



The Evolution of African American Vernacular in 20th Century Literature

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Abstract. This research paper examines the significance and impact of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in 20th-century literature. It traces the historical roots of African American Vernacular English from African oral traditions through slavery, segregation, and its emergence in literary movements like the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. The paper analyses the distinctive phonological, lexical, grammatical, and stylistic features of African American Vernacular English as showcased by key authors such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and Toni Morrison. Exploring the representation of African American Vernacular English in literature, the paper reflects on its role in providing authentic voices for African American characters, challenging stereotypes, and affirming cultural identity. It addresses criticisms and controversies surrounding its use, including debates on authenticity and the challenges of using African American Vernacular English in academic and literary contexts. Finally, the paper suggests avenues for future research, including the continued exploration of African American Vernacular English's influence on contemporary literature, its pedagogical implications, and its portrayal in media and popular culture. By studying African American Vernacular English in literature, this paper aims to highlight its enduring significance and contribute to a more inclusive understanding of language, culture, and identity in America.

Index Terms- African American Vernacular English, 20th-century literature, Cultural identity, Linguistic diversity, Representation in literature, Language and social consciousness, Literary criticism

I. Introduction

African American Vernacular English (AAVE), also known as Black English or Ebonics, is a distinctive dialect spoken primarily by African Americans. It encompasses unique linguistic features, including specific phonology, grammar, and vocabulary, which distinguish it from Standard American English (SAE). The significance of African American Vernacular English lies not only in its linguistic



uniqueness but also in its cultural and historical context. African American Vernacular English has been shaped by the experiences of African Americans, reflecting their history of slavery, segregation, and ongoing struggles for equality. Its evolution showcases the resilience and creativity of the African American community in preserving their cultural identity through language. The evolution of African American Vernacular English in 20th-century literature is a testament to its dynamic nature and its role in African American cultural expression. Early in the century, writers such as Paul Laurence Dunbar and Zora Neale Hurston used African American Vernacular English to provide authentic voices to their characters, capturing the lived experiences of African Americans. Dunbar's poetry, including works like "Lyrics of Lowly Life," often incorporated African American Vernacular English to convey the richness of black life. Hurston's novel "Their Eyes Were Watching God" is notable for its use of African American Vernacular English, which adds depth to its characters and setting.

In the mid-20th century, the Harlem Renaissance marked a significant period for African American literature, with African American Vernacular English playing a central role. Langston Hughes, a key figure in the Renaissance, used African American Vernacular English in his poetry and prose to celebrate black culture and critique social inequalities. His work "The Weary Blues" vividly captures the rhythms and nuances of black speech. The latter half of the 20th century saw the rise of the Black Arts Movement, which further emphasized the importance of African American Vernacular English in literature. Writers such as Amiri Baraka and Nikki Giovanni embraced African American Vernacular English as a means of cultural expression and political resistance. Baraka's play "Dutchman" and Giovanni's poetry collections, including "Black Feeling, Black Talk," showcase the power of African American Vernacular English to convey the urgency of the black experience. Contemporary authors like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker continued this tradition, using African American Vernacular English to explore complex themes of identity, community, and resistance. Morrison's "Beloved" and Walker's "The Colour Purple" are profound examples of how African American Vernacular English can enrich narrative voice and authenticity. This paper will explore the definition and significance of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and its evolution in 20th-century literature. It will examine how early 20th-century writers like Paul Laurence Dunbar and Zora Neale Hurston used African American Vernacular English to depict authentic African American experiences. The impact of the Harlem Renaissance, with figures such as Langston Hughes, will be discussed, highlighting how African American Vernacular English was utilized to celebrate black culture and address social issues. The influence of the Black Arts Movement, with contributions from Amiri Baraka and Nikki Giovanni, will be analysed to understand African American Vernacular English's role in political and cultural expression. Finally, the paper will explore the works of contemporary authors like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, demonstrating how African American Vernacular English continues to enrich literary narratives and affirm African American identity.



