

A Study of African American English Variant Based on the Corpus of Afro-American Music

Wang Tian, Yang Yuan, and Liu Jing

Abstract—As black culture became a trend, African American English, used by the majority of Afro-Americans, also gained influence. In order to solve the prejudice and misunderstanding toward language variant, this paper, taking Afro-American music as corpus, sorts out the characteristics and development history of AAE, introduces the concept of language variant, and analyzes AAE from the perspective of sociolinguistics. It is expected to arouse the attention to AAE English variant in the field.

Index Terms—African American English, sociolinguistics, language variant, music corpus.

I. INTRODUCTION

From 16th and 19th century a large number of slaves were transported to the United States through triangles trade. For the purpose of communicating, they mixed English grammar with the original language and gradually formed African American English, also known as AAE after several generations. With the rapid development of the Internet, Afro-American culture has spread to China through movies, music and other channels, and has been learnt and followed by countless Chinese young people as a hot trend. Afro-American language, as an important part of its cultural transmission, has inevitably generated great influence on Chinese second language acquisition. Therefore, this research is of practical significance. This paper, taking Afro-American music as corpus, summarizes and analyzes the features, causes and developing trend of AEE English variant.

This paper consists of five parts. Part One introduces the history and development of Afro-Americans, Afro-American music and African-American language, and summarizes the current research status of African American English both home and abroad. Part Two illustrates the features of AAE from phonological, lexical and grammatical perspectives. Part Three analyzes them from sociolinguistics perspectives. Part Four describes the practical application and value of AAE. Part Five states the development tendency of AAE.

II. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A. Introduction to the Afro-American

Afro-Americans have made their mark in American history. Since the triangle trade in the 16th century, they have been a major force in American agriculture and industry, busy

working in the Southern cotton fields, and along the railroads that span from east and west, from south to north. Today, more and more Afro-Americans are active in politics, culture, entertainment and sports in the United States. People are no longer surprised by the appearance of Afro-Americans in all fields of life, and become accustomed to the reality that they increasingly play various roles in society as presidents, police officers, actors, singers and so on.

However, racial discrimination and inequality has long and broadly been existing in American society. For centuries, Afro-Americans have been struggling for equal social status and racial independence, but there are still few examples of black leadership in any industry, most Afro-Americans still work in manual jobs or service industry, and most of them can still not enjoy the same educational resources as their white counterparts can. Although there is no longer an obvious wall separating whites from blacks in 21st century society, the class gap created by long history is the invisible divide between many black and white families.

B. Overview of Afro-American Musical Corpus

Afro-Americans made great contributions to American music. They created Ragtime music, Gospel, Blues, Jazz, Rock and Roll, R&B, Soul, Funk and hip-hop (in chronological order). The evolution of Afro-American music started in the early 1700s in form of secular traditions like game song, work song, and field call, and syncopated dance music. In the late 18th century and early 19th century, it developed to sacred traditions.

The Cambridge History of American Music [1] explains why there are various forms of music created by Afro-Americans. It mentions that their creativity has repeatedly been looted by the popular music industry. When this happens, Afro-Americans have often turned away from what has been taken in order to create another new music. For example, after the banjo was popularized in minstrelsy, it fell out of favor among Afro-Americans. The rhythms it had played were reassigned to other instruments and merged with other harmonies and forms, and then Ragtime and Jazz resulted.

In the music field, Afro-Americans were never passive recipients of white culture. Rather, they actively reworked it to suit their own lives. They were no longer contented with being invisible compatriots. Instead, they wanted to distinguish themselves from other Americans and wanted their distinct features to be recognized. They struggled not merely for equality but for individuality.

C. African American English

1) Abstract to the language variant and AAE

Linguists define African American English as a variant of

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Standard English, an ordered heterogeneity. It is *ordered* so that it facilitates smooth communication between speakers, and it is a *heterogeneity* in that it has different linguistic features [2]. The traditional and more well-known English variants are British English and American English, two variants classified according to their regional status. While AAE is a variant used by people in a smaller speech community within American society [3]: 24-27.

