Lost in Translation?
African American Vernacular English
Ideas and Expectations
in a University Writing Center

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to critically examine attitudes and existing approaches to vernacular language use—specifically African American Vernacular English (AAVE)—in a university writing center at a large state-funded Midwestern university. By surveying and studying the responses of both writing center consultants and clients, this study attempts to gain an understanding of what attitudes and approaches (or the absence of approaches) exist and how these be can shape strategies for language inclusive strategies in writing centers that reach beyond simple familiarity and instead strive toward generative activity for those of alternative language backgrounds and uses.

OVERVIEW

African American students often come to the language classroom and to the university writing center using African American Vernacular Language (or AAVE) in speech and daily communication. But today’s university writing center is an often a diverse place where multiple vernacular dialects and languages exist alongside dominant discourse—often called “Standard English” (SE). Why is it important to not only account for but also to understand these myriad dialects and languages in our efforts to equip students in their literate practices?

As with English-as-a-second-language (ESL) learners, studies and evidence show that an effort to come to a student with preexisting knowledge of his or her first language very often makes the learning process and its transition much smoother and more effective. Additionally, for students who speak vernacular and/or dialectal English,
a better grasp on Standard English is gained when the student’s native/home tongue is contextualized and reaffirmed.

Often, however, we find ourselves in the midst of a debate over Standard English’s central role as a language of wider communication (LWC) and the degree to which respect for and understanding of vernacular and dialectal Englishes might usurp or destabilize this role. But as Geneva Smitherman points out in *Talkin That Talk* (2000), “Now, don’t nobody go trippin cause ain none of dese proposals (those recognizing dialect and alternative language) suggesting that schools shouldn’t teach “standard English” or more precisely, the US Language of Wider Communication—note I said “wider,” not “whiter” communication. All students need to know this language if they are going to participate fully in the global world of the twenty-first century.” (Smitherman, p. 161).

So, though English as LWC is important to a student’s success in the academic, professional, and (on some levels) personal worlds, an understanding of and respect for a student’s own vernacular and dialectal language usage allows that student a vital link to his or her literacy heritage and understanding of communication as a whole.

African American Vernacular English (AAVE)—also sometimes known as African American Language (AAL), African American English (AAE), and Ebonics—has an especially strong and relevant history in the family of American languages. This study surveyed a subset of Michigan State University students—both writing center clients and writing center consultants—to gauge their attitudes about knowledge of and approaches to AAVE in generally and in writing center sessions. The hypothesis centers
on the level to which AAVE concerns are understood or not understood and also addressed or not addressed in the University Writing Center setting. The purpose of the study is to draw attention among rhetoric and composition, English, education, socio-linguistic researchers, teachers, writing center administrators and staff of the linguistic expectations and needs of certain segments of the student population, specifically African American clients. As Bir and Christopher write in their 2003 article “Training writing tutors to recognize dialectical difference,” “Students speaking nonstandard dialects have a difficult task in becoming comfortable with the language that is required for most projects in academic and business worlds. Writing centers can assist them much more efficiently and positively than we currently are able to, simply by adding to our training a bit of basic information about dialect and a lot of sensitivity to the is-sues that accompany it” (p. 4).

TERMINOLOGY

The system by which African Americans use the English language in the United States has a long and evolving history and the terminology associated with it is no less evolving and shifting. This study uses the terminology “African American Vernacular Language,” or AAVL, to describe the structured and historic language of most African Americans in the United States. In the university setting, like the vast majority of educational settings in the US, the language used in teaching, academic, and research work is often referred to as “Standard English” (or SE). This form is also sometimes referred to as LWC, or the “Language of Wider Communication.” This study will make use of the term Standard English, unless quoted as otherwise.
Writing center terminology varies widely from institution to institution. Many centers refer to themselves as “writing labs” while others refer to themselves as “writing centers” or “tutoring labs and centers.” Writing center clients are also often called “tutees” or “students.” Similarly, consultants are often known as “tutors.” This particular study models the terminology within the Michigan State University Writing Center where the study was conducted, thus “writing center,” “client,” “consultant,” and “session” are used.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

To properly contextualize the need to think about African American student needs in the writing center, we must first take into account what has, and has not, been said about the historic prejudices of the majority standard English using-community, the subsequent struggle of African Americans in the classroom (specifically the language classroom), as well as looking at what has been said about why it is important for students and language users to think critically about all language forms. Additionally, we must also look at any existing discussion of race (and consequently race based language) in the writing center.

