

OLGA O'TOOLE

JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY IN KRAKÓW  
FACULTY OF PHILOLOGY  
CHAIR IN ENGLISH LINGUISTICS  
E-MAIL: VIOLGA\_OTOOLE@YAHOO.COM

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## **Ethnolect and Attitudes in Chicagoland: An Analysis of African American Chicagoan Attitudes to AAVE**

### **ABSTRACT**

In the field of ethnolect study, African American Vernacular English and Chicano English are known for their great significance in indexing and building identities. The Chicago and Chicago Northwest Suburb communities in particular, however, have seen little methodological linguistic study with concern to language attitudes. The following work is an analysis of interviews that took place in the Chicago area with members of the African American community. Although research on language attitudes in minority communities has already been carried out,<sup>1</sup> not much has been done as far as language attitude research within the African American community in Chicago. The interviews regarded the attitudes of in-group members to their respective ethnolects and provides an analysis of aspects of their perceptions concerning the varieties associated with their ethnic group. The interviews followed the direct approach to language attitude studies and consisted of open questions.<sup>2</sup> In order to elicit responses from each speaker concerning the varieties they speak, questions of discrimination, attitudes, and perception, especially in the context of employment, were touched upon in the conversations with each participant.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Ronkin, H. E. Karn, *Mock Ebonics: Linguistic Racism in Parodies of Ebonics on the Internet*, "Journal of Sociolinguistics" 1999, 3 (3); T. Kristiansen, *Investigating language and Space: Experimental Techniques Space*, [in:] *Language and Space: An International Handbook of Linguistic Variation*, eds. P. Auer, J. E. Schmidt, Berlin 2010.

<sup>2</sup> P. Garrett, *Attitudes to Language*, Cambridge 2010.

## KEYWORDS

sociolinguistics, language attitudes, ethnolects, AAVE, identity, code-switching

## Introduction

Language attitudes have seen much study,<sup>3</sup> and the question of identity is one that has become increasingly prevalent in the social sciences since the 1950s. The subject continues to attract the attention of researchers today.<sup>4</sup> As Bucholtz and Hall state, identity is “the product rather than the source of linguistic and other semiotic practices,” making it more of a socio-cultural phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> This approach to language and identity study is also applicable with regards to ethnic minorities and their heritage languages.<sup>6</sup>

According to the Freidberg Institute for Advanced Studies, there are over “30 million working-class African Americans throughout North America” that speak African American Vernacular English, “with heavy concentrations of speakers in metropolitan areas such as New York, Philadelphia, Washington, DC, Chicago, Detroit, Houston and Los Angeles.”<sup>7</sup> The African American population makes up over 30 percent of Chicago’s residents, with the African American Community being hit the hardest by a lack of job availability and poverty.<sup>8</sup>

Within the study of language varieties, ethnolects<sup>9</sup> have been categorized as having to do with ethnicity, and have hence been made distinct from other types of lects. An ethnolect has been defined as “varieties of a language that mark speakers as members of ethnic groups who originally used another language or distinctive variety.”<sup>10</sup> African American Vernacular English is an ethnic variety that has seen much repression on the side of educators and governing bodies.<sup>11</sup> What is now broadly known as African American English, and more narrowly as African American Vernacular English, has undergone many changes in name

<sup>3</sup> C. Myers-Scotton, *Multiple Voices: An Introduction to Bilingualism*, New Jersey 2005; P. Garrett, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> J. Edwards, *Language and Identity: An Introduction*, Cambridge 2009, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> M. Bucholtz, K. Hall, *Identity and Interaction: A Sociocultural linguistic approach*, “Discourse studies” 2005, (7) 4–5, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> C. Fought, *Language and Ethnicity*, Cambridge 2006.

<sup>7</sup> W. Wolfram, *Rural African American Vernacular English*, “The Electronic World Atlas of Varieties of English”, Leipzig 2013.

<sup>8</sup> K. Hendricks et al., *A Tale of Three Cities: The State of Racial Justice*, Chicago 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Also referred to as *ethnic varieties* P. Eckert, *Where do Ethnolects Stop?*, “International Journal of Bilingualism” 2008, 12 (25), p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> M. Clyne, *Lingua Franca and Ethnolects in Europe and Beyond*, “Sociolinguistica” 2000, 14, p. 86.

