

Living in Two Worlds:  
Speaking BEV in a  
SE World

by

Wendy M. Hunt

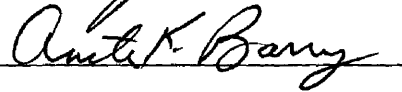
Presented to the American Culture Faculty  
at the University of Michigan-Flint  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master of Liberal Studies  
in  
American Culture

Winter 1995

First Reader

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Julie J. Hall", written over a horizontal line.

Second Reader

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Anita K. Barry", written over a horizontal line.

Living in America and the question of a specific American culture mean vastly different things to most Americans. Just as the backgrounds of Americans are ethnically diverse, so are their lives. The sphere within which most people spend their lives varies in regards to language, traditions, beliefs, and values. These all influence each other, creating almost as many different American cultures as there are Americans. The following pages discuss how one of these factors, language, affects the lives, education, social mobility and careers of those who use it.

All people use some form of language each day. This takes many forms such as speech, sign language, or written language, as well as nonverbal body language. How this language is accepted by others affects how its user will be accepted by others. People come to the United States from all over the world and bring with them a magnificent collection of languages. Speech patterns vary greatly from coast to coast and from east to west due to the constant movement of people and the languages they speak. Linguists, those who study languages, have conducted many studies on the varieties of English spoken in this country and the resulting attitudes people foster toward them.

Researchers have come to the conclusion that all English speakers speak a "dialect", or variation, of English. Linguists claim no single dialect is inherently better than another. Each is mutually intelligible to other speakers of English. The main difference lies in how each of these dialects is accepted by people outside of that particular speech community. Every dialect has a specific

phonological (sound) system, grammar, and vocabulary. The most widely accepted dialect in the United States is Standard English (SE). This is, with some variation, the dialect utilized by television and radio announcers, educated people, literature, and the business world. It often comes as a surprise to people when they learn for the first time that it is no more linguistically valid than Southern English or New York English. There is no single dialect that is linguistically *better* than another. All dialects are adequate for communication, learning and speech. What makes some seem more or less accepted is the way society views them. This is often the case with the dialect known as African-American English, Black English, Black Dialect, or Black English Vernacular (BEV). BEV has existed in the United States for several hundred years, getting its start on the islands of the Caribbean and the plantations of the South. Its speakers have struggled with the question of the validity of their language and the difficulty of trying to fit into the dominant white culture. The result is often a sense of living a linguistically dual life. They use one dialect (SE) for business and socializing in the dominant culture, and another (BEV) for their home dialect and among friends. It is important to note here that not all black people speak BEV, just as it is true that not all BEV speakers are black. BEV is a dialect that may be spoken by any person who lives in a speech community where this is the primary dialect of the people, usually those in a working class environment, and, especially, the young.

BEV has a rich heritage. There are different theories as to how it developed; however, most linguists now

believe it is the result of pidgin and creole languages which developed during the years of the slave trade when speakers of a multitude of African languages needed to find a way to communicate amongst themselves as well as with the primarily English-speaking traders. This view, called the *creolist theory*, argues that each ethnic group in Africa spoke a different language and it was practical for intercommunication to learn the makeshift language used by the traders. This pidgin, as it was called, was based on English and various West African languages. It was no one's native language and was used only for the purpose of simple communication.

Because of their fear of insurrection by the enslaved Africans, ship captains and, later, plantation owners housed together Africans from different ethnic groups so they would find it difficult if not impossible to communicate and stage a rebellion. What resulted was the Africans' adoption of the pidgin as a language with which to communicate both on the voyage to America and then on the plantations. Over time, this became a more complex and complete language which developed into a creole spoken by the descendants of these slaves and, eventually, by most of the slaves themselves. Linguists theorize that as slaves were exposed to more of the English-speaking culture of the plantations, decreolization occurred in which the creole became more like English in its structure and vocabulary while still maintaining some characteristics of the African languages upon which it was also based. Today this creole still exists in the form of Gullah, or Geechee, which is spoken by some rural and urban blacks along the Atlantic coast of South Carolina and Georgia, as well as the Sea

Islands off the coast of the Carolinas.

