

African American Vernacular English in *Dumbo* (1941) Film

Bahasa Inggris Vernakular Afrika–Amerika Dalam Film *Dumbo* (1941)

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the popular English dialect which originated from the black people known as AAVE (African American Vernacular English), where its usage is not limited to the origin community. Two focuses of this study will be on analysing the grammatical characteristics of AAVE and its underlying factors within the utterances from the three characters in *Dumbo* film, which are; Timothy the mouse, the crow, and the clown by using qualitative method and the theory on AAVE dialect by Walt Wolfram and Rickford. This study applied the qualitative method and the data was gathered from coding character's utterances. The results showed that the three characters used AAVE grammar such as; verb phrase, negation, and nominals. AAVE grammatical characteristics that were used by the characters are copula absence, completive done, sequential be done, other verbal phrase characteristics, *ain't*, multiple negation, objective form them, and second person pronoun *y'all*. They also showed three factors on the AAVE grammar usage which are social class, age, and linguistic environment. These grammatical features are affected by the character's class in the society as lower-worker group, character's age which is in adolescence, and the linguistic environment surrounding the character which depends on the level of familiarity felt by the characters regarding the topic or the person. The AAVE grammar alongside the factors found in the utterances of the three characters proved that they all represent the African American heritage which is the AAVE dialect despite having different races. The underlying factors influencing their utterances proved that a language will not be exempt from the various variables within the society.

Keywords: African American Vernacular English; Dialect; *Dumbo*; Language

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bermaksud menelaah dialek Bahasa Inggris populer yang berakar dari orang-orang kulit hitam, yakni AAVE (African American Vernacular English) yang penggunaannya tidak hanya terbatas pada komunitas aslinya. Dua fokus penelitian ini

adalah menganalisis karakteristik gramatika AAVE dan faktor yang mempengaruhinya dalam tuturan dari tiga karakter film *Dumbo*, yaitu Timothy si tikus, si badut, dan si gagak berdasarkan teori dialek AAVE oleh Walt Wolfram dan Rickford. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dan data dikumpulkan dengan memberi kode pada tuturan tokoh. Hasil penelitian ini mengungkap bahwa ketiga karakter menggunakan gramatika AAVE berupa frasa kata kerja, negasi, dan nominal. Fitur gramatika AAVE yang digunakan oleh para karakter terdiri dari absensi kata hubung, completeive done, sequential be done, karakteristik verbal phrase lainnya, *ain't*, negasi ganda, bentuk objektif *them*, dan kata ganti orang kedua *y'all*. Ditemukan tiga faktor yang mempengaruhi penggunaan gramatika AAVE yaitu kelas sosial tokoh yang berasal dari pekerja kelas bawah, usia tokoh yang masih remaja, dan lingkup linguistik yang bertolak pada tingkat kedekatan emosional tokoh dengan topik atau lawan bicaranya. Adanya gramatika AAVE beserta faktor yang memengaruhi dalam tuturan ketiga karakter membuktikan bahwa mereka merepresentasikan budaya Amerika-Afrika dalam segi bahasa yakni dialek AAVE, sekalipun dengan latar ras berbeda. Faktor dalam tuturan mereka membuktikan bahwa bahasa dipastikan terpengaruh oleh berbagai aspek dalam masyarakat.

Kata Kunci: Bahasa; Bahasa Inggris Amerika-Afrika; Dialek; *Dumbo*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a system of communication that conveys meaning through written characters, sounds, gestures, and symbols. It makes it possible for people to communicate their ideas, feelings, and thoughts, which promotes communication and the sharing of knowledge between people and generations. Language use has a role in conveying messages to audiences [1]. In general, the use of language can be the main instrument in conveying information so that people know what their leaders' ideology is like [2].

A variant of the same language can be called a dialect when it contained differences within its vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammatical form [3]. It is also important to note that from a linguistic viewpoint, there are no dialects that are 'more correct' or 'better' than one another [1]. Dialects may vary based on the social groups or classes that are using it and can be used to associate its speakers with their identity, such as occupation, ethnic or race, caste, religion, and so on. Race or ethnicity particularly has received an abundance of attention as the important building block of language. The African-American Vernacular English, also known as AAVE, is one of the dialects associated with race, specifically black people [4]. This dialect originated from the enslaved African during American history, as they were treated as trades and faced oppression and segregation in the United States [5].