This language has been named in various different ways, such as Black English, Black American English, African American English, African American Vernacular English, Negro Pidgin, Negro Creole, Negro dialect, Ebonics, etc. Some people consider it as a dialect, some consider it as non-standard and inferior, while some others consider it as a completely independent language. However, no matter how different linguists in different periods define or call it, it essentially refers to the language spoken by the majority of Afro-American in the United States.

The terms commonly accepted by scholars today are African American English (AAE) and African American Vernacular English (AAVE). The non-discriminatory name African American English is the most appropriate one. First of all, AAE was born in American society. It is not accurate to generalize it simply as Black English, because the language embraces not only black culture, but also American culture. Second, AAE is not an inferior language, because language is not hierarchical, and it is a structured language with internal laws. Therefore, any term like non-standard English or inferior English, is not suitable for AAE.

There are two common misconceptions: first, all black people speak AAE; second, none white people uses AAE.

In theory, if a black person grew up in a white family or community, the black person would not speak AAE. In response, Labov [4]-[7] proposed another concept which is distinct from AAE -- Standard African American English. Not all Afro-American speak the same way. A small number of them use SAAE, which differs from Standard English only in small phonetic features. In addition, many upper-middle class Afro-Americans speak virtually the same language as whites [4].

Similarly, a white person who grew up in a black ghetto and was exposed to AAE may also speak AAE. In reality, the growing influence of AAE and its interpenetration with Standard American English have made some AAE features blurred or even disappear. Besides, some AAE features have been accepted by white people, making it more and more common to see AAE features in White English. The lyrics of *And I'mma cake like it ain't nothin* in *Sky Hooks* created by Lil Dicky, a white growing up in a wealthy upper-middle class family, is a good example.

2) History and Evolution of AAE

According to the different demands of different speakers in different periods, the development of AAE can be divided into three major stages.

The first stage is Black Pidgin English. To be more precise, it can't be viewed as real English. It was created for simple communication between two very different speech communities: the black West-Africans who speak tribal language, and the slave traders and plantation owners who speak English. It's a sort of expression that combines English words with the grammar of West-African languages.

Compared to Standard English, the language in this period is certainly grammatically incorrect and phonetically deviated. Similar linguistic phenomenon also appeared in China in the 18th and 19th centuries. Chinglish, which we often talk about, is also a pidgin language.

In the second period, Black Creole was developed by descendants of slaves in the United States (Afro-American who were born in the United States), and was closer to English both grammatically and phonetically than Black Pidgin.

In the third period, after the American Civil War, Creole disintegrated and African American English in the last 30 years entered a stage where it presents internal rule changes and unique language features. Some linguists take it as an independent language system, Ebonic, while some scholars regard it as a social dialect and thus call it African American Vernacular English or African American English.

3) Research status of AAE

The study of AAE in the West precedes that in China. In 1965, linguists like Labov and Cohen, with the support of educational officials, began to study the differences between the dialect of central Harlem and Standard English in the classroom. A decade earlier than that, a group of linguists had begun studying the non-standard English spoken by African Americans [6]. Domestic studies on language variants started later, and mainly focused on the regional variants like American English and British English at the early stage. Till 1980s and 1990s, studies on AAE began to prosper in China. A relatively complete theory on the formation, phonological, lexical and grammatical features of AAE was gradually formed. From the beginning of the 21st century, in addition to improving studies on the characteristics and theories of AAE, great attention has been given to the practical significance of AAE in teaching and its application in film and television. Around 2010, domestic research on AAE entered a difficult point. On the one hand, some researchers proposed the concept of the fusion and differentiation of AAE, while on the other, domestic enthusiasm for AAE research decreased. However, after the broadcast of a variety show called *The Rap of China* in 2017, black culture and African American English gained popularity rapidly in China, leading its actual influence in China to soar to a historically high level. AAE is also frequently used in literary works to create and depict vivid characters and embody unique literary function [8]. However, through retrieval, only 12 research papers on African American English and about 100 research papers on Black English were found on CNKI. Great potentials in this filed are still there to be realized, and this is exactly the value of this paper.