In “Myth education: Rationale and strategies for teaching against linguistic prejudice,” Leah A. Zuidema (2007) discusses standard English users’ historic “linguistic prejudice” and further suggests “it is imperative that students learn to identify and critique (such) prejudicial portrayals of languages, dialects, speakers, and writers” (Zuidema, p. 673).
In the relatively short history of writing centers in American colleges and universities, little has been written or discussed concerning vernacular language in the center.

In “Addressing racial diversity in a writing center: stories and lessons from two beginners,” Barron and Grimm (2002) discuss the privileging of white experience in the writing center noting: “because so many writing center administrators are white, because the professional organization is predominantly white, most of our programmatic and professional decisions have been based on assumptions informed by white experience” (Barron and Grimm, p. 72).

Some argue that the writing center can actually play a role in client awareness and understanding of her/his own language and culture in addition to the language and culture of wider society. Bawarshi and Pelkowski (1999) in “Postcolonialism and the idea of the writing center” argue that the university writing center is an ideal place to teach and practice a critical and self-reflective form of acculturation, encouraging under-prepared students (especially those marginalized by race, class, and ethnicity) to adopt critical consciousness (Bawarshi and Pelkowski). If such marginalized students (clients) adopt such a critical consciousness, their communication skills and choices will be expanded not only in the academic world but in the wider world they venture out into post-college.

Grimm (1996) writes, “Writing centers are supposed to deal with heterogeneity—students who speak English as a second language, students who use a nondominant dialect, students who have learning disabilities, students who don’t follow assignment
guidelines—and writing centers are expected to master and control this heterogeneity rather than interpret it. A lack of dialogue between writing center workers and composition teachers maintains the status quo. Composition scholars theorize about difference, but the social differences that that discursive practices create and maintain are contained and silenced in the writing center” (Grimm, p. 524).

Weaver (2006) points out that writing centers often promote the idea of “colorblindness” in order to purport racial equality, yet this approach often stifles discussion of the true issues at hand with racial differences in the writing center’s day-to-day activities. Weaver asserts that such claims of colorblindness are ways that White writing center directors can deal with “cognitive dissonance” about taking responsibility for racial challenges in the writing center—“It’s much safer when we do no have to take responsibility for managing diversity” (Weaver, p. 82).

John Trimbur (2000) on the other hand, suggests that writing centers must and will become “multiliteracy centers.” The visions for what the writing center is and may or may not become with respect to racial diversity (and consequently linguistic diversity) seem quite varied which seems a reflection of the dearth of research in the topic area.

So while there is a small but considerable body of work on African American Vernacular English (AAVE), the topic of race in the writing center is little-visited and the topic of vernacular and/or race and ethnicity-based language usage in the writing center even less-visited. The few works that do exist often vaguely call for racial and linguistic awareness in the writing center but offer few workable solutions for how we might achieve this awareness.
METHODOLOGY (PROCEDURES)

The study surveyed both clients and consultants anonymously via a voluntary Internet questionnaire about their interactions with AAVL. The Internet questionnaire link was distributed to consultants via internal MSU Writing Center listserv email. For clients, this link was distributed via a paper flyer available at the front writing center desk at the time of check-in for a writing center session. The survey was opened to both consultants and clients for ten days (a Saturday though a following Monday). Surveyees were informed of the time frame within which they could take the survey. Surveyees were also assured that their participation was completely anonymous and voluntary. Surveyees also gave their informed consent for this anonymous data to be analyzed and utilized in this study. Surveyees’ consent was given in their taking and submitting of the survey. The survey was conducted within the bounds and approval of the Michigan State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and its policies and guidelines.

