

## Linguistic Variation

It's easy to think of a language as a uniform phenomenon. Our ability to understand what other people say reinforces our perception of uniformity. Looking closer we find that no two people speak exactly the same way. Even a single individual changes their speech from moment to moment.

Linguists distinguish different types of language varieties:

**Dialects** are varieties of the same language. The word dialect sometimes has negative connotations—referring to nonstandard dialects or even languages.

Everyone speaks a dialect of a language; we all have individual dialects or **ideolects**. Some people use dialect to refer exclusively to differences in pronunciation—technically **accent**. Again, there are people who confuse accent with foreign accents—everyone has an accent

It is difficult to distinguish between languages and dialects

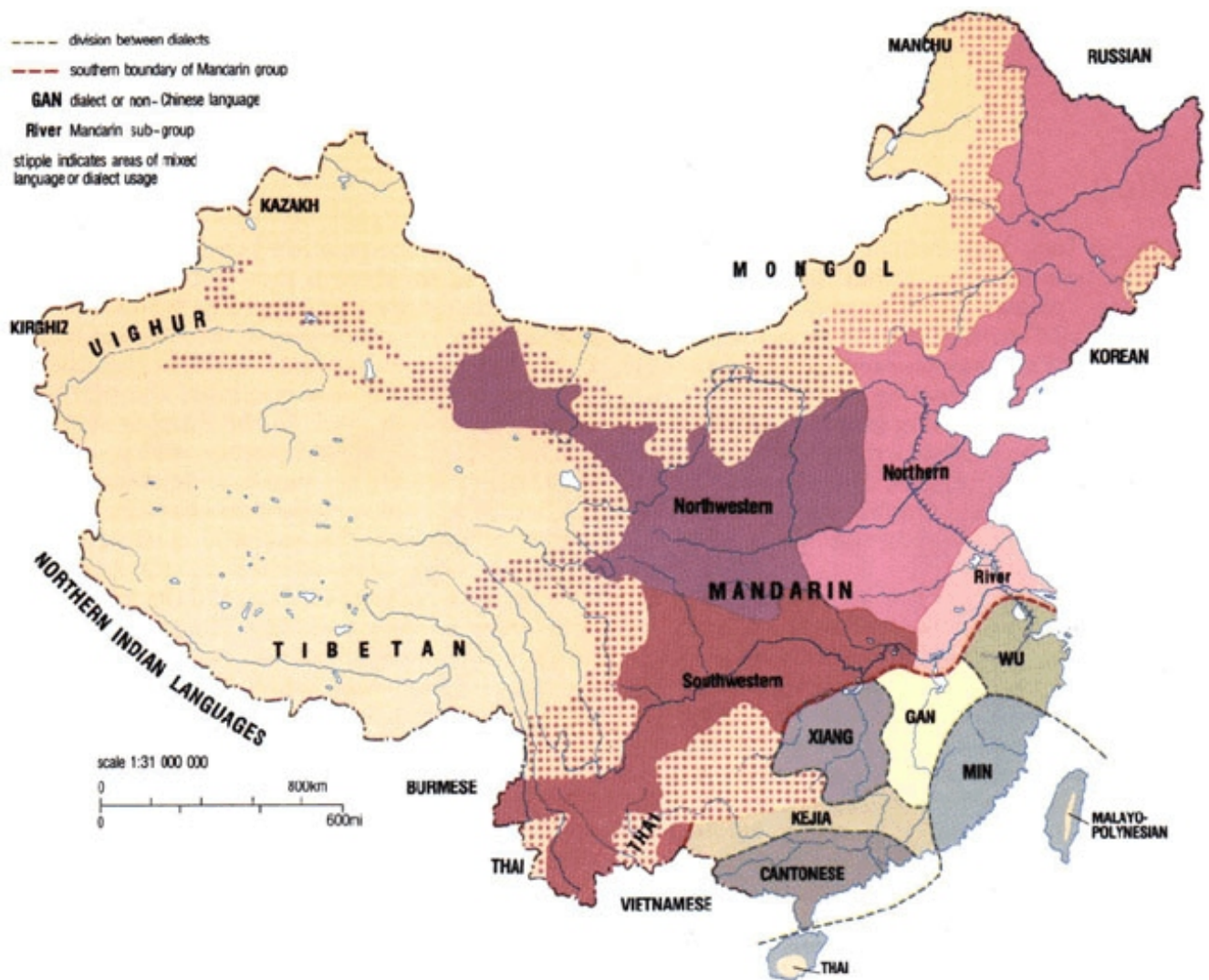
Linguists use the criterion of **mutual intelligibility** (at least 80% mutually intelligible vocabulary): Kansan, Coloradan, St. Louisian?