III. THE SYSTEMATIC DESCRIPTION OF AAE

As an ordered variant, African American English has unique features in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. In this chapter, a systematical description of AAE will be carried out, based on musical corpus, so as to facilitate subsequent sociolinguistic research.

A. Phonology

The research on AAE at home and abroad mainly focuses on vocabulary and grammar. The limited amount of phonetics

research showed some recognized special rules of AAE in pronunciation: forwarding of word stress; weakening or omission of final consonants; consonant linkage simplification; the consonant /l/ is not pronounced after a vowel; the consonant /th/ is pronounced as /t/, /d/; omit /r/, /l/, etc. Studies on its pronunciation are very limited and are mainly done before the 21st century. In recent years, there have been new attempts on the study of AAE phonetic variation in China. Representative research papers include *Vowel Features of African American English in American Rap Music* [9], in which the author analyzes the striking differences between AAE vowels and Standard English vowels. Firstly, the tongue is positioned higher and more forward when pronouncing monophthong /æ/, which is reflected in words commonly used in hip-hop lyrics, such as *bad*, *ass*, and *faggot*. Second, the monophthong /ɛ/ is aurally similar to /je/, only that the tongue is higher and more forward. Third, the tongue is positioned higher and more forward when pronouncing diphthong /au/.

B. Vocabulary

ROST English word frequency statistics software 4.0.2.7 is used to study the words and expressions included in the lyrics of 30 pieces of randomly-chosen Afro-American music. There is a total of 16,473 words, and 2,465 different words are found after merging repeating words. After filtering out the basic vocabulary included in CET-4 or below, 901 AAE words remain. After integration, it is found that AAE vocabulary are presenting the following features:

1) Words exclusively used in AAE

AAE has many unique words. These words are derived from the life of Afro-American but spread and be used all over the world. For example, *homie*, *dawg*, *bling*, *bro*, *popo*, *cop*, etc. AAE also has special words that come from African languages, such as *uh-huh* and *okay* [10].

2) Same words with different meanings

Only some words, which are same with Standard English but express different meaning, are shown in Table I.

TABLE I: SAME WORDS WITH DIFFERENT MEANING

Word	Meaning in SE	Meaning in AAE
blood	the red liquid that flows through the bodies and animals	money
pig	an animal	police
seeds	the small hard part produced by a plant	children
accessory	an extra piece of equipment that is useful but not essential	boyfriend/ girlfriend
hoe	a garden tool	a derogatory term for a woman
bang	sth to hit sth in a way that makes a loud noise	sexual intercourse
chick	a baby bird, especially a baby chicken	beautiful women

3) Different words to express the same meaning

Only some words, which are different with Standard English but express same meaning, are shown in Table II.

TABLE II: SAME MEANING WITH DIFFERENT WORDS

Meaning	SE	AAE
what you earn by working or selling things, and use to buy thing	money	chex; green\ china\ bone, ect.
an official organization whose job is to make people obey the law	police	pig\ popo\ cop, ect.
the female	woman\ lady\girl	doll\ skirt\ whore\ hoe, ect.
brother	man\boy	homie\ bro\ crew, ect.