INSTRUMENTATION AND PARTICIPATION

The survey of clients and consultants (both groups being comprised of MSU students, graduate and undergraduate) was carried out using Survey Monkey (http://www.surveymonkey.com/) an online survey program. The survey was constructed to be anonymous and participants were told of this anonymous feature. The survey of clients contained 12 multiple-choice questions and required approximately 20 minutes of students' time. The survey of consultants contained 14 multiple-choice questions and required about the same amount of time.
In these surveys, consultant response was quite high, while client response was somewhat average. Of approximately 55 total consultants working in the MSU Writing Center, 23 responded to the survey—about a 42% response. Among clients, of 10,054 registered past clients emailed, response was 502 persons—nearly a 5% response.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section will look generally at both surveys’ responses—breaking down question areas generally in both surveys. In the section that follows, we can try to begin to draw some broad conclusions about these responses. The full survey instrument for each group can be found in “Appendix A: A consultant survey of vernacular English language use in the MSU writing center” and “Appendix B: A client survey of vernacular English language use in the MSU writing center” in this study.

Both consultants and clients were first asked (anonymously) to self-identify from a list of racial/ethnic groupings. For Michigan State University (MSU) as a whole, statistics for the Fall 2007 semester show that of 46,045 total students (36,072 undergraduate and 9,973 graduate and professional), 54 percent are female and 46 percent male. Of this total, 7.4% are African American, 5.1% are Asian/Pacific Islander, 2.8% are Chicano/Other Hispanic, and 0.7% are Native American (para. 11, "MSU facts," 2007, Fall).

For the consultant survey out of 23 responses, 19 self-identified as “Caucasian/non-Latino” (74%), two as “African-American/non-Latino” (9%), and three as “Asian/Pacific Islander” (13%). One person identified as “American Indian or Alaskan” (4%). None of the survey respondents (0%) identified as either “Latino” or “Other.”
For the client survey, of the 502 respondents, 316 self-identified as “Caucasian/non-Latino” (63%), 40 as “African-American/non-Latino” (8%), and 95 as “Asian/Pacific Islander” (18.9%). “Latino” comprised 17 responses (3.4%). Three persons (0.6%) identified as “American Indian or Alaskan,” and 31, or 6.2% as “Other.”

**General Demographic Data**

Question one asked the consultant to self-identify racial/ethnic identification as discussed previously. Question two asked “Is English your first language?” Of the consultants surveyed, 21 (91.3%) answered “yes” and two (8.7%) answered “no.” Among clients, 11 (91.7%) answered “yes” and one (8.3%) answered “no.”

Twelve (52.2%) of consultants identified as graduate students, while 11 (47.8%) identified as undergraduate students. Among clients, 10 (or 83.3%) identified as undergraduate students and 2 (16.7%) identified as graduate students. This compares with approximately 78% of the student population as a whole at MSU being undergraduates and approximately 22% being graduate and professional students (see previous statistics).

Question four of the consultant survey asked about how many hours per week a consultant typically works in the writing center (nearly 48% work 10-to-20 hours per week while about 30% work 5-to-9 hours and about 26% work less than five per week). For clients, question four asked how many times in a semester they typically visit the MSU Writing Center. Here it is important to note that there is no cap on how many times per semester a client may visit the center although students are generally monitored to ensure that they do not abuse the center by visiting over four hours per week (in order
that other students may also have access to the center’s resources). On this question, 63.9% of clients said they typically visit the MSU Writing Center one time per semester. About 24% said they visit 2-to-4 times per semester, and 12% said they visit more than 4 times per semester.