African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) depiction can be found in popular media, especially films. Films have a huge influence on people, due to its tendency on bringing up ideas or representation of a certain discourse, whether it stays true to the actual truth or not [6]. An example of AAVE representation in film can be seen in the film *Fresh* (1994). The interesting part of the film is how AAVE were used by non-blacks, instead the utterances were spoken by Latino characters, which means that dialect may be spoken by other races outside of the originating community [7]. Likewise, African-Americans and non-African-Americans speaking AAVE use similar features [8,9,10].

Based on this phenomenon; the researcher is interested in looking for depictions of AAVE in films that are done by characters who are not exclusively black. A movie that suits the criteria is Disney's *Dumbo* released in 1941. An important point that grabs the researcher's attention to this film is how the depiction of African American was done by different characters, both with animals which are the mouse and the crows. Alongside them AAVE was also used by the humans, namely the clown workers.

For this study, the researcher used Walt Wolfram's theory about the grammatical characteristics of AAVE and the theory by Rickford about the underlying factors in AAVE usage. So based on the background of the study above, the objectives of this study are: (1) to analyze the grammatical characteristics of African American Vernacular English used by the three characters in *Dumbo* film, and (2) to find the factors behind the African American Vernacular English used by the three characters in *Dumbo* film.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research uses a qualitative method design to analyze data available the data source which is the script of the film *Dumbo* (1941). Qualitative methods suited this research as the collected data were in the form of words, clauses, and sentences [11]. The researcher conducted data collection through detailed steps, including multiple reading of the data, setting boundaries, reviewing written data in the form of emphasizing needed information related to the research questions, and analyzing each data carefully. The data was analyzed by using Miles & Huberman's three steps: data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions [12]. Data reduction refers to the process of eliminating irrelevant data from the previously observed and collected data, while data display offers an organized assembly of information for conclusion drawing. The last step involved the relevant data and drawing summaries on whether the researcher's analysis had answered the formulated research questions or not.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Findings

3.1.1. Grammatical Characteristics

1. Verbal Phrase

This refers to the use of grouped verbs that function as a single verb. In AAVE, several characteristics that belong in this category are copula absence, invariant be, completive done, sequential be done, remote been, simple past had + verb, specialized auxiliaries, subject-verb agreement, double modals. The data is as follow: "I seen a peanut stand and heard a rubber band. ***I seen a needle that winked its eye.*** (*Dumbo*, min. 54:57 – 55:02)." In Standard English, the crow's utterance would have been written as "I have seen a needle that winked its eye". Despite this, the crow's utterance had omitted the complementary auxiliary verb have. The most compatible category for this utterance is the copula absence, which happens when a contractible auxiliary verb is erased completely from the sentence that is in a present-tense form. Thus, the crow's utterance was the only data that contained the pattern of copula deletion. The other example is "Crow: Hey, brother, w-w-wait a minute. Uh, don't go away feelin' like that. ***We done seen the light.*** (*Dumbo*, min. 58:09 – 58:14).

In this utterance, the crow spoke about how he just had an experience in the recent past which was seeing the light. In forming his sentence, the pointer word done preceded the past participle seen. This is to be distinguished from the past participle form of the verb do/has/have in Standard English. The usage of the word done as a time-marker for the AAVE grammar shares the same function as the present perfect tense in Standard English, which on the contrary, uses the verb has or have followed by past participle. Since the crow's utterance showed that the event happened in a close time frame, it also matched the function of completive done in AAVE grammar. Hence, the sentence 'We done seen the light' is identified as showing the grammatical characteristics of AAVE.