<sup>11</sup> J. Rickford, *Using the Vernacular to Teach the Standard*, [in:] *Ebonics in the Urban Education Debate*, eds. D. Ramirez, T. Wiley, G. de Klerk, E. Lee, Long Beach 2005.

since the beginnings of mass undertakings of study on the variety in the 1960s. The names, as such, refer to the variety conditioned by social climate and spoken by working class members of the African American community. Green<sup>12</sup> provides a list of the terms that includes, but is not limited to Negro dialect, Negro English, Black English, Black Vernacular English, Afro American English, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and Ebonics. Although there has been a general consensus to referring to the variety as both AAVE and Ebonics, AAVE is considered the more politically correct term because of the connotations that the term Ebonics carries.<sup>13</sup>

As Wardhaugh states "linguists have noticed how uniform [African American urban speech] is in many respects."<sup>14</sup> Although AAVE has been categorized as a variety in its own right due to its being characterized by a uniform structure, its own grammatical system and lexicon, negative sentiment towards the African American community continues to reach the linguistic sphere. AAVE is known for being perceived as slang, as well as its value in indexing pop-cultural awareness.<sup>15</sup> Despite the work of linguists, the social perception of AAVE has not seen much change since the first studies of AAVE claimed its validity as a variety.<sup>16</sup>

With regards to linguistic varieties, the tools through which identity is communicated stand as significant manifestations of attitudes towards certain languages. Because minority ethnolects are what are known as *marked lects*, a concept used "to describe various polarities within language systems"<sup>17</sup> they diverge from what is considered the norm, and many times have a social stigma attached to them. Some varieties are defined as *unmarked* varieties, as they are perceived as a norm within groups of linguistic varieties, due to their higher prestige, whereas marked categories are those which stand outside of socially dominant categories.<sup>18</sup> Some examples of marked lects might be varieties of ethnolects and regiolects, like Chicano English or Southern English.

<sup>12</sup> L. Green, *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*, Cambridge 2002, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> M. Ronkin, H. E. Karn, op. cit.; M. Bucholtz, *Sociolinguistic Nostalgia and the Authentication of Identity*, "Journal of Sociolinguistics" 2003, 7 (3); J. Rickford, op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> R. Wardaugh, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, Oxford 2006, p. 342.

<sup>15</sup> E. Chun, *Taking the Mike: Performances of Everyday Identities and Ideologies at a US High School*, "Proceedings of the Thirteenth Annual Symposium About Language and Society", 2005; J. Rickford, op. cit.; W. Labov, *Unendangered Dialect, Endangered People: The Case of African American Vernacular English*, "Transforming Anthropology" 2010, No. 18 (1).

<sup>16</sup> R. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology and Discrimination in the United States*, New York 1997.

<sup>17</sup> C. Myers-Scotton, *Codes and Consequences: Choosing Linguistic Varieties*, Oxford 1998, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem.

The use of *marked* language is socially manifested in the act of *code-switching*,<sup>19</sup> as well, which can be used as a tool for the negotiation of identity.<sup>20</sup> Code-switching is the occurrence of a verbal action that “creates communicative and social meaning.”<sup>21</sup> The act of code-switching does not only negotiate identity, but also functions as a marker of positive attitudes of speakers towards the language or variety in use.<sup>22</sup> Study of code-switching has been carried out in the context of bilingual individuals and communities, as well as that of bidialectal speakers.<sup>23</sup>

The functional role of code-switching will be important in analyzing its reflection of language attitudes, as the actual role that switching from Standard English to AAVE is significant, if it occurs. Here, the functional role is seen as that of community building and the expression of identity.<sup>24</sup> The analysis will look, in particular, at the attitudes of those in the Chicago African American community towards AAVE as a variety. The importance of understanding such attitudes is due to the rise in racial hate crimes and an overall need for the understanding of how racial bias has fueled a rejection of markers of blackness, which is heavily associated with being “angry or criminal.” The present study aims to investigate whether the same attitudes are felt by those in the African American community, themselves.

## 1. Attitudes

Crystal defines language attitudes quite simply, saying that they are “the feelings people have about their own language or the language of others.”<sup>25</sup> Speakers of minority dialects and other languages in the United States are oftentimes faced with the feeling that they have to learn Standard English in order to have the same opportunities as others.<sup>26</sup> Negative sentiment towards minority lects does not only take place in groups where varieties of high esteem are spoken, but also among speakers of minority lects. There are several methods of measuring

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<sup>19</sup> Code-switching exists in many forms, including inter-sentential code-switching, metaphorical code-switching and situational code-switching and is divided into two main categories, functional and formal code-switching (J. Holmes, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed, Essex 2008).