**Questions of AAVE Familiarity**

Questions five, six, and seven on both surveys address both AAVE familiarity and AAVE and SE use. On the question of familiarity with AAVE “or Ebonics,” over 90% of consultants answered that they were familiar with the terms, while about 4% each said they were not or were unsure. Among clients however, only about 64.5% claimed familiarity with the concepts of AAVE or Ebonics, while about 24% claimed unfamiliarity and about 11% claimed to be unsure. Regarding AAVE and SE use (in questions six and seven on both surveys), nearly 96% of consultants and 94% of clients claimed to use SE sometimes or most of the time, while use of AAVE “sometimes or most of the time” among consultants was at about 17%. Among clients however, use of AAVE “sometimes or most of the time” was at about 8% also but with nearly 7% being “unsure” of their AAVE use (versus 0% for consultants).

**Questions of AAVE in the Writing Center**

The next series of questions, on both surveys, asked only those who had identified in question seven as users of AAVE “sometimes or most of the time” to continue on. Those who had answered “false” or “unsure” on question seven were asked to submit the survey and were finished. By filtering the survey to account for only those who answered that they were AAVE user “sometimes or most of the time” we can
look at those 41 respondents as well as the X respondents who were African American (whether AAVE user or not).

Question eight of the consultant survey asked whether a consultant had ever explained to AAVE using clients how and when SE might best be used—57% of these consultants answered “true,” while 14% answered “false” and about 29% answered “unsure.” Question eight for the client survey asked whether (as an AAVE using client) consultants had ever explained how and when SE might best be used. Among these clients, 100% answered “false.”

For consultants, question nine asked the same type of question as question eight but with respect to AAVE instead of SE. Among consultants responses were evenly split with 42.9% each saying they had and had not explained to users of AAVE how AAVE might best be used (14.3% were unsure). Among clients, question nine asked them if they, as AAVE users, had ever used AAVE instead of SE at least partially in any academic papers or assignments. All (100%) of respondents answered that they had not.

Question 14 of the consultant survey and question 10 of the client survey both asked about familiarity with the concepts of “code-meshing” and “code-switching” with respect to SE and various vernacular Englishes (among them AAVE) in speech or writing. Nearly 67% of consultants said they were familiar with these concepts, while only about 22% said they were not (with 0% being unsure). Among clients, 100% claimed familiarity with these terms.
On the consultant survey, question ten asked whether they had ever encouraged clients to use AAVE in academic papers or assignments. Nearly 43% said they had while an equal number said they had not and about 14% said they were unsure. In question 11 on this same survey, they were asked if they had ever discouraged clients from using AAVE in academic work; here only 14% said they had while nearly 72% said they had not and about 14% said they were unsure. Question twelve of the consultant survey asked “I tend to encourage the exclusive use of Standard English.” Here, only 14% answered “true,” while nearly 86% said “false” and 0% were unsure. In question 13 of the consultant survey, surveyees were asked to respond to the statement “I would appreciate training and resources to help me to teach clients about the uses of vernacular language forms and dialect in composition.” Almost 78% answered “true” to this statement with over 22% answering “false” and 0% answering “unsure.”

Rounding out the client survey, questions 11 and 12 asked self-identified AAVE users if they would find useful writing center consultation sessions that explained to them how to more knowledgeably use both SE and AAVE (respectively) in their academic endeavors. For both questions, 100% of respondents answered “true.”

**KEY FINDINGS**

The results revealed a visible divide between consultant knowledge about AAVE and client knowledge about AAVE. For example, over 40% of clients either did not know or were unsure of what AAVE or Ebonics was yet less than 9% of consultants said the same. Consultants showed themselves to be quite savvy not only about what AAVE is but also accompanying concepts (such as codeswitching or codemeshing). At this point,
it is important to note that a higher percentage (over 52%) of consultants identified as graduate students (versus 22% of the university total), which also may help explain the increased awareness of AAVE and its details, uses, and roles. Alternately, the ratio of graduate to undergraduate clients was statistically similar to the university as a whole.