But many other factors determine the boundary between language and dialect. One common observation is that a language is a dialect with an army and a navy. In fact, national boundaries often fail to coincide with linguistic boundaries.

The Scandinavian languages (especially Norwegian and Swedish, but also Danish) have a great deal of mutual intelligibility, but are commonly considered different languages.



Most people think of Chinese as a single “language”, but in fact there are at least seven or eight distinct “Chinese” languages with a great deal of internal dialect variation.



These languages are tied together for both political and cultural reasons. Prominent among the latter is a shared writing system which primarily logographic rather than phonetic.

American Southwest: Papago and Pima (same language, different countries)

Serbian and Croatian (same language, different history, religion and writing systems)

Further complicating the difference is the existence of **dialect continua**.

Mutual intelligible pairs of dialects in a chain, but the ends are not mutually intelligible

Town A ~ Town B ~ Town C ~ Town D ~ Town E

but Town A dialect is not understandable in Town D or E.

Europe provides well known examples of dialect continua,

e.g., Holland/Germany; France/Italy



Also find cases of one-way intelligibility:

Brazilian Portuguese  $\leftarrow$  Spanish      Danish  $\leftarrow$  Swedish

The Language Files address the issue of how multiple factors play a role in determining language features

A 68-year-old lower class Appalachian male  
geography, age, gender, socioeconomic status, group identification  
[sodi]

The case studies show how these factors interact to determine the features of someone's speech  
Conducted by William Labov, famous sociolinguist, in the early 1960s.

Martha's Vineyard-island off Cape Cod, Massachusetts

Looked at motivation for centralized diphthongs /cy/ and /cw/ in why and wow

Found:

1. centralization was geographically restricted to Martha's Vineyard; not found on mainland
2. use increased with age and peaked between 31 and 45 years
3. centralizers had lower socioeconomic status
4. the Portuguese and Native American population had high degrees of centralization

Labov accounts for these variables in terms of the speakers' identification with the island

R-less in New York City

New York speakers lack /r/ in four, card, papers, here, there, etc.

Labov looked at the correlation of /r/ use and social status

He collected data from salespeople in New York department stores; assumed the salespeople would "borrow prestige from their customers" and reflect their customers' use of /r/.

Labov looked for items in the department stores that were located on the fourth floor—why?

Then asked the clerks two questions:

1. Excuse me, where are the women's shoes? —> Fourth floor
2. Excuse me?

The first was designed to elicit casual speech, while the second was supposed to elicit careful, emphatic speech

% of /r/s in floor

	Casual	Careful
Saks Fifth Avenue	63	64
Macy's	44	61
S. Klein	8	18

Find increased use of /r/ in careful speech; most evident in middle class store—Macy's

Labov assumed that clerks in Macy's try to use /r/, but often fail in casual speech. Aim for upper class level of /r/ use.

Less secure speakers are aware of the prestige dialect and view it as an ideal

Also showed that /r/ is never completely present or absent in any of the dialects—> variable feature

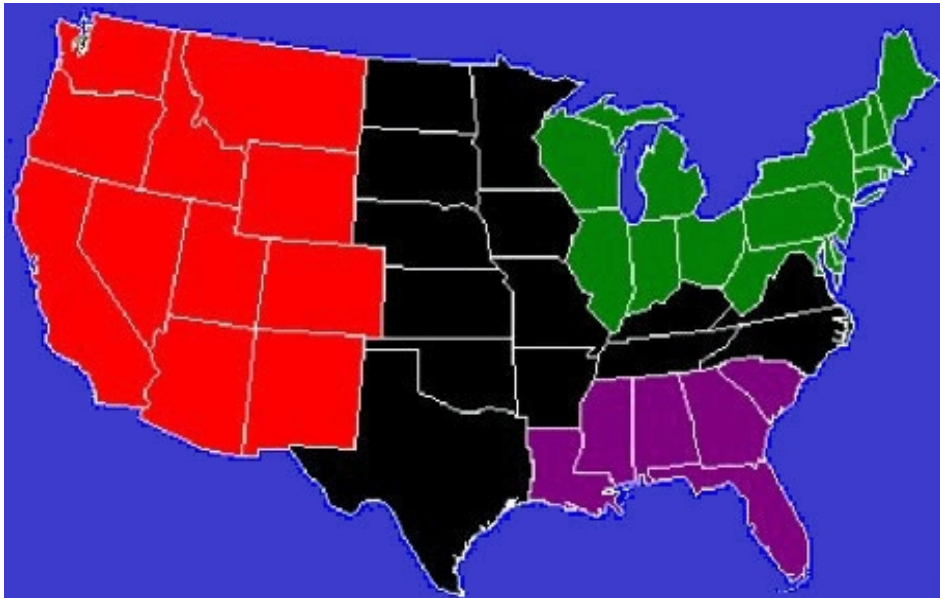
Sometimes speakers overcompensate and produce hypercorrections