II. Historical Context of African American Vernacular

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) finds its roots deeply embedded in African oral traditions. Before the transatlantic slave trade, African societies had rich linguistic and cultural practices characterized by oral storytelling, communal participation, and the use of proverbs, songs, and chants. These oral traditions were not merely for entertainment but served as essential tools for preserving history, imparting knowledge, and reinforcing social norms. When Africans were forcibly brought to America, they carried these traditions with them. Despite the harsh conditions of slavery, they continued to pass down their oral practices, which began to blend with the English spoken by their captors, creating a unique linguistic hybrid that laid the groundwork for what would become African American Vernacular English. The period of slavery had a profound impact on the development of African American Vernacular English. Enslaved Africans were thrown into environments where their native languages were suppressed, and they had to learn English quickly to communicate with both their captors and fellow slaves from different linguistic backgrounds. This necessity led to the creation of a creolized form of English, incorporating elements of African languages in terms of grammar, syntax, and phonology. Features such as the use of double negatives, the absence of the copula (e.g., "He going" instead of "He is going"), and the unique sound patterns can be traced back to these African influences. After the abolition of slavery, the era of segregation continued to shape African American Vernacular English. African Americans were often isolated in separate neighbourhoods and schools, leading to the reinforcement and preservation of their distinct linguistic patterns. During this time, African American Vernacular English was a vital tool for fostering a sense of community and cultural identity amidst systemic oppression. It served as a means of covert communication and resistance, allowing African Americans to navigate and survive in a hostile environment.

The Harlem Renaissance, spanning the 1920s and 1930s, marked a significant moment for the recognition and celebration of African American Vernacular English in literature. This cultural movement saw a flourishing of African American art, music, and literature, centred in the Harlem neighbourhood of New York City. Writers and poets of this era began to intentionally incorporate African American Vernacular English into their works, using it to capture the authentic voices and experiences of black Americans. One of the pioneers in this regard was Zora Neale Hurston. In her novel "Their Eyes Were Watching God," Hurston employed African American Vernacular English to bring her characters to life and to faithfully represent the speech of rural African Americans in the South. Hurston's work was groundbreaking in its unapologetic use of African American Vernacular English, challenging the prevailing notion that Standard American English was the only valid literary language. Langston Hughes, another central figure of the Harlem Renaissance, used African American Vernacular English extensively in his poetry and prose. In "The Weary Blues," Hughes captures the rhythms of black speech and music, blending them seamlessly into his literary work. Hughes believed that African American Vernacular English was a crucial expression of black identity and sought to



elevate it within the broader American literary tradition. The use of African American Vernacular English during the Harlem Renaissance was not merely a stylistic choice but a political statement. Writers like Hughes and Hurston were asserting the validity and richness of black culture and language in a society that often sought to marginalize and devalue it. By incorporating African American Vernacular English into their works, they were challenging racial stereotypes and affirming the intellectual and artistic contributions of African Americans. The Harlem Renaissance thus played a crucial role in legitimizing African American Vernacular English as a literary language, paving the way for future generations of writers. This period demonstrated that African American Vernacular English was not just a dialect of English but a vibrant and essential part of African American cultural heritage. The legacy of the Harlem Renaissance continues to influence contemporary African American literature, where African American Vernacular English remains a powerful tool for storytelling and cultural expression.

III. Characteristics of African American Vernacular in 20th Century Literature

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) exhibits distinct phonological characteristics that set it apart from Standard American English (SAE). One notable feature is the pronunciation of the "th" sound. In African American Vernacular English, the "th" in words like "this" and "that" often becomes "d," resulting in pronunciations like "dis" and "dat." The "th" sound in words like "think" and "thanks" may be pronounced as "t" or "f," resulting in "tink" or "fanks." Another phonological aspect of African American Vernacular English is consonant cluster reduction, where consonant clusters at the end of words are simplified. For example, the word "test" might be pronounced as "tes," and "hand" might become "han." This feature is prominently displayed in works like Zora Neale Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God," where characters' speech authentically reflects these phonological traits. African American Vernacular English also includes unique lexical items—words and phrases that are either entirely different from those in Standard American English or used with distinct meanings. Some common African American Vernacular English terms have even crossed over into mainstream American English, often through music, especially hip-hop. Terms like "cool," "bad" (meaning good or impressive), and "crib" (meaning home) originated in African American Vernacular English. In literature, these lexical features serve to provide authenticity to characters and settings. For instance, in Richard Wright's "Native Son," the use of terms like "Jim crow" and "hustle" helps paint a vivid picture of the protagonist's environment and social context. These lexical choices enrich the narrative, grounding it in the lived reality of African Americans. The grammatical features of African American Vernacular English are distinctive and systematic. One prominent grammatical feature is the use of the habitual "be." In African American Vernacular English, "be" is used to indicate a habitual action, as in the sentence "She be working late," meaning she regularly works late. This differs from Standard American English, where the habitual aspect is often implied by context rather than specific grammar. Another characteristic is the omission of the copula in certain contexts.