But while consultants seemed to claim a high awareness of AAVE and the nuances of its roles (or potential roles) in academic discourse, this did not seem to make the transition to client knowledge or experience. For example, though over 43% of consultant respondents said they had explained the use of AAVE to clients in sessions, 0% of clients claimed to have ever heard about AAVE usage in a session. It is important to note here that nearly 60% of client respondents said they visit the center over four times per semester. This increases the likelihood that an absence of discussion of AAVE issues is more than a fluke or coincidence. Among the self-identified AAVE using clients, the data reveals a willingness to learn more about both SE and AAVE in regards to academics. But these same client results also show that these AAVE users have not yet felt that anyone has addressed AAVE in sessions. Are consultants lying about their own practices in writing center sessions? It would be difficult to imagine a situation where consultants who are so aware of AAVE issues would feel the need to lie in an anonymous survey, and yet perhaps the answer lies more in Weaver’s (2006) assertion that those in the dominant culture often even subconsciously seek to avoid the “cognitive dissonance” of truly confronting and dealing with these issues in meaningful, direct ways.
In terms of other studies done regarding student attitudes toward AAVE, Bir and Christopher write of their own study:

To the researchers, dialect very directly equals identity. Surprisingly, to the students, it does not, or at least to a much lesser extent. When asked a series of questions to find out how strongly they consider Ebonics to be a part of who they are, 38% agreed or strongly agreed that it is part of them, 27% had no opinion, and 31% disagreed or strongly disagreed, which is a fairly even split. In response to whether they were proud to speak Ebonics, more than a third had no opinion, while 27% agreed mildly; almost 10% strongly agreed, and 27% mildly or strongly disagreed. But when asked whether they were embarrassed to speak Ebonics, they were more emphatic: 76% disagreed, 21% had no opinion, and only 3% agreed. It seems that they do not perceive their identities to be very strongly linked to their language, and while they are not particularly proud of it, they certainly are not embarrassed (Bir and Christopher, 2003, p. 4).

Dr. Geneva Smitherman states that the survey results shown here are likely “a more realistic snapshot of African American and African American Language (speaking) Writing Center clients/students in college today. There is still lingering ambivalence—I call it linguistic push-pull—about Black speech in the African American community. This ambivalence is probably even more pronounced among Black youth in college, particularly in historically white universities, than say among their peers who are not in college.”

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Bir and Christopher (2003) write, “Writing centers can and should ease the transition between home and standard dialects, minimizing the resistance some students may feel toward Standard English and the system that requires it” (p. 4). Yet, we see in this study’s findings seem to show that this opportunity may be a missed one in writing centers. Students often come to the university setting with a limited
understanding of their home language and a sense of academic deficiency due to their limited experience with SE. This can often add to a lowered literacy confidence level. When such low confidence is not addressed, students continue to not only misunderstand their own language boundaries but also do not begin to open up to the possibilities of multiple language tools. Clearly consultants, while often aware of the complexities and difficulties of linguistic variation—especially where it concerns minority students—are struggling to find tangible ways to translate this awareness into working strategies to equip clients on their literacy journey. Clients, for their part, seem at the very least to be intrigued by the idea of exploring multiliteracies and codeswitching and codemeshing. I believe the university writing center must work with teachers to help students of all backgrounds understand the complexities and meaningful structure (both present and historically) of multiple languages and vernaculars and that a move away from classrooms as temples of SE with a fixation upon binaries of rightness and wrongness will allow us to also free up the resources of the writing center not as simply a place for “grammar checking” and “emergency help with ‘mistakes’” but rather a place of linguistic and literary enrichment. When so much is at stake for students in our universities, we fail them by leaving them ill equipped to negotiate not just some, but all of their literacy paths. Where do we start? As Grimm (1996) writes, we need “to situate writing center work within the democratic desire to understand and negotiate difference, to work within heterogeneity rather than to manage or eliminate it” (Grimm, p. 524).
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REFERENCES