4) Simplified spelling of words in AAE

- er becomes -a,
Example: nigger--nigga, motherfucker--muthafucka.
- abbreviated verbs or phrasal verbs followed by to,
Example: want to--wanna, going to--gonna, got to--gotta.
- ing becomes -in('),
Example: fucking--fuckin('), nothing--nothin(').
- other abbreviations, like 'em(them), 'til(until).
Example: He wait 'til I fall and then pull up and catch me.
(Off The Grid, Kanye West)

5) Special simplified use of AAE vocabulary

- usage of number:
2 = to -- see you tomorrow = CU 2morrow;
4 = for -- for you = 4U;
8 = eight \ aight \ eat -- great = gr8;
9 = night.
- usage of letter:
C = see, U = you, N = and, R = are, X = ks(cks),
O = U, ect.
Example: thanks = thanx, checks = chex, love = luv.
- panacea*

Some AAE words are used as panacea. *FUCK* is one of the most frequently used one. It can be a noun, a verb, or an adjective. It can be used in derogatory swearing or intensification, as in: *Fuck you!* (Means fuck off), *I don't care a fuck!* (Means I couldn't care less). It can also be used in a neutral or even commendatory sense to strengthen the expression. For example, *It's fucking good* is often said to mean very good.

There are many other deviations in AAE vocabulary. They are deeply rooted in life and full of metaphorical meanings. Most of them deviations are simplifications of SE, which is closely related to the phonetic characteristics of AAE, and greatly influenced by social factors.

C. Grammar

Sociolinguist, Labov [6], holds that the fundamental factor affecting the reading of Afro-American is the grammar of BEV (Labov referred to it as Black English Vernacular in the early time, and later changed it to African American Vernacular English). In 1973, in order to prove that it is an independent language, he found several grammatical rules of BEV. By 1992, linguists Lane and Molyneaux had identified 18 accepted grammatical rules in Black English. Here are some of AAE's grammatical deviations, taking Kanye West's lyrics as an example:

1) Usage of linking word and auxiliary verb

- Use *be* instead of *am*, *is*, *are* to express habitual action

or state.

Example: I be on my.

(Follow God, Kanye West)

- b) In the present tense, linking verbs and auxiliary verbs are often omitted (except *am*).

Example: This that different latitude.

(Everything We Need, Kanye West)

- c) In the past tense, linking verb *was* is used disregarding the change of subject, singular or plural form, or person.

Example: We was all born to die, nigga.

(I thought about killing you, Kanye West)

2) Plural nouns and pronouns

- a) Omit the plural suffix of the noun in phrases expressing quantity.

Example: This month I done lost three friend.

(Hurricane, Kanye West)

- b) A few irregular plural nouns have special deformations.

Example: foot—foots, man—mens.

- c) Other.

Example: dess (desk)—desses; ness(nest)—nesses.

3) Negation

- a) Use *ain't* instead of other negative verbs, regardless of subject or tense.

Example: But I ain't Jamacian.

(Through the Wire, Kanye West)

- b) Use double negation or multiple negation.

Example: Ain't no way I'm givin' up.

(I Am A God, Kanye West)

4) Tense

- a) There is no use of singular form in third person, the predicate verb is only the prototype, and when the predicate verb is *do* or *have*, there is no person or number transformation.

Example: I meet her in church, she pray for me.

(Off The Grid, Kanye West)

- b) *have/has/had* has been omitted from the perfect tense, and use *done* for the finished action, *been* for the unfinished action. *done* is equivalent to *have/had* in SE, while *been* has the sense of the present perfect continuous tense.

Example: This month I done lost three friend.

(Hurricane, Kanye West)

Example: I done had too many bitch stab me in the back.

(OK OK, Kanye West)

IV. THE RESEARCH OF AAE BASED ON SOCIOLINGUISTICS

Sociolinguistics is an interdisciplinary subject, which can be divided into two parts: macro-sociolinguistics and micro-sociolinguistics. The study of AAE includes not only language, but also politics, history and culture. Macroscopically, it reflects language contact and cultural contact. In the micro aspect, it reflects the influence of social factors on the internal structure of language. Therefore, the study of AAE should take into account both macro and micro perspectives.

A. Reasons for the Formation of Phonetic Features

The phonetic deviation can be traced back to the first stage of AAE, the Pidgin period, when AAE were least in common with SE in phonetics. Language at this time is only for the

most basic demand of communication, with neither flowery rhetoric devices nor rigorous grammar being pursued.