e.g., [kyubr] 'Cuba' [s]r 'saw' [aydiyr] 'idea'

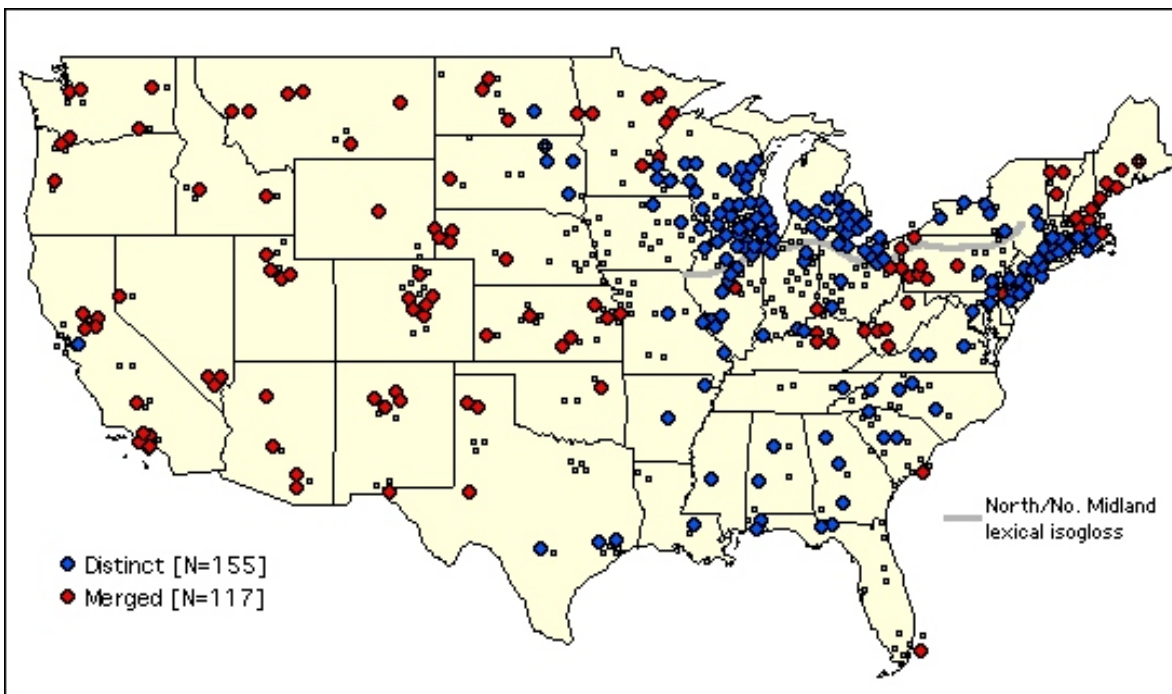
## Regional Dialects in the United States

Settlement patterns in the United States contributed to the formation of regional variants of

