

STANDARD ENGLISH VS. BLACK ENGLISH VERNACULAR

Standard English is considered “the standard language.” What makes Standard English the “standard” is that it is the language spoken by the “educated, affluent, power-elite of the nation (Sword and Wheeler 11-12). The Standard dialect is the elite dialect in an area. When a group is considered the elite, the language that group speaks unconsciously become the elite language “standard.” The term “Standard” has become a problematic term because it connotes nonstandard language as being bad or incorrect. It implies that there is one correct language when actually there isn’t.

Standard English is considered well developed and grammatically correct, but vernacular varieties are also well developed and grammatically correct. Vernacular varieties are used in familial, casual, and community settings. Standard languages are used in the professional and business settings (Sword and Wheeler 12). A widely used vernacular language in America is Black English Vernacular. It is a language that has been connoted as “incorrect grammar.” It is not incorrect and actually has its own grammar rules. The difference is that it is appropriate for different contexts, other than academic and workplace writing. With this in mind, we elect to teach another grammatically correct form of English. Both forms of language are rhetorical, but the contexts in which they are used make the difference. A writer and speaker would have to know when to use a particular language. Since academic and workplace classes exist to prepare or enhance students for the professional world of work, teachers and professors support the teaching of Standard American English (SAE).

The following exercise is a style exercise that follows our previous discussions on communicating appropriately in the workplace. We deemed this exercise necessary after several of you expressed concerns about appropriate workplace communication. The exercise will help you determine the appropriate communication mode for a variety of

rhetorical contexts. The style activity will provide practice with code-switching, choosing language patterns to fit particular settings (Swords and Wheeler 57).

There are four paragraphs that are in Standard American English and four in Black English Vernacular. Based on the given rules of Black English Vernacular and the rules of Standard American English that you've been taught your entire life, translate the paragraphs according to the directions.

RULES OF BLACK ENGLISH VERNACULAR

1. Habitual *be*

The verb *be* typically replaces its conjugated forms: *am, is are, was, and were* (Rickford & Rickford 113).

2. Consonant cluster simplification

A. Final consonants

Delete the final consonant in a word and replace the consonant with an apostrophe.

Ex: tes' and test (150)

B. Middle consonants

Delete the middle consonant in a word and replace the consonant with an apostrophe.

Ex: th'ew as in "He th'ew the ball to me" (102-103).

C. Consonant after vowel

Delete the consonant in a word after the vowel.

Ex: he'p=help afta=after yo=your

3. Soul vocalization

It is often the pronunciation of consonants that distinguishes the speech of blacks from the speech other ethnic groups.

A. Dropping consonants

Delete the unstressed initial and medial syllables in words.

Ex: (a)bout= `bout (be)cause= `cause (a)fraid= `fraid.

B. Metathesis

Switch two consonants in a word, often to achieve an easier articulation.

Ex: aks (axe) for ask (102-104)

C. Replacing letters with other letters

Replace the *er* letters at the end of words with an *a* (*ah* sound) and add an apostrophe.

Ex: oth(er)=otha' furth(er)=furtha' numb(er)=numba'

4. Negative forms and constructions

A. Double negatives

Use negative verbs such as *ain't*, *don't*, or *wadn't* with a negative noun or pronoun.

Ex: "She *wadn't no* young lady, *neither*=She wasn't any young lady, either" (123).

B. Ain't

Ain't is the most common negative form in Black English Vernacular. Use as the equivalent of Standard English *am not*, *isn't*, *aren't*, *don't*, *hasn't*, and *haven't*.

Ex: I ain't lyin'=I am not lying (122).

5. Tense-aspect markers

Forms such as *be*, *steady*, and *been* come just before or after the verb and tell when (tense) or how (aspect) something happened.

A. Done

Done emphasizes the completed nature of an action, and/or its relevance to the present.

Ex: For example, I done had [=have had] enough.

B. Finna/Wanna/Gonna

Finna is used for immediate futures (events just about to happen).

Ex: I'm finna go=I'm about to go

Finna, *Wanna*, and *Gonna* are derived from *fixing to*, *wanting to*, and *going to*. Both blacks and whites in the South use these terms for immediate future (See Rule 2). We can say *I'm gonna* when the *to* is part of a verb. For example, *to write* means *gonna write*. But we cannot say *gonna* when the *to* is part of a prepositional phrase, as in *going to North Carolina* (Swords and Wheeler 126).

6. Zero copula

Zero copula is the absence of *is* and *are* in a sentence. *Is* and *are* are called copulas because they couple, or join, a subject and a predicate.

Ex: "She Ø in the same grade."
"People Ø crazy" (Rickford & Rickford 119-120)

Directions: Based on the given rules of Black English Vernacular and the rules of Standard American English that you've been taught your entire life, translate the paragraphs according to the directions. Some words don't have rules, but use the context clues to translate slang, which is the best way to learn slang terminology. The slang is enclosed in quotes.

STANDARD ENGLISH VS. BLACK ENGLISH VERNACULAR STYLE EXERCISE

Directions: Translate the paragraphs that are in Black English Vernacular into Standard American English.

1. I'm finna go down to the mill to see if any men be willing to he'p me plow my garden. I don't want no "good for nothin's." I want some shop ones 'cause I'm trynna get this here done real quick. I be ready to "bust somebody head" 'bout "slackin' on the job." That's why I gotta have some shop ones.

2. I ain't gonna go to that church for that weddin'. I don't 'gree wit' it an' I ain't going! Terry don't need to go neither if you aks me! I done told him that he gonna go there and wanna stop the weddin'.

3. He be runnin' 'round actin' crazy when he wake up late. An' he always wake up late. Bein' his roommate ain't no joke. I done had enough. Dis' mo'ning we got into it. He gonna use up all the hot wata' and not tell nobody.

-
-
4. Grandma' han' made these quilts. E'ry scrap is special. She finna give me one. I love de one wit' patches from her weddin' dress. I aks her if she had a hard time cuttin' up her dress! She say she had a harda time makin' her quilt.

Directions: Translate the paragraphs that are in Standard American English into Black English Vernacular.

1. Everybody is sick at Mary's house. I have called to check on them and see if they are going to see a doctor. I am not about to constantly check on them. I have other things to do! I know it sounds mean, but I don't want to do it any more.

2. The farther I tried to throw the ball today, the shorter distance it went. I don't know what I'm going to do about it. I am angry because I threw it farther last week; therefore, I know that I can do better.

3. The teacher did not do a good job explaining what she expects on the test. Now, his students look uneasy. They are about to start asking a lot of questions. They will probably ask how long the test will take, what kind of questions will be on the test, and how many points will be possible.

4. No, I don't want to go the mall to buy anything. I have already went over my spending limit for this week. In fact, I hope I did not bounce any checks. My husband would kill me if I went to that store and spent our savings.

WORKS CITED

- Rickford, John R. and Russell J. Rickford. *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000.
- Swords, Rachel and Rebecca S. Wheeler. *Code-Switching: Teaching Standard English in Urban Classrooms*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 2006.