as aggressive because she sounded Black.

“So if she’d been interacting with another person who spoke African American English, they may not have perceived her tone as adversarial,” she said. “But because he was unfamiliar with the sort of norms of Black speech and tone, he perceived it as aggressive and that’s a small part of what led to the escalation in that situation.”

Though Holliday said the differences between African American English and other varieties of English aren’t as large as the differences between languages like English and Spanish, miscommunication can still occur. A 2019 study of court reporters in Philadelphia found participants incorrectly transcribed 40% of the African American English sentences and were able to accurately paraphrase the meaning of those sentences just 33% of the time.

Despite the stigma, African American English hasn’t died out not only because completely changing the way someone speaks is hard, but also because language is an important part of who someone is, Holliday said.

“If you can only speak African American English, especially if you’re a kid, then that hinders your educational opportunities,” she said. “But if you can only speak ‘standard’ English, then you’re very uncool because what is valued in the community is actually about linguistic dexterity.”

Hill said Black deaf people can face some of the same stigma and pressure to code-switch as hearing people, particularly in the workplace. He said he’s heard many stories of Black deaf people and children of deaf adults working as translators and interpreters who have had their work criticized by white deaf people as too expressive or exaggerated even though it was linguistically accurate.

“They might misinterpret something to mean something else,” Hill said. “Because of the facial expressions in Black ASL, white deaf signers might think we’re signing aggressively or that we’re angry, but really those facial features are linguistic features in Black ASL to enhance meaning.”

And inadequate access to technology and the lack of Black interpreters can

make it more difficult for Black deaf people to effectively communicate with hearing people, according to Sheryl Emery, president of National Black Deaf Advocates.

“The chances of me getting an interpreter who looks like I do is very, very rare,” Emery said through an interpreter.

Emery said Black deaf people can be marginalized because of both their race and their deafness, and “even though things have gotten better, we still need to make more of an effort with more discussion about the Black community being more accepting, interacting [with] and recognizing the people with disabilities within our Black community.”

### Dictionary, TikTok generate awareness, ‘prestige’

Hill said he worries about the preservation of Black ASL as the schools where it was born close and members of the already-small research community like McCaskill retire. But he said it is encouraging to see young people raising awareness about Black ASL on social media platforms, like Nakia Smith, a 22-year-old from Texas who describes herself as an “influencer activist.”

Some of Smith’s TikTok videos, which often feature lessons on Black ASL or stories from family members who she said grew up during the Jim Crow era, have attracted more than a million views. She said it’s important for more people to know that while Black ASL is not the same for everyone, it is unique and reflects Black culture.

McCaskill said she hopes to see more research done on how Black ASL is being used today as well as a dictionary and classes potentially created around the language.

“I feel that we only scratched the surface, really,” she said. “And so I certainly believe that more research needs to be conducted, needs to be shared and disseminated with a wider audience.”

Meanwhile, linguists, including Weldon and Lanehart, are currently working to bring an African American English dictionary to life. They said “The Oxford Dictionary of African American English” will trace the historical roots of words created in the African American community.

Lanehart said the team, which includes researchers and editors at Oxford University Press and Harvard University’s Hutchins Center for African & African American Research, found it easy to agree on including some words, like ashy and kitchen. But others have sparked lively discussions about their proper spelling and pronunciation like “shorty,” which is pronounced more like “shawty” by people in the South. She called the undertaking a “hugely significant project.”

“I wouldn’t say that it legitimates African American language because African American language is already legitimated just like every other language variety,” Lanehart said. “But it does bring a level of prestige to it to counteract those arguments that say that it’s not worthy.”