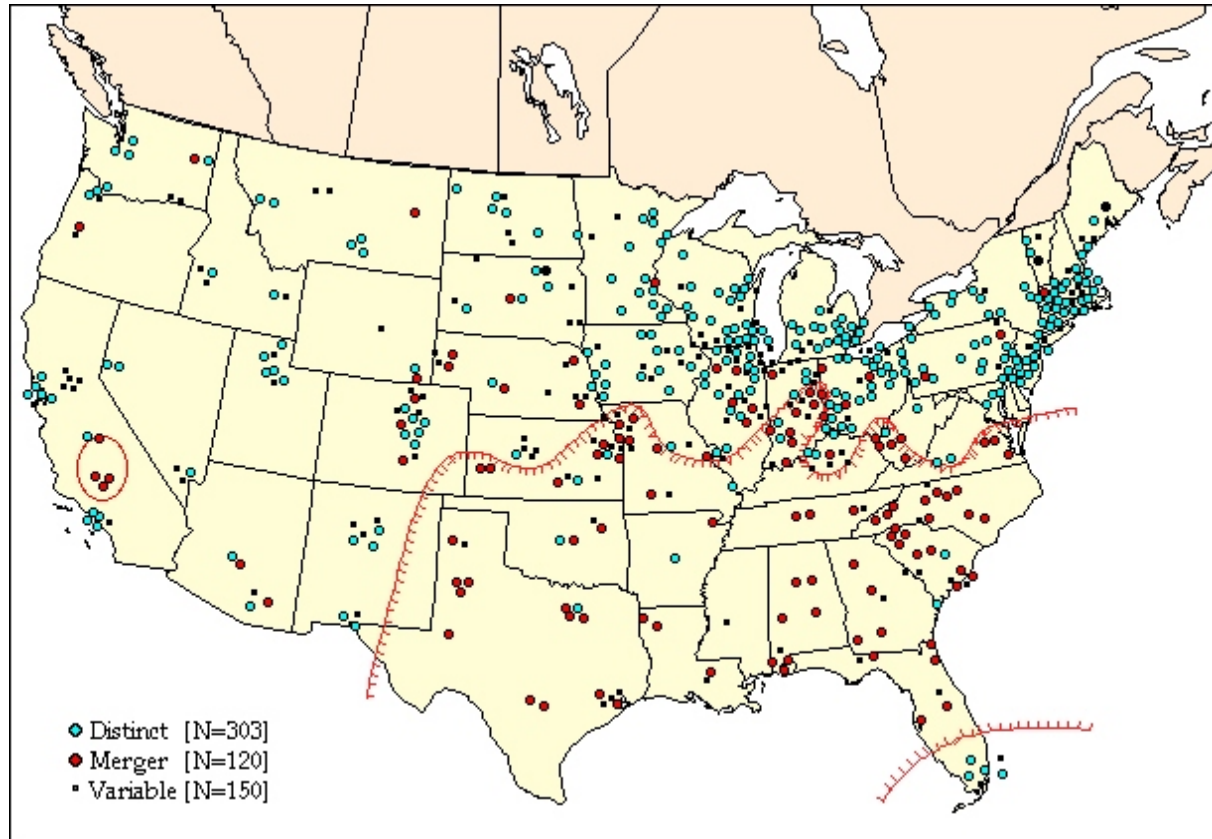
American English. Westward migration reflects to some extent the original colonial settlement patterns on the Atlantic seaboard. Contact with Native Americans and the later arrival of immigrants from other parts of Europe also contributed to distinct regional dialects.



These regions generalize from the geographic distribution of specific linguistic features. Labov's Phonological Atlas of North America shows how specific features are distributed. Here is a map of speakers that distinguish between the vowels in *cot* and *caught*.



Here is another map that shows how some speakers have merged the vowels in the words **pin**/**pen** and **him**/**hem**, but not in the words **pit**/**pet**. What is the conditioning environment?



The geographic distribution of linguistic features define **isoglosses**. We often find a **bundle of isoglosses** separating dialects.

#### Northern SAE

- pail/bucket (the 'i' indicates 'instead of')
- angleworm/earthworm
- pit/seed
- morning [mɔːnɪŋ] ≠ mourning [mɔːnɪŋ]
- greasy /s/, not /z/
- root /u/, not /ʊ/
- postvocalic /r/ less, e.g., barn [bɑːn], four [fɔː]

#### Midland English

- skillet/frying pan
- blinds/shades
- poke/paper sack
- keeps postvocalic /r/ and /θ/, e.g., with
- /a/ in frog, fog; /ɔ/ in dog
- redworm/earthworm
- pack/carry
- /a/ in write; not /ay/

## Southern English

loss of postvocalic /r/

tote/carry

snap beans/string beans

you all

/yuw/ in news, due

shucks/husks

might could/might be able to

loss of contrast between /I/ and /ɛ/ before nasals, e.g., pin vs. pen

metathesis [ækst] for asked

## Language & Gender

Even the title of this topic is tricky

Linguists traditionally use gender to refer to grammatical distinctions—masculine/feminine

Can look at language variation based on sex (language & sex?)

or sexually based social distinctions

but sex also denotes sexual activity which we won't examine

The file notes that a new field of gender studies has recently developed that focuses on the construction of gendered identities and emphasizes cultural practices.

So we use the term gender rather than sex.

See Prof. Gene Buckley's page on [language and gender](#).