<sup>20</sup> C. Fought, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> P. Auer, *Code Switching in Conversation: Language, Interaction and Identity*, Adingdon-on-Thames 1999, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>23</sup> C. Fought, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> C. Hoffman, *An Introduction to Bilingualism*, London 1991.

<sup>25</sup> D. Crystal, *English as a Global Language*, Cambridge 1997, p. 215.

<sup>26</sup> J. Milroy, L. Milroy, *Authority in Language: Investigating Standard English*, New York 2002; T. Crowley, *Standard English and the Politics of Language*, London 2003.

language attitudes,<sup>27</sup> and for the purpose of the study, a direct approach, in this case the interview method in questionnaire format, was chosen.<sup>28</sup>

The interviews that took place were conducted with a goal of reaching conclusions about the attitudes of members of the Chicago African American community towards the languages that their ethnic group is associated with. The assumption was that despite the fact that much negative sentiment is directed at AAVE, ties African American heritage propels people of the community to use AAVE rather than reject it. The study was motivated by a need to discuss the attitudes towards AAVE as a variety, especially surrounding the racial hate crimes committed against African Americans in the United States around the time.

## 2. Methods

The analysis has been divided into sections which correlate with the order of the questions asked throughout the course of the interview. At the end of each section, a table presenting the categorization of the attitudes of the study's participants has been provided, which represents the material described. The first section deals with the categorization of AAVE by those interviewed, the second section deals with the question of identity with regards to AAVE, the section that follows regards the issue of code-switching and if it was deemed necessary by the speakers, the final part of the analysis consists of a discussion of the issue of employability and how the participants measured the effect of AAVE on employment.

The interviews were done over the course of two months, from July to August 2014, and ten people were interviewed. The full list of questions used during the interviews, as well as the recordings may be found as an attachment in the appendices (Appendix A). The interviews were carried out in an environment comfortable and convenient for the interviewee. Seven of the participants were female, and three of them were male, and they ranged from between 28 to 51 years of age. Approximately half of the interviews took place at the UCAN Chicago South office in Southside Chicago in the state of Illinois. This area of the city has a large African American population and is well-known for the gang activity that takes place. UCAN is an organization which works to support both youth and adults who have suffered trauma. The organization provides education to families entering foster care and works with troubled youth to put them on the right path for their futures and oftentimes helps them begin to receive an education.

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<sup>27</sup> Methods of measuring language attitudes include indirect form of analyses, such as matched and verbal guise techniques. Other techniques consist of direct forms of measurement, such as interviews and surveys conducted among speakers, as well as folklinguistic approaches (Garrett, op. cit.).

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem.

The interviews were not conducted solely in the city of Chicago, and therefore the area in which all of the interviews occurred will be collectively referred to as the “Chicago area”. This includes the Northwest suburbs, where cities like Palatine, Evanston and Schaumburg can be found. Some of the people interviewed hail from the Chicago suburbs, and have resided there their whole lives, whereas others come from the “inner city” and the Southside Chicago. A table of the participants has been provided below.

Tab. 1. Participants

PARTICIPANTS					
Male	Age	location	Female	Age	location
Fred	39	Southside Chicago, IL	Rheba	28	Southside Chicago, IL
Lee Roe	41	Southside Chicago, IL	Lashonda	34	Southside Chicago, IL
Darryl	51	Southside Chicago, IL	Angel	36	Evanston, IL
			Karen	43	Southside Chicago, IL
			Mary	43	Southside Chicago, IL
			MichaelAnn	49	Southside Chicago, IL
			Petrina	47	Palatine, IL

Source: own work.

Permission was given by each person interviewed to use his or her first name in the following work, and therefore no pseudo names will be used for any of the participants. Most of those interviewed were of a middle class standing, although all of the participants came from a lower-class to lower-middle class background.

The direct approach to the study of language attitudes entails using interviews or surveys to measure speaker attitudes,<sup>29</sup> where in the case of the present studies, solely interviews were used to come to conclusions. One of the first questions the participants were asked was what languages they spoke. Then they were asked what their thoughts on AAVE were, where I referred to it as AAVE, or Ebonics. The purpose of the question was to measure reactions and determine the participants’ categorizations of the term. Although the transcribed material represents over eight hours of audio recordings, selections of the transcriptions have been made for the purpose of the paper.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem.

### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1. IN-GROUP MEMBER ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE STATUS OF AAVE

The initial question of what language each participant spoke led to a discussion on the subject of AAVE and whether or not they considered it a variety. Eight of the participants referred to the use of AAVE as “slang” or “improper English.” What is interesting, however, is that not all participants displayed negative sentiment towards AAVE. Frank’s initial response to being asked about the languages he spoke was that he spoke English. However, when asked again if he spoke any other languages, he responded that he spoke AAVE.

Fred: Um...Ebonics (1) slang.

Fred not only expressed the fact that he considers himself a speaker AAVE, but also said that he supported it as a language with strong ties to his African American heritage. Fred also underlined the importance of using AAVE with his children.

Karen was another participant to consider African American Vernacular English a language in its own right. Despite the fact that she overtly called it slang, while sometimes using the term Ebonics, she expressed a clear opinion of what she thought of AAVE:

Karen: I: do um if that i:s what someone grew up with culturally (.) then to me it is considered a sla:ng (.) slang is a language (2) just like if you wanna go even further like with texting (2) uh people are using OMG (/ouem'dgi/) and all of this different fo:rm of communication to me: it eventually is gonna become a way of communication (.) I mean it is a way of communication but it's gonna be more common commonly u:sed

This opinion, however, the one that favors the view of African American Vernacular English as a language or variety of its own, was not one that was expressed by only two of the participants. The eight other participants were hesitant in considering themselves to be bidialectal speakers of English, like Rheba, who referred to African American Vernacular English as “improper” and a type of speech not fit for the workplace. Some of the participants, such as Rheba and Mary, discussed their experiences with needing to improve their English.

Rheba: I've learned that I had to perfect my speech over time=  
meaning that (1) in academics  
and even when I was at Argo (.) that's when I actually learned how to actually (.) y'know (.)  
speak proper (.) and talk y'know

Rheba's reference to standard, academic English as “proper” is indicative of the sentiment that African American English is slang and not even a valid form of

English. She also refers to AAVE as slang when asked about what language she speaks with friends and family in the Southside:

Rheba: um (2) just (2) slang (.) that's like the norm.

The fact that she speaks what she refers to as slang with her family indicates a quite blatant linguistic division between members of what might be considered the "academic" or "white-collar" world and "home" in the Southside. Rheba is not the only one who sees African American Vernacular English as "improper" English. Mary, a 43-year-old employee at UCAN, is a prime example of someone who does not necessarily consider African American English to be a dialect.

Mary: I never bought into the whole Ebonics thing

She explained that when she entered the academic world, her teachers emphasized the importance of doing away with speech that sounded African American, even when she was in the sixth grade.

Mary: I had teachers that really: focused on how (.) how we were already perceived. and makin' sure that (.) you know (.) it's like instead of sayin' [fou] (.) it's four [for] (.) you know (2) so when a teacher said that to me (.) it resonated. and from that point on I (.) you know (.) it's not [bm ə] or [bm tu] (.) it's 'about to' or somethin' (.) So (.) um (.) those things

Mary was not the only one to mark African American Vernacular English as being more slang than a dialect. Angel, a 32-year-old patient care technician did not favor the idea of an official status for the variety.

Angel: cuz its just like something (2) it's l- (.) it's see like it's like it's just like sla:ng to me so it's so natural that it's not even. to me: I don't feel like I'm speakin you know what I mean? Like (2) *speakin'* (2)  
I'm not gonna be at work speaking slang (3)

Angel equated African American English to a Southern, or "country" way of speaking.

Angel: U:m (2) cuz it almost sound like when you use it (1) like (.) when when you use it (.) somebody that doesn't (.) they're like (.) o:h you sound country: (2) y'know cuz it's like.it's kinda like tha:ng /əæ:ŋ/ =  
like my brother'll be like it sounds so country when people talk like that (.) you know (.) things like that (.) U:m (1) it's just. it's just (.) it's just like a natural thing so it's not really like anything you would (1) see (2) and like (...) a lot of people from Atlanta (.) mm (.) talk from like down South (3) my mom..she does it (.) ha:rd..she has a really hard (hhh) and that's what it is but (it's like) to somebody else that will call it Ebonics?



(.) It would really be like oh you just have a country (a really) down-South accent (.) you have a country accent.

The fact that Angel described African American Vernacular English as a country-like variety reflects a more negative attitude towards the dialect itself. On more than one occasion, Angel reiterated the non-language status of the variety in her own mind.

Angel: And that's-that's bad... that's sad to me because that's broken English and that's... because I don't cons-/I personally don't consider that to even be like a real lang(h)uage... I think that's (.) just (.) our background..speaking words..y'know making a bunch of words up..cuz it is a bunch of words in that..I can't even call it a language..it's just a bunch of words in Ebonics that are totally made up

Lashonda was another participant who expressed a dislike for the use of a term such as *Ebonics*, and even questioned the origin of the term upon my use of it.