AAE presents a serious phonetic deviation since the very beginning, and this deviation got intensified by black people's lack of SE education and their isolation from other races in the subsequent centuries. The longer they were isolated, the more their language changes [3]: 28. Finally, a new generation of Afro-American picked up their phonological habits from speech communities and passed them down from generation to generation.

Many people subjectively attribute AAE phonetic deviation to race. They assert that [11]: 13, the principal articulators are the jaw, lips, teeth, ridges (often called alveolar ridges), tongue, hard palate, soft palate (flat synovial membrane), pharynx, larynx, and vocal cords and further attribute the deviation to black people's different physiological structures. Not to mention that such a conclusion is racist, it is totally metaphysics. It is true that many black singers who come from the upper-middle class and are well-educated, retain a distinct AAE sound, such as Kanye West who graduated from University of Chicago, and J. Cole and Travis Scott, who are from upper-middle class families. But important factors, such as speech community and Afro-American's strong desires to express their racial and national identity and their desires to send out political signals, are often ignored. The absolute white language communities are rare in today's easily accessible and information-rich society. Race is not the cause for AAE phonetic deviation.

B. Analysis of AAE Vocabulary Characteristics

AAE vocabulary generally presents two characteristics: unique and simplified.

A corpus of 16,473 words in 30 randomly selected pieces of Afro-American music shows that AAE words are unique in the following aspects: First, most of the words are related to money and women. And these words are very life-like and practical. Second, the words in AAE are relatively simple. English vocabulary generally has 10 categories, but AAE vocabulary has only roughly 3 categories, namely noun, interjection and verb. Third, the amount of vocabulary is limited. After filtering out words of CET-4 and below, there are only 901 AAE words. The words in SE are colored, while the AAE words are black and white. From these AAE words, it seems that early Afro-American have no need for more communication, and language is created simply for survival need. Scholars take this simplification as a common learning strategy [12]. The causes include the influence of tribal culture in West-Africa and the unequal treatment Afro-Americans received. Slave owners regarded black slaves as property and tools for labor, thus limiting the additional needs for communication by Afro-Americans in history.

In order to have a clue on the development trend of lexical deviation in AAE, a comparison between 10 songs made before 1950s and 10 songs thereafter was made. Fig. 1 shows that lexical deviations are much more frequently used after 1950s, rising to 14.9 per song from 4.1 before 1950s. Putting the lyric content aside and only taking the changes in the internal elements of the language into consideration, it is not difficult to get the signals conveyed by Afro-Americans through language variation.

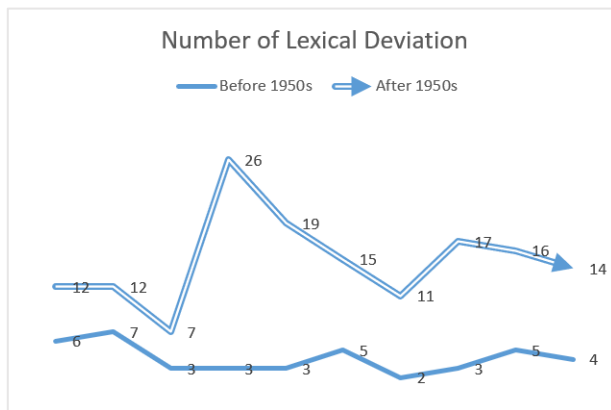


Fig. 1. Lexical deviation.

After the Declaration of Independence in 1863 and the Afro-American Civil Rights Movement started from 1950s, Afro-American gradually gained the right to be educated. However, AAE vocabulary is not getting closer to Standard English, but more prominent in its own characteristics. It can be seen from the changes of AAE that Afro-Americans have been striving for language independence, so as to symbolize their own independence. They try to distinguish themselves from white people through the heterogeneity of language or to express the signal that *I am black*. Language deviation is the way for them to pursue equal status and civil rights, and it also flaunts the independence of Afro-American.