For example, instead of saying "She is nice," one might say "She nice" in African American Vernacular English. This feature is systematic and governed by grammatical rules, rather than being random or indicative of poor language skills. Double negatives are also a common grammatical feature in African American Vernacular English, used for emphasis. In Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye," characters frequently use double negatives, such as "I don't know nothing about that," to add emphasis and convey deeper emotional layers. Stylistically, African American Vernacular English in literature often involves a rich use of metaphor, simile, and other rhetorical devices rooted in African oral traditions. These stylistic features enhance the expressiveness and emotional depth of the narrative. For instance, in Langston Hughes's poetry, such as in "The Weary Blues," the use of rhythm and musicality reflects the oral tradition and the influence of jazz and blues music. Call-and-response, a feature originating from African communal activities, is another stylistic element seen in African American Vernacular English. This technique is used in narratives to create a dynamic, interactive dialogue that engages readers. In Alice Walker's "The Colour Purple," the epistolary format between Celie and her sister Nettie often employs a call-and-response pattern, enhancing the emotional connection between the characters and the readers. Storytelling in African American Vernacular English often involves a conversational tone, direct address, and a focus on communal experiences. This can be seen in Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man," where the narrator's voice is deeply personal and direct, drawing readers into the immediacy of his experiences. Overall, the characteristics of African American Vernacular English in 20th-century literature are multifaceted, encompassing phonological, lexical, grammatical, and stylistic features. These elements work together to create rich, authentic, and deeply resonant narratives that reflect the African American experience. Through the works of authors like Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, Langston Hughes, and Alice Walker, African American Vernacular English has not only been preserved but celebrated as a vital part of American literary heritage.

IV. Key Authors and Works

Langston Hughes is renowned for his pioneering use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in poetry, which played a crucial role in shaping the Harlem Renaissance and beyond. His poetry captures the rhythms, cadences, and spirit of African American life, often drawing on the oral traditions of blues and jazz music. In works like "The Weary Blues" and "Montage of a Dream Deferred," Hughes masterfully employs African American Vernacular English to evoke the struggles, joys, and aspirations of black Americans. Hughes's use of African American Vernacular English in poetry serves multiple purposes. It authentically reflects the language and experiences of African Americans, providing a voice for the marginalized and oppressed. It challenges the dominance of Standard American English (SAE) in literature, asserting the validity and richness of African American Vernacular English as a literary language. Through his poetry, Hughes celebrates the beauty and resilience of black culture while also critiquing the social injustices faced by African Americans. Zora Neale Hurston is celebrated for her authentic



representation of African American Vernacular in fiction, particularly in her seminal work "Their Eyes Were Watching God." Set in rural Florida, the novel vividly portrays the lives of African Americans in the early 20th century, capturing their speech, customs, and folk traditions. Hurston's use of African American Vernacular English in dialogue and narration creates a rich and immersive reading experience, transporting readers into the world of her characters. In "Their Eyes Were Watching God," Hurston demonstrates a deep understanding and appreciation of African American Vernacular English as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon. The novel's protagonist, Janie Crawford, speaks in a distinctively Southern African American Vernacular English dialect, which reflects her upbringing and social milieu. Through Janie's voice, Hurston explores themes of identity, love, and self-discovery within the context of African American life in the Jim Crow South. Hurston's portrayal of African American Vernacular English in "Their Eyes Were Watching God" has earned praise for its authenticity and literary merit. By centring African American Vernacular English in her fiction, Hurston not only preserves a vital aspect of African American culture but also challenges prevailing stereotypes and misconceptions about black speech and identity.