Lashonda: =I mean..just because it's just like..I don't know if it needs a w- like... where did that come from? Where did the word Ebonics come from? I dunno (3) d-if you kn[ow

However, when asked about her thoughts on the term African American Vernacular English, she responded equally negatively, then expressing a negative sentiment towards the existence of a separate official ethnolect of African American origin.

Lashonda: no (.) n-I don't think-I don't think we should have our own Engl-like I d-

Because (2) it feels like (2) I feel like if we worked so hard to be the same (.) n-like (2) not the same but treated the same? then to work towards having a separate language doesn't even make sense sometimes? Like (.) just (.) it bothers me. (2) it doesn't sound right to me (2) I dunno (.) it just sounds unintelligent to me=

Lee Roe also automatically termed African American Vernacular English "broken English" and Standard English "proper English". He talked about the way he spoke in high school and the way he and his friends spoke. He described his speaking African American Vernacular English as broken English.

Lee Roe: Uh: (2) broken English= natural (.) uh (.) again (.) when I moved up here I didn't really care anymore (.) so I just used whatever came naturally (.) so-n- broken English

Lee Roe used the terms slang and broken English interchangeably, implying that they are the same thing. He was not the first to refer to AAVE as slang, which is

something that Baron<sup>30</sup> has found to be a commonly occurring description for the ethnolect.

Each participant had at least a slightly different view of African American Vernacular English and his or her own opinion concerning whether or not it should be considered a valid variety.

Tab. 2. Qualification of AAVE by participants

Broken/Bad English	Country	Slang	Language/Dialect
Lee Roe Mary Lashonda Petrina	Angel MichaelAnn	Lee Roe Rheba Karen	Fred Darryl

Source: own work.

Almost all of the participants attributed a negative quality to AAVE, whereas only two maintained its dialectal status within the discussion.

3.2. AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH AND IDENTITY

Despite the fact that a majority of the African American participants disregarded AAVE as a proper variety of English, there were two participants who advocated for it, those being Fred and Darryl. Darryl, who is 51 years old, reminds us that language is directly linked with heritage are.

Fred also considered AAVE to be a part of his identity. He did admit, however, that when the situation calls for it, he is ready and willing to speak Standard English:

Fred: but I also don't deny (.) if I have to speak (.) you know proper English

He explained that both varieties make him who he is, and that because of his strong association of his self with African American Vernacular English, we can confer that he strongly identifies with the variety, possibly because of its ties to his heritage.

Darryl referred to himself as a user of both Standard English and African American Vernacular English and stated that he had no problem switching between varieties.

<sup>30</sup> D. Baron, *Ebonics and the Politics of English*, "World Englishes" 2000, 19 (1).

Darryl: I think (.) uh (.) i:t ma:y have a little bit to do with my identity: it has a lot to do with gro:wth and u:h (.) as a case (.) and like I say uh my prior (xx) just fits as far as gaging my identity (.) but my language skills I-uh-I (.) and so (.) like I was saying (.) even earlier o:n I read a lot of books (.) so I was exposed to (.) a lot of stu:ff u:m U:m (3) no:t really I probably talk more like thi:s (1) than the o:ther (.) becau:se (.) you know I'm not on the street anymo:re (.) I'm not a ki:d (.) obviously (.) I'm fifty (.) so (.) you know (.) [so

Just as Fred did, Darryl admitted that African American Vernacular English was a part of his identity. He described it as one of the two languages that he spoke and he stated that he was not ashamed of that. This can be compared to the sentiments of those participants quoted earlier, such as Mary, who does not even allow her nephew to speak African American Vernacular English because she categorized it as slang. The fact that Darryl and Fred speak this way around their African American peers demonstrates how even socially stigmatized varieties can still be used in manifesting identity.

Angel, however, expressed disapproval of the use of the African American vernacular in the workplace, stating that she herself does not use it at work, and, in turn, she does not allow her daughter to use it at home, either. The use of African American Vernacular English, or what a number of the participants considered “slang” and “bad” or “broken” English affects the way they raise their children and expressed the way they wanted their children to speak.

Tab. 3. Identification of participants with AAVE

Identifies with AAVE	Does not identify with AAVE
Fred Darryl Lee Roe MichaelAnn	Mary Lashonda Karen Rheba Angel Petrina

Source: own work.