The file notes that the link between cultural norms for behavior, including linguistic behavior, and gender is arbitrary

In Malagasy culture, indirect, deferential speech is highly valued

Malagasy men are silent in public confrontations, while Malagasy women express anger and criticism through direct, confrontational speech (Keenan 1974).

The opposite seems to be typical in Western Cultures where men take the lead in public speech.

There isn't a fixed linguistic behavior that is typical of all males or females.

Although male behavior is more highly valued in both societies

One issue we see here is the extent to which language merely reflects social distinctions or actively creates and perpetuates these distinctions

Linguists have long noted the presence of gender-based differences in languages

Some societies have different languages for men and women

Mary Haas (1944) examined men's and women's language in **Koasati** (Muskogean–Louisiana)  
Men and women used different verb forms:

women	men	
lakáw	lakáws	'He is lifting it'
mól	móls	'He is peeling it'
lakáwwilit	lakáwwilitʃ	'I lifted it'
lakáwtʃ	lakáwtʃ	'you are lifting it'
iskó		'He drank'
hí:č		'He is looking at it'

Question: Which is the base form? Do you add or subtract the /s/?

$\emptyset \rightarrow s / VC \_\_\_ \#$

Men and women used the form appropriate to their gender but had to understand the other form  
They would use it to quote speakers of the opposite sex  
As the language changed, young women began using men's forms

Haas proposed a classification of such gender differences in language:

	Speaker	Hearer
Type I	M	M or F
	F	M or F
Type II	M or F	M
	M or F	F
Type III	M	M
	M	F
	F	M
	F	F

Which type is Koasati?

Which type is Biloxi?

M → M	kikankó	'carry it'
M or F → F	kitkí	
F → M	kitaté	

Language differences aren't solely tied to gender distinctions; some Australian aboriginal languages mark other kinship relations, e.g. Dyirbal "mother-in-law" language (Dixon 1971)

Guwal "everyday" language  
Dyalŋuy "mother-in-law" language

Men used Dyalŋuy when speaking to mother-in-law; woman to father-in-law

The languages have the same grammar & phonology, but different vocabulary

Guwal		Dyalɲuy	
dʷambun	‘long wood grub’	dʷamuy	‘grub’ + color, habitat, behavior descriptions
bugulum	‘small round bark grub’		
mandidʷa	‘milky pine grub’		
gidʷa	‘candlenut tree grub’		
gaban	‘acacia tree grub’		

mother-in-law language has a quarter of the vocabulary of everyday language  
Unfortunately it is no longer used—neither is Dyirbal

Also find “brother-in-law” languages

How does gender affect language use in English?

Find women are more likely to produce words like *running* with final [ɪŋ] rather than with [ən]  
Trudgill’s (1974) study of speech in Norwich, England—Figure 1, p. 394.

Similar to a study by Fischer (1958) of [ɪŋ]/[ən] in 24 children  
Found [ɪŋ] use linked to gender, class, personality, mood and the specific word being used

	-ɪŋ	-ɪn	most formal	formal	informal
boys	5	7	-ɪŋ 38	33	24
girls	10	2	-ɪn 1	35	41

Used -ɪŋ with *hit, chew, swim*; not used with *criticize, correct, read*

These and other studies show that women, and girls, use prestige variants more often than men.

John Edwards (1979) found that listeners expect female speech to have more prestige features  
and male speech to have fewer prestige features

Edwards had adults in Dublin, Ireland listen to recordings of preadolescent children from  
working-class and middle class families

The adults identified the working-class boys as males, but were much worse at identifying the  
middle-class boys (doubled their error rates)

They identified the middle-class girls as females, but were much worse at identifying the  
working-class girls

The file doesn’t state whether the adults were working-class or middle-class—What do you think?

The generalization appears to be that women are more likely than men of the same social class to  
use standard, prestige linguistic forms

The File provides three explanations for this difference:

1. linguistic insecurity—but is it the men or the women who are insecure?
2. women's role in child rearing—can't account for women who don't have children—girls
3. labor market dynamics—can't account for differences between boys and girls

Ask class to identify gender-related linguistic features

Phonological

Have they noticed a difference in the use of [ɪŋ]/[ɪn]?

Lexical (Lakoff 1973)

female color terms—mauve, teal, lavender

adjectives—adorable, cute, charming, sweet

male topics—sports, cars, hardware

Verbal hedges

perhaps, maybe

Discourse—direct vs. indirect requests (Is there a difference between what men and women say?)