2. Negation

When someone swears, they are using a term that originally referred to locations associated with death, to scare someone, and also the term death itself. The following is the example such as "Timothy: ***I don't see nothin' wrong with 'em.*** I think they're cute. (*Dumbo*, min. 21:39 – 21:42)" The italicized words within this utterance indicated the existence of double negations. The words "I do not see" and "nothing", which were used by Timothy the mouse, had the meaning of him seeing nothing wrong with *Dumbo*'s ears. As opposed to the double negation function in Standard English which

forms a positive meaning, in AAVE double negation still forms a negative outcome. So, when Timothy used two negations, they did not cancel each other. In this case, the negation don't is further emphasized by using the negative indefinite pronoun nothing. So, Timothy's sentence meant he did not see anything wrong with Dumbo's ears, hence why he claimed that Dumbo's ears are cute in the next sentence. This use of the double negation fits the grammatical characteristics of AAVE.

3. Nominals

According to Crystal, nominals refer to a term used in some grammatical descriptions as a substitute for noun. It can also be interpreted as "words which have some of the attributes of nouns but not all" (Crystal 328). The existing noun phrase in the AAVE dialect may consist of several characteristics which are absence of suffix *-s* in possessive pronouns and plurals, associative plural *an 'em*, second person plural *y'all* and possessive pronoun *they*, objective form *them*. The data is as follow "Timothy: Wake up, Dumbo! Don't look now, but I think we're up in a tree. **Aw, don't pay no attention to *them scarecrows*.** (*Dumbo*, min. 53:39 – 53:42). In addressing which scarecrows exactly that Timothy referred to, he used the word *them*. In Standard English, the determiners/pronouns used for referring to a specific people/several subjects would be these/those. In AAVE, they instead use the pronoun *them*. Again, it is a deviation from the function of the pronoun *them* in Standard English, which is originally to become the referred people/subjects. But in AAVE, the pronoun *them* precedes the referred noun. This pattern could be seen within the utterance above, so it could be inferred that it showed the grammatical characteristics of AAVE nominals.

3.1.2. Underlying Factors

The AAVE utterances spoken by the three characters were all products of many factors that played along in influencing the characters. The underlying factors are social class, age, gender, and linguistic environment.

1. Social Class

Social class refers to the division of society based on economic, social, and cultural factors. It often includes aspects like income, occupation, education, and lifestyle [13]. The following is the example "Crow: I saw a clotheshorse, ***He rear up and buck***. And they tell me that a man made a vegetable truck. I didn't see that I only heard. (*Dumbo*, min. 55:25 – 55:32). The line above contains the italicized clause "he rear up and buck" which was spoken by the leader of the crow. The clause did not follow the subject-verb agreement rule in Standard English, so it is categorized as one of the grammatical characteristics of AAVE. The verbs 'rear up' and 'buck' do not have the addition of suffix *-s*. What might influence this choice of grammar was the social background of the crows. They talked about seeing a baseball bat before, along with the news of a man making a vegetable truck which he admitted he did not see for himself. It is implied that the crows did not hang out in a certain place and often travelled around. They also did not talk about having a job or doing something for their job so it could be inferred that at that point of the conversation, the crows were unemployed. This automatically makes the social class factor very reasonable in regard to the crows' AAVE dialect, especially the absence of suffix *-s* feature.

2. Age

Age emerged as one of the key determinants of AAVE's grammatical features, according to Wolfram's 1969 Detroit study. Black youths from lower socioeconomic classes, aged fourteen to seventeen, deleted their copulas 68% of the time, which is twice as often as their adult counterparts (38%). According to another McNair-Knox study, a 15-year-old girl removed her copulas 81% of the time, whereas her mother did the same only 35% of the time and a seventy-six-year-old woman in the community did so just 15% of the time [4]. The data is as follow "Crow: Hey, brother, w-w-wait a minute. Uh, don't go away feelin' like that. ***We done seen the light***. (*Dumbo*, min. 58:10 – 58:14). The data above shows absence of the copula *have*, which is one of the characteristics of the AAVE grammar. This matched the factor of young age towards the AAVE usage, in which teenagers had deleted their copulas up to 68% of the time. According to the context of the dialogue, it can be inferred that the crows are still young since they were shown to receive earful nagging from Timothy who acted maturely. After receiving the scolding, all the crows had cried, and they quickly wanted to apologize to both

Timothy and Dumbo. While apologizing, they also said they have seen the light, meaning they have been enlightened and ready to be a better person. Due to this, it can be said that this utterance by the crow is influenced by his young age.