C. Reasons for AAE to be Standardized on Syntax

The lyrics from the same singer at different ages are also showing great differences, mostly in vocabulary and grammar, presenting a trend of getting closer and closer to Standard English.

The trend is particularly evident in the lyrics of Afro-American singer Kanye West. Table III shows the number of double negation and grammatical variation of tying verbs used by singer Kanye West in his representative works in different periods. Combined with Fig. 2 and Fig. 3, it can be seen that from 2003 to 2019, his use of double negation and the use of tying verbs different from Standard English generally showed a declining trend, which means that his language became more standardized as he grew older.

TABLE III: GRAMMATICAL VARIATIONS IN KANYE WEST'S LYRICS

Song (time)	Double negation	Tying verb
Through the Wire (2003)	0	9
All Falls Down (2004)	2	14
Skit#2 (2005)	4	5
Can't Tell Me Nothing (2007)	7	1
Heartless (2008)	0	4
See Me Now (2010)	1	7
Ultralight Beam (2016)	0	3
I Thought About Killing You (2018)	2	3
On God (2019)	0	1

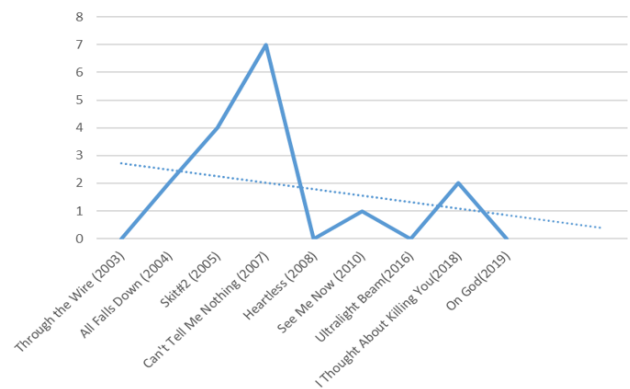


Fig. 2. Double negation.

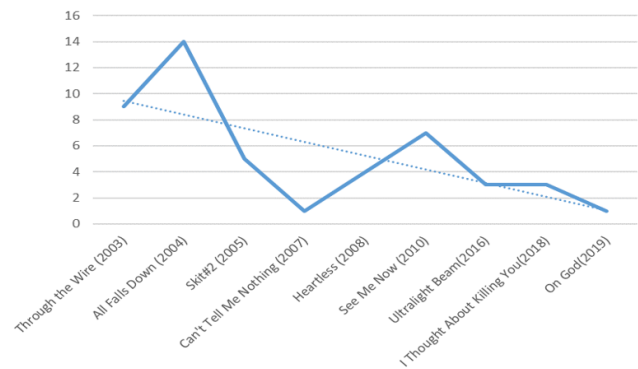


Fig. 3. Tying verb.

The age difference in language is the difference of language in time, and it is the slight change of language history in a smaller time segment, which will form obvious historical evolution after a certain period of accumulation [13]. Therefore, the changes of individuals with age will also affect the development of the whole language after quantitative accumulation. In addition, age is not the only reason for the above changes. Change in social classes is another big reason. According to Labov [4]-[7], there is likely to be a class shift with age, and the middle-aged people are generally higher than young people in terms of social status.

V. PRACTICAL APPLICATION AND VALUE OF AAE

In 1996, the Oakland District School Board in California, U.S.A. recognized the legitimacy of AAE. In 1997, many linguists, sociolinguists and language educators pointed out the educational significance of AAE [14].

English teachers have been thinking about how to make boring English lessons vivid, especially in elementary English classes. In the past, teachers often introduce the culture at the beginning of class to arouse students' interests to what are going to learnt later. This may be effective for some students, but a totally different culture is hard for students to accept, which will then make them get confused, and finally lose interest. It might be a new way to begin with a language variant which appears to be simpler than Standard English though the medium of music. Through practice, countries such as the United States and Switzerland have found that learning from dialects helps to master SE. Whether AAE is characterized as a language variant or a dialect, is not important. As long as it is regular and systematic, it can be applied to language teaching.