Richard Wright's works are marked by a nuanced exploration of African American Vernacular in narratives of oppression and resistance. In novels like "Native Son" and "Black Boy," Wright depicts the harsh realities of racism, poverty, and violence faced by African Americans in the early 20th century. Through his characters' voices, Wright captures the cadences and idioms of African American Vernacular English, grounding his narratives in the lived experiences of his protagonists. Wright's use of African American Vernacular English serves to humanize his characters and convey the depth of their emotions and struggles. In "Native Son," for example, the protagonist, Bigger Thomas, speaks in a raw and unfiltered African American Vernacular English dialect, reflecting his alienation and anger in a society that denies him dignity and opportunity. Through Bigger's voice, Wright exposes the dehumanizing effects of racism and classism, challenging readers to confront the systemic injustices that shape African American lives. Wright's exploration of African American Vernacular English in narratives of oppression has had a profound impact on American literature and social consciousness. His works continue to be studied and celebrated for their unflinching portrayal of the African American experience and their powerful use of language as a tool for social critique and change. Toni Morrison is renowned for her masterful incorporation of African American Vernacular into modernist literature, earning her acclaim as one of the greatest American novelists of the 20th century. In novels like "Beloved," "Song of Solomon," and "The Bluest Eye," Morrison skilfully blends African American Vernacular English with elements of magical realism, myth, and folklore to create haunting and lyrical narratives that explore the complexities of race, identity, and memory. Morrison's use of African American Vernacular English is integral to her exploration of African American culture and consciousness. Through her characters' voices, she gives expression to the collective trauma and resilience of the black community, illuminating the ways in which language shapes and reflects individual and collective experience. In "Beloved," for instance, the character of Sethe speaks in



a distinctive African American Vernacular English dialect, which conveys the pain and resilience of her journey from slavery to freedom. Morrison's incorporation of African American Vernacular English in modernist literature has earned her numerous accolades, including the Nobel Prize in Literature. Her works continue to be celebrated for their innovative use of language, their profound insights into the human condition, and their enduring relevance to contemporary discussions of race, identity, and social justice.

V. Influence and Legacy

The influence of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) on mainstream literature and language has been profound, shaping the way writers approach narrative voice, dialogue, and cultural representation. African American Vernacular English has enriched mainstream literature by providing authenticity, diversity, and a unique perspective on the American experience. Authors like Mark Twain, William Faulkner, and Flannery O'Connor incorporated elements of African American speech patterns and vernacular into their works, influenced by the oral traditions of the South. Twain's "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" features characters like Jim, whose dialogue reflects African American Vernacular English, contributing to the novel's realism and social commentary. In contemporary literature, writers like James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, and Toni Morrison have further expanded the use of African American Vernacular English in mainstream literary fiction. Morrison's "Song of Solomon" and "Beloved" are notable examples where African American Vernacular English is used to authentically depict African American characters and communities, challenging readers to engage with diverse linguistic and cultural perspectives. Outside of literature, African American Vernacular English has also left its mark on mainstream language, with terms and expressions originating from African American Vernacular English becoming integral parts of everyday speech. From slang terms like "cool" and "hip" to grammatical structures like "ain't," African American Vernacular English has enriched and diversified the English language, demonstrating its lasting impact on American culture.

In contemporary literature, African American Vernacular continues to play a significant role in reflecting the diversity and complexity of African American experiences. Writers like Jesmyn Ward, Colson Whitehead, and Ta-Nehisi Coates employ African American Vernacular English in their works to explore themes of race, identity, and social justice. Ward's "Sing, Unburied, Sing" and Whitehead's "The Underground Railroad" feature characters who speak in authentic African American Vernacular English, allowing readers to connect with the cultural nuances and linguistic richness of the African American community. Coates's non-fiction works, such as "Between the World and Me," also incorporate elements of African American Vernacular English, reflecting the author's personal experiences and perspectives on race in America. The continuation of African American Vernacular English in contemporary literature serves to keep alive the traditions of African American storytelling and cultural expression. It provides a platform for marginalized voices and fosters greater understanding and empathy across racial and cultural divides.



African American Vernacular English plays a crucial role in shaping cultural identity and social consciousness within the African American community and beyond. It serves as a marker of cultural authenticity and solidarity, connecting individuals to their shared heritage and experiences. Through literature, music, and other forms of artistic expression, African American Vernacular English has become a powerful tool for self-expression, resistance, and empowerment. From the poetry of Langston Hughes to the rap lyrics of Tupac Shakur, African American Vernacular English has been used to articulate the joys, struggles, and aspirations of African Americans, asserting their agency and humanity in the face of oppression. African American Vernacular English challenges dominant narratives and stereotypes about African Americans, highlighting the diversity and complexity of black linguistic and cultural practices. It fosters a sense of pride and resilience within the community, affirming the value of their language and heritage. In broader society, African American Vernacular English serves as a bridge between communities, fostering cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. As African American Vernacular English continues to influence mainstream culture and language, it prompts conversations about race, power, and representation, contributing to greater social awareness and inclusivity.