Here, there is a divide between the participants’ identifying with AAVE, with the majority of the female participants expressing a lack of feeling of identification with the variety, and all three of the male participants’ expressing their identification with it.

### 3.3. THE FUNCTIONS OF CODE-SWITCHING IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

A number of those interviewed, when asked about the credibility of a speaker of AAVE and job opportunity, maintained that there is a time and a place for the use of the variety. Even those who considered themselves advocates of the ethnolect, such as Fred, expressed the need to educate those who are unfamiliar with how the use of the vernacular could negatively influence their future prospects of being considered employable.

The code-switching that takes place in the context of the use of African American Vernacular English is usually *functional*, and specifically *situational*, in that the use of variety is highly dependent on the context, and also plays a role in.<sup>31</sup> The use of the variety served the function of community building in some of the cases.<sup>32</sup>

All of the informants mentioned that African American English was more likely than not to be disapproved of in a professional setting. Whereas some participants expressed a leaning towards the use of Standard English at work, others found it unacceptable to use what they called slang in the workplace. This is why some speakers expressed a need to know when to speak what way. Mary, who at first seemed completely against the use of African American Vernacular English, then stated that if the user was able to switch easily from one variety to the next, it was okay.

Mary: If you can transition from speaking like that, amongst you:r peers (.) friends (.) family (.) whatever (.) and transition and know the correct way then that's fine (1) but if you can't then it's a problem (.) I want us to ri:se

Angel expressed a similar opinion to Mary's saying there is a time and a place for the use of what she calls "slang". She explained that her daughter's half-sister spoke differently from her (her daughter sometimes picking up the slang from her sister), and the contexts in which her daughter's half-sister uses the variety she is used to speaking. She talked about the reasons she disliked the children's use of the vernacular.

Angel: Because of them speaking it like that they take it li:ke..nothin personal because I was like explaining how like ((her sister)) (3) when sh- even when she's certain places (.) certain people don't understand those wo:rdz (.) y'know and I think that if you're able to.. if that's just how you like to speak when you're comfortable around fa:mily or certain friends that's oka:y (.) but I think that if you can't (.) if you can't speak in a proper language when you're around at work or when you're talkin to a tea:cher o:r someone else (H) and they don't understand that=

<sup>31</sup> J. Holmes, op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> P. Auer, op. cit.

Lee Roe also explained why code-switching played a minor role in his life, stating that he usually spoke Standard English, because the environments he was in somewhat expected the use of it, but that there were in fact situations in which he used the vernacular. He mentioned that he did not use it as much in his adult life.

Lee Roe: U:h (1) not so much (.) ehm (.) I think in all the settings I-I've had to work in professionally i:ts (.) it just tones itself down?

U:m...I still know it I still use it sometimes I mean it just naturally comes out b-(.)by and large I s(xx) moreso speak proper (.) especially since I have to

Lee Roe's statement about switching between AAVE and Standard English out of necessity is also deemed somewhat true in what Fred says about when to use African American Vernacular English and when to strive for more of what he calls "proper".

Fred: I understand that who I am and my presence (1) can be intimidating (.) especially for folks who look like me (2) and who don't have the same opportunities that I have (.) and so: I'm real cautious about th[a:t

(1) if I'm n (.) if I'm (.) at work (.) or any type of work environment (.) you know (.) there's a certain level (1) terminology (.) that I have to speak (.) it's the bottom line (.) y'know? I can (.) but if I'm around uh just my peers (.) and family (.) then I just cut loose (.) there's no problem at all

What Fred said simply reiterated the constraints on language use that exist in the work environment, making clear what happens outside of it for some speakers of AAVE. Although he discussed the way language use works differently in different environments, he provided insight into how code-switching works in the professional sphere alone.

Karen made an interesting point about the act of switching between African American Vernacular English (which she once again chose to term "slang") and Standard English at work, claiming that whatever situation a certain variety is optimal for dictates what variety is used. Karen, who works as an intake supervisor for the teen parenting network and in the foster care program at UCAN, found that the use of the vernacular was crucial in her work. As the majority of her clientele was African American, she explained that speaking African American Vernacular English might make the people she worked with feel more comfortable in her presence and make her, in turn, more approachable for them.

Karen: It depe:nds o:n the person tha:t you're speaking with on the pho:ne (.)I am a person that's very adjustable: (3) and I'll adjust to what's necessary to retrieve the information that I need.