AAE cannot be said to be non-standard English, but it does differ from SE. AAE, especially its grammar, is not a good example for Chinese students to follow when learning written language. However, it is a very everyday language, which makes up for the common spoken problems among Chinese students. And it can be used as supplementary learning material. At the same time, it is necessary to strengthen students' understanding of standardized English and English variants, so that students can clearly distinguish between the two, and make a self-judgment before learning it. In [15], it indicates that the research on language attitude should focus on "non-standard" language speakers, so that it can help reduce language-based prejudice and discrimination. Based on that, language variant learning can help to shape students' value system, deepen their understanding to different cultures in the melting pot of American society, and cultivate their awareness of not to look at skin color through colored glasses.

VI. DEVELOPMENT TENDENCY OF AAE

Sociolinguistics is not only about using the present to illustrate the past, but also about perceiving the future through the present [16]. The ultimate goal of AAE research is to analyze and predict its development direction.

AAE has gone through three main stages of development, from a West-African-oriented language, to the English with further characteristics, and finally to the English with West-African elements. The fourth stage of AAE would be its deep interpenetration with Standard American English which will in turn take on the features of AAE gradually, such as the use of words like *cool*, *jazz*; of expressions like *What's up*; and of simplified English like *BTY* (stands for by the way). AAE is also moving closer to SE, especially in the grammar aspect.

Sociolinguist Bernard Spolsky hypothesized that two groups of people who speak the same language, and travel from the same place to live in two different destinations tend to develop their own languages towards different directions because of the distance and geographical boundaries[3]:28. This explains why AAE is different from West-African English. Afro-American are no longer isolated in today's society. The construction of roads and access to every family by television, radio and the Internet have broken down the segregation in modern society, reduced the variation of dialects and made the language more and more homogeneous. According to Bernard Spolsky, AAE tends to get increasingly closer to Standard American English.

AAE will certainly approach Standard American English in some ways, but the two will never overlap completely. It has been partially integrated into SAE, which, however, as the uniformed official written and spoken language will not accept all AAE rules. As long as heterogeneity exists, AAE will distinguish itself from other language variants. Second, any language variant is dynamic, including Standard English. The change of society and the change of speech community are the factors that affect the development of both. Not all languages are constantly evolving. It is possible that one variant keeps changing while the other stays the same. Based on that, they will unlikely overlap.

In fact, because so many factors will affect language variation, no one is sure about AAE's future. But under

current conditions, AAE fits the profile of fast and accurate style of communication in 21st century. Perhaps AAE will grow beyond imagination.

VII. CONCLUSION

The variants of any language and their common language are not superior or inferior to each other in terms of the code itself [17]. In essence, AAE is by no means African English, but a regular and systematic social variant. In the complex society of the United States, AAE is not only the language for Afro-Americans, but also used by some white Americans. Moreover, many people outside the United States also have AAE characteristics through music and second language acquisition. Therefore, the study of AAE is of profound significance to English teaching in China and to promote mutual understanding and communication among different cultures and nations.

Since each speaker will use different ways to express different attitudes and convey different information in different environments and situations, the factor of code-switching should be taken into account in the selection of corpus when studying the social factors of AAE. Music is a kind of language with which singers freely express without being induced, and thus has great research value. It is expected that more thinking and research on AAE will be carried out in China in the future.

As Bernard Spolsky said, the complex relationship between language and society is one of the most fundamental human phenomena, which needs to be explored and analyzed in depth [3]:78. Lastly, Geneva Smitherman [18], pioneering scholar of African American language, points out that we must broaden our conception of the language and its speakers, and further examine the implications of gender, age and class on African American English as global manifestations of it increase.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Wang Tian composed the original paper, conducted the research, combined with the music corpus, summarized the features of African American English systematically, and summarized its deviant factors and development trends. Yang yuan revised and refined the paper. Liu Jing gave the guidance and also revised the paper.

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