VI. Criticism and Controversies

One of the main criticisms surrounding the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in literature is the debate over authenticity and representation. Some argue that authors who are not native speakers of African American Vernacular English may misrepresent or stereotype African American speech patterns, leading to inaccurate or caricatured portrayals of black characters. For instance, in "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" by Mark Twain, the character Jim speaks in a dialect that reflects African American Vernacular English. While Twain's intentions were to realistically depict the speech of the time, critics argue that the portrayal can reinforce negative stereotypes and perpetuate racist attitudes. The use of African American Vernacular English by non-black authors has sparked debates about cultural appropriation and who has the authority to represent African American experiences authentically. Critics argue that without a deep understanding of the cultural and linguistic nuances of African American Vernacular English, non-black authors may inadvertently contribute to harmful stereotypes or misinterpretations. Using African American Vernacular in academic and literary contexts poses several challenges, including issues of comprehension, standardization, and respect for cultural authenticity. In academic settings, students and scholars may struggle to understand texts written in African American Vernacular English if they are not familiar with its linguistic features. African American Vernacular English is often stigmatized as "incorrect" or "uneducated" English, leading to resistance or dismissal in literary and educational circles. Critics argue that this attitude perpetuates linguistic discrimination and overlooks the rich cultural heritage embedded within African American Vernacular English. Authors who choose to use African American Vernacular English in their works face the challenge of balancing authenticity with readability and accessibility for a broader audience. Some worry that heavy reliance



on African American Vernacular English may alienate readers who are not familiar with its nuances, potentially limiting the reach and impact of the literature.

In response to criticisms, authors and scholars have advocated for a more nuanced understanding of African American Vernacular and its role in literature and society. They argue that African American Vernacular English is a legitimate and valuable form of communication, deserving of respect and recognition. Writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker have defended their use of African American Vernacular English in literature, emphasizing its authenticity and cultural significance. They assert that African American Vernacular English is not a deviation from Standard American English but a distinct linguistic system with its own rules and expressive power. In academic circles, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of linguistic diversity and the need to include African American Vernacular English in literary studies and language education. Scholars like Geneva Smitherman ("Talkin and Testifying: The Language of Black America") and John Baugh ("Beyond Ebonics: Linguistic Pride and Racial Prejudice") have contributed to the discourse by highlighting the historical and cultural roots of African American Vernacular English and challenging linguistic prejudices. Educators have also begun to incorporate African American Vernacular English into curriculum and pedagogy, recognizing its role in affirming cultural identity and fostering linguistic empowerment among African American students. Overall, the evolving discourse on language diversity acknowledges the complexities and challenges surrounding the use of African American Vernacular in literature and academia. By engaging in respectful dialogue and promoting greater understanding of linguistic diversity, scholars, writers, and educators aim to overcome criticisms and embrace the richness of African American Vernacular English as a vital component of American culture and literature.

VII. Conclusion

Throughout this discussion, we have explored the significance of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in 20th-century literature. We dealt its historical roots, evolution, characteristics, key authors and works, influence, criticisms, and controversies. We examined how African American Vernacular English emerged from African oral traditions, was shaped by slavery and segregation, and found expression in literature during movements like the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. We discussed the distinct phonological, lexical, grammatical, and stylistic features of African American Vernacular English, exemplified by authors like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and Toni Morrison. African American Vernacular English holds immense significance in 20th-century literature as a vehicle for authentic storytelling, cultural expression, and resistance. It provided a voice for African American experiences, challenging dominant narratives and stereotypes while affirming the richness and complexity of black culture and identity. Authors who incorporated African American Vernacular English into their works not only preserved linguistic heritage but also brought marginalized voices to the forefront, contributing to a more inclusive and diverse literary landscape. African American Vernacular English enriched narratives



with its rhythms, nuances, and depth, capturing the essence of African American life in all its joys, struggles, and triumphs. Future research on African American Vernacular in literature could further explore its impact on contemporary works, including its intersection with digital media, music, and performance art. Investigating how African American Vernacular English continues to evolve and adapt in response to social, cultural, and technological changes would provide valuable insights into its enduring relevance. Scholars could delve deeper into the pedagogical implications of African American Vernacular English, exploring how educators can better incorporate linguistic diversity into language instruction and literacy development. Research into the portrayal of African American Vernacular English in media and popular culture would also shed light on its broader societal influence and representation. By continuing to study and celebrate African American Vernacular in literature, we honour its legacy and contribute to a more inclusive understanding of language, culture, and identity in America and beyond.

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