Karen used the vernacular not just for the benefit of the person she was talking to, to make him or her more comfortable, but also to her own benefit and to effectively carry out a task and in a timely fashion.

Karen: U:m becau:se we deal with a heavy populated A:frican Ame:rican culture..um.. it's sometimes is beneficial to u:tili:ze sla:ng o:r um to me meet them where they're- they're at (3) u:m (3) to gather the information that you need.

She explained that it was not she who initiates the use of slang to create a wider comfort zone, but that she was the one who accommodates to whoever it was she was speaking to:

Karen: I think that they feel comfortable (3) because they have to utili:ze this approach before I would (2) it wouldn't be something that I would just initially u:se (.) it would be somethin that I would find that *they* are using and they feel co:mfortable so I would meet them where they're at

The following table presents the categorization of the reactions of the participants to code-switching, based on whether or not they implied that they practiced code-switching themselves or overtly expressed approval or disapproval of it.

Tab. 4. Use of code-switching among participants

Code-switching between contexts (work/peer)	Code-switching at work	Does not partake in code-switching	No comment	Thinks code-switching is ok	Code-switching is not ok
Fred Darryl	Karen	Mary Lashonda Angel	Petrina MichaelAnn	Mary Fred Karen	Angel

Source: own work.

Those who discussed code-switching expressed the necessity of being able to switch easily from one variety to the next when the situation calls for it. Though these situations may be different, such as Fred’s uneasiness at seeming pretentious in front of his peers yet knowing that he should use the standard at work, and Karen’s example of bonding with clients through the use of AAVE, they each demonstrate the important role that code-switching plays in the African American community.

## 3.4. AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH AND THE QUESTION OF EMPLOYABILITY

It is a common belief that the use of AAVE diminishes a speaker's credibility and eligibility when applying for a job.<sup>33</sup> The fact that employers pay attention to how their future employees speak is no secret, but whether or not the use of the African American Vernacular English in the work place is viewed as appropriate is another issue. Here we discuss the sentiments of a select number of the participants to the use of African American Vernacular English in the workplace.

A number of the participants expressed distaste for the use of AAVE at work, claiming that there is a time and place for everything, even the use of certain speech. Considering, however, how many of the interviewees referred to the black vernacular as "slang", this comes as no surprise.

One of the points that Fred made in his discussion of his job at UCAN is the work he did to train individuals to speak in order to be considered presentable and employable. He explained that he himself had to take part in workshops which promoted the idea of professional speech to help people assimilate to the working world. He expressed that these expansions of the idea that there is a correct linguistic variety is one limited to certain job descriptions. His comments were more tolerant than others and even expressed support of the use of the African American Vernacular in the workplace.

Fred: U::m...well...let's say if you're just startin' out on a job. you just got hired somewhere...there's a certain level (.) you know (2) where they call it probational period.. or whatever..you know and you almost have to perfo:rm it's like an interview You know..you are who you are in that interview..but outside of that..typically you're either a little bit mo:re or less. y'know and so...for the purposes of gettin yourself in the door and...y'kno:w...bein in the environment..I encourage folks to be a:s..um...professionally...um..equipped as possible..but then also: ...because I think some of the tell-tale si:gns of candida:tes who: wanna work..or go into the workforce...so if you and I ha:ve...I'm makin it general...if you and I have the sa:me expertise..sa:me education level..or we offer the sa:me skill se:ts...I mean what do: employers ha:ve to dictate which candidate they select?

Although he considered himself an advocate for the use of African American Vernacular English and keeping the variety present in the lives of its speakers, he agreed that in the workplace, the use of Ebonics was not helpful in advancing a person's career status. He stressed the importance of teaching youth when and how to speak Standard English, stressing the notion of the professional setting as a place in which it is expected rather than an option. This, however, he believed to be true mostly of an office-type job setting.

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<sup>33</sup> S. L. Lanehart, *Sociocultural and Historical Contexts of African American English*, Amsterdam 2001.

Fred: I think it really depends o:n the um i:ndustry (.) an-and what type of work you're doin (.) more social environment (2) say someone works for standard parking...alright? Now there's a certain level of what professionalism you should ha:ve (.) but then it's mo:re social enga:gement  
[right]  
Y'know..and so: (.) as opposed to bein at a law firm (.) where I don't think that is gonna be: recommended at a:ll (.) and so they may have a certain le:vel of (2) of u:m (2) ade- quateness that you- you just have to a:sk (2) and there's no room fo:r anything else.