Open the window

Please open the window

Would you please open the window?

Could you open the window?

Do you think it's stuffy in here?

Should also note that English traditionally associates gender with certain occupations:

mailman, fireman, chairman

vs. letter carrier, firefighter, chair

Some terms still imply a single gender:

doctor, nurse, poet, prostitute

Use a marked form (an additional morpheme to signal the contrary gender)

female doctor, male nurse, poetess, male prostitute

The male term is typically the unmarked form

prince princess

actor actress

host hostess

heir heiress

The -ess suffix sometimes has other connotations:

governor governess (a “little” governor)

master mistress (another lover)

Put male term first in conjoined NPs

Mr. & Mrs., man & woman, husband & wife, Dick & Jane (exception aunt & uncle)

Do these distinctions reflect traditional expectations of female and male occupations and power?  
How would you test this theory?

Would eliminating gender inequalities in language help foster economic and social equality?

## **Language Attitudes**

Beliefs about language and gender demonstrate the power language can exert in the popular imagination. The linguist Dwight Bolinger wrote a book about this titled **Language, the Loaded Weapon**. See Prof. Gene Buckley's page on [language attitudes](#).

Language beliefs contribute to the cultural and political wars waged in the United States. See [James Crawford's](#) page on the history of language discrimination in the United States.

Linguists point to two lessons from this history:

1. Beliefs about language are not based on fact.
2. Beliefs about language have serious consequences.

## **African-American Vernacular English (AAVE)**

With this background we can examine the African-American variety of English. It became more widely known after the Oakland, CA school board planned to incorporate [Ebonics](#) (AAVE) into their curriculum in 1996.

The debate soon disintegrated into a political power struggle.

Linguists were appalled by the public's [ignorance](#) of basic linguistic research furthered by the mass media's dependency on sound bites rather than science.

The files point out two questions that come out of this debate:

1. Are AAVE varieties systematic and rule-governed like other languages?
2. Can an understanding of AAVE varieties help students acquire Standard American English?

It is a mistake to identify the use of AAVE with a single ethnic group. The term implies that all and only African Americans use AAVE.

There is as much variation in AAVE as in other varieties of English.

An 80-year-old will speak differently from a 13-year-old, and male AAVE speakers speak differently from female AAVE speakers

AAVE is also spoken by Hispanics and whites in inner cities

Find the influence of typical sociolinguistic factors in use of AAVE, i.e., age, socioeconomic status, gender, style and context.

Features of AAVE

Missing verb *to be* in present tense

She the first one started us off.

He fast in everything he do.

I know, but he wild, though.

You out the game.

Some educators, psychologists (speech therapists) treat missing *be* as a speech defect.

Actually very systematic.

BE deletion corresponds to contraction in SAE

He's fast ...    He fast ...

AAVE also has an habitual or invariant BE

SAE

The coffee is always cold.

Sometimes she is angry

She is late everyday

AAVE

The coffee always be cold

Sometimes she be angry

She be late everyday

Invariant BE marks an habitual or repeatable activity. SAE relies on an adverb.

Thus, AAVE has grammaticalized a lexical distinction in SAE.

It is possible to misuse invariant BE in AAVE:

\* He be working right now (not habitual)

\* He be my brother (not repeatable)=> He my brother

It is as hard to become fluent in AAVE as it is to become fluent in SAE

It is not sloppy, careless or defective speech.

The files also discuss several hypotheses about the origins of AAVE:

1. **Dialectologist View** From 1920s to 1940s dialectologists viewed AAVE as a regional variant of SAE. AAVE originated as a southern variety of English that spread northward through migration.

Migration accounted for the 'supraregional homogeneity' of AAVE.

2. **Creolist View** Creolists argued that AAVE originated as a pidgin language during the time of the slave trade with West Africa. It became the primary means of communication on slave plantations and underwent creolization, and later decreolization through contact with SAE. Gullah considered a remnant of the original English-based creole.

3. **Unified View** Combines both dialectologist and creolist explanations. AAVE contains features of a dialect of SAE, and remnants of a creole past.

AAVE Resources on the web:

- Charles J. Fillmore's look at the [Ebonics debate](#).
- William Labov's 1972 Atlantic Monthly article on [Black Intelligence](#).
- Peter L. Patrick's page on [African American English](#).
- Peter L. Patrick's list of [linguistic features](#) in AAVE.
- Peter L. Patrick's AAVE [bibliography](#).
- John R. Rickford's page on [creole origins](#).

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