3. Language Environment

Rickford stated that a speaker's relationship with the environment may produce a variety of the AAVE grammatical characteristics [13,14]. A case of this can be seen from a study of a teenager named Foxy Boston deleting her copula when in different social settings. When she was interviewed by a familiar figure, she felt comfortable and resulted in deletion of 3rd person singular present tense suffix *-s* up to 73% of the time, followed by deletion of her copulas up to 70% of the time. In comparison, when interviewed by a stranger, her deletion of suffix *-s* dropped down to 36% and her copulas down to 40% of the time [10]. The topics talked within each interview also affected her use of the AAVE grammatical characteristics. When she talks about graduation or plans about her college and career, Boston's copula deletion fell to 43%, but when talking excitedly about relationships, it rose to 86% ((Rickford and Rickford 128). The data is as follow 'Timothy: You oughta be proud. You're a success. Look. A peanut! Come on. Eat it. Got lots of vitamins. **Give ya a lot of, uh, pep.** (*Dumbo*, min. 38:00 – 38:10). The verb "give" in the sentence above was highlighted because it contains the deletion of the suffix *-s* in the present tense verbs. This was one of the grammatical features of AAVE in the verbal phrase. When looking at the context of the utterance, it was between Timothy and Dumbo who were sharing a vulnerable moment together. Dumbo, who got very down had trusted Timothy on cheering him up. This context aligned with one of the underlying factors behind the AAVE usage, which was the linguistic environment. AAVE speakers tend to delete the suffix *-s* whenever they are talking with a close person or with a topic they are interested in. Therefore, this data of Timothy's utterance having AAVE grammar could be said to be influenced by his close relationship with Dumbo

3.2. Discussion

In this part, the researcher presents the discussion based on the findings of this research. The first result of data analysis in this research is about the grammatical characteristics found in the film *Dumbo* (1941). From the four categories of the AAVE grammatical characteristics proposed [15], the most used feature among the three characters was negation. Timothy used the negation feature *ain't* up to 6 times and the multiple negation feature up to 8 times. The crow only used the negation feature *ain't* up to 2 times. While the clown used the negation feature the least, combining the *ain't* and multiple negation feature within a single utterance. Besides the use of the negation feature, there was also the verbal phrase feature found quite frequent within the utterances from the characters. Lastly, the third AAVE grammatical feature found in the utterances was nominals, which consisted of the objective form them which Timothy spoke with, and the second person plural pronoun *Y'all* within the crow's utterance.

Secondly, the result obtained by the researcher's data analysis is the underlying factors in the usage of AAVE within the three character's utterances. Within the film, different races were depicted by having human character and multiple non-human characters, which were the talking animals. The mouse was part of the minor race since he was the only mouse existing in the whole story. The crow, who was obviously black feathered, could be associated with the skin of black people and thus was the obvious representation for black people. As for the clown, he was only shown as a silhouette from within the resting tent, but from a social point of view, it appeared that clowns were viewed very lowly, and they tried to earn respect and recognition from the audiences. These qualities along with their AAVE speeches enhanced the notion of them representing the black people and their history [15]. These different backgrounds affected their usages of AAVE as well [10].

4. CONCLUSION

This research found that depiction of AAVE in the film *Dumbo* (1941), which were uttered by three characters, had showcased that among four major grammatical characteristics according to Wolfram's theory, negation was the most prominent. Additionally, the study found three underlying factors that affected the utterances of these characters, first, the characters' social class, in which they belong to the lower-worker group. Second, their young age shown by the playfulness and naivety of the crows, and lastly the linguistic environment surrounding the character as seen from close friendship

between Timothy and Dumbo, which allowed him to use AAVE a lot within their conversations. The wide variables of the factors underlying the AAVE grammatical usage had shown that languages would not be exempt from external influences in the society and is not exclusive to a certain race only.

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