Some other participants expressed a similar sentiment that the use of “Ebonics”, “slang” or “African American Vernacular English” holds a person back when he or she is trying to find a job or in a professional setting. Karen reiterated what Lee Roe said about the use of the variety hindering a person’s chances of success.

She was one respondent who expressed the feeling of any limit in communi- cation that the use of African American Vernacular English could render, which also illustrates a sense that even the African American community considers it an inferior variety. Petrina was another participant to say that using AAVE limits one’s abilities to find a good job.

Petrina: I don't think anything wrong wi:th [AAVE] (.) I mean (.) although (.) when I hear the younger kids tryin to pick up on certain sla:ng (1) I I correct em (.) I'm like you kno:w you shouldn't be: speakin like tha:t (.) and (.) it's like if you're if you're out in a social setti:ng (.) and you're trying to get a job you should never speak like that

Tab. 5. Attitudes towards the use of AAVE and employability

AAVE positive for a work environment	AAVE negative for a work environment
Darryl	Angel Petrina MichaelAnn Fred Karen Lee Roe Angel Mary LaShona

Source: own work.

It is quite visible here, how the majority of the participants agreed on the same plane of the issue of finding a good job and speaking “properly”. There is an obvious correlation here between the use of the standard when in a professional



setting and trying to get work. This is reason enough for an in-group member to reject the use of and not support African American Vernacular English.

#### 4. Results

Overall, the language attitudes of those interviewed, all from varying backgrounds in terms of education and upbringing, were prevalently negative ones. Despite the initial assumption that the attitudes of ingroup members of minority groups would be rather positive with regards to their heritage variety the findings have indicated that this is not quite the case. Among the participants, there were those who expressed disapproval of the use of the variety. The differences in terminology used by the participants to describe AAVE as either slang, country speak African American Vernacular English and Ebonics represents attitudes towards the status of the variety.

The sentiments towards code-switching were also quite mixed. While some believed that any use of the variety is bad, there were those who believed it acceptable to use AAVE as long as they were able to switch back to Standard English when necessary. There was a general consensus that a speaker of African American Vernacular English should be able to switch between the two, and that a mono-dialectal speaker of AAVE would be held back by his incapability to speak Standard English.

The relevance of functional code-switching, however, was indicative of the way in which the variety was seen by some as a tool not only in the negotiation of identity, but also in accommodating to the context in which one finds him- or herself. What can be observed is that despite eight of the participants' negative sentiment towards the status of the variety, it is crucial to be able to switch from one to the other depending on the situation one finds oneself in.

The positive comments regarding AAVE were most commonly associated with the usefulness of AAVE in maintaining community ties, for accommodating to people at work and staying in touch with heritage. Although most of the comments regarding AAVE were more reluctant to acknowledge the official status of the ethnolect as a variety, there was a general consensus that it serves as an identity-building tool. It must be mentioned that the number of participants was limited, and that a greater number would have enabled for a broader study of language attitudes in the Chicago area.

The participants generally harbored a negative sentiment towards the vernacular. The analysis shows that mixed attitudes were shown regarding AAVE's status as a valid variety and its role in maintaining job positions, especially in the case of those at UCAN. The sentiment, however, that the use of AAVE hinders a person's ability to get a new job and prevents him or her from reaching any opportunity to gain more prestige was also present throughout the interviews.

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## APPENDIX A

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about your background, your family
2. Where are you/ where is your family originally from?
3. What is/ are the languages that you speak?
4. What do you think about the language(s) that you speak?
5. What do you feel that others think about the languages (or way) that you speak?
6. Have you ever suffered discrimination because of your language/ the way that you speak?
7. Do you ever feel misunderstood?
8. Have you ever been denied a public service (over the phone, for example) because of the way you speak?
9. Do you find that younger or older generations tend to be more racially biased?
10. Why (if so) do you continue to use a language that so many people see as being non-standard English? (Why do you choose not to use it?)
11. How strongly do you identify with your heritage?
12. How do you demonstrate this?
13. Has anyone from outside of your community ever tried to emulate your language/ the way that you speak? How good was that attempt? How did you feel about it?

## APPENDIX B

## TRANSCRIPTION NOTATION

(.)	Minimal pause
(number)	Longer pause (counted seconds)
[	overlap
@@@@	laughter
Wor(h)d	Laughter in a word
C:	Long consonant
V:	Long vowel
Wor-word	Stutter
<u>Word</u>	Emphasis
?	Rising intonation
(Hx)	Exhale
=	Question response
(xx)	Inaudible
WORD	Imitation or higher tone of voice
(...)	Omitted excerpt