As speakers of BEV migrated to large urban areas in the north, they took their language with them and maintained it. This was due, in part, to the forced racial segregation they faced as well as a need for group solidarity. The result is a form of English that is both widely spoken and greatly misunderstood by those unfamiliar with it. Many people have, and still do, perceive BEV as a dialect that "...is more regional than racial, i.e. more Southern than Negro...The so-called black English is basically the same slovenly English spoken by the South's under-educated poor white population." ( as quoted in Speicher/McMahon, p.36). To put it more simply, BEV was long considered a substandard variety of English spoken by the uneducated masses. It was not until the 1960's that much true research was conducted on the subject. At this point linguists determined that BEV was, in fact, a valid and distinct dialect of English with its own syntax, vocabulary, and phonology. These same features have been the subject of much debate over the last thirty or so years.

Controversy has arisen from questions of its validity as a legitimate separate linguistic system. There are also opposing views on how BEV should be treated in education. Some view it as simply a class-related dialect while others maintain it is a marker of their ethnic identity.

Exactly what distinguishes BEV from SE? The following chapter will take a detailed look at the specific rules and styles used by BEV speakers as well as examples.

## CHAPTER 2

Just as speakers of SE have specific rules of grammar, so do BEV speakers. These rules are most often learned during childhood and are followed unconsciously by the adult speaker.

BEV can be separated into several areas of study. There are differences in sentence structure, pronunciation, and speaking styles. Being familiar with each of these helps greatly in understanding the issues and concerns of BEV speakers today.

The phonology of BEV is one of the more easily explained and distinguishable features of this dialect. BEV uses "the same number of sounds as White English (approximately 45 sounds counting English intonation patterns) but these sounds exist in a few different patterns of distribution" (Smitherman, p.17). In other words, speech rhythms, voice inflections, and tonal patterns are different from those of SE. While these vary among BEV speakers (just as SE intonations vary by region) the following are a few relatively common pronunciations used by speakers of BEV. Speakers of BEV will change the initial /th/ in a word to a /d/ so that the word *them* becomes *dem*. When the /th/ is at the end of a syllable it is pronounced with an /f/. In that case the word *south* becomes *souf* and *birthday* is pronounced *birfday*. Sometimes the /th/ is pronounced as a /v/ as in *bruver* for *brother*. Like Southern English, BEV is also an r-less dialect which means that both medial and final /r/'s in words are dropped. The resulting words take on different sounds, which may lead to difficulties in comprehension,

meaning, and spelling. The word *more* would sound like *mow*, and the word *sore* would be pronounced and heard as *sow*. BEV also neutralizes the front vowels of /i/, /e/, and /E/ before nasal consonants which results in words like *pin* and *pen* becoming homophones.

The softening of medial and final /l/'s, called *l-weakening*, makes words such as *help* and *will* sound like *hep* and *wi*. Consonant cluster deletion also occurs which drops the word-final consonant in a cluster of two or more. This occurs mainly with the alveolar consonants of /t, d, l, n, s, and z/. Words like *test* and *ghost* become *tes* and *ghos*. This can provide the BEV speaker with a number of difficulties in reading and aural exercises if they are based on SE. Chapter 4 will discuss these issues further as they relate to the problems faced in school by youngsters speaking BEV as their home dialect.

Speakers of BEV will also change the pronunciation of vowels when used in conjunction with the /ng/ ending so that the word *thing* would be rendered as *thang* and *ring* would become *rang*. Another characteristic of BEV is to shift the stress to the first syllable of some words so that the word *po-LICE* would be pronounced *PO-lice*. Finally, voiced stops are devoiced at the end of stressed syllables so the word *midnight* is often pronounced *mitnight*. These pronunciations help to give BEV its unique characteristics.

It is not pronunciation alone that has given rise to the controversy surrounding this speech. Perhaps the most crucial and distinguishing feature of BEV is its grammar. Grammar is a very rigid system in any language and is one of the most resistant to change. Speakers of BEV throughout the country share several commonalities regardless of where

they live and what socioeconomic class they belong to. When people are asked to name a feature of BEV that stands out to them, most will name the case of *invariant be*. This is sometimes called *habitual be* and refers to an ongoing act or condition. *Habitual be* is common to creole languages and its usage is one thing people will hyperextend when they are trying to mimic the dialect. For example, if a BEV speaker says "She be late." that speaker means "She is late again", or "She is always late". However, if the speaker wants to communicate the idea that this is not a usual occurrence and that most often the subject is on time, that speaker might say "She late". A second use of *be* is its use to signify future events such as "She be here this weekend", or "He be going home tonight".

*Be-deletion* is a separate rule used to signify an event fixed in time or something that does not repeat itself. In this case, the *be* is deleted. An example of this can be seen by looking at the above sample once again: "She late" would simply mean that she is late just this one time. Another example is "This my mother" or "That man too tall for her little short self" (Smitherman, p.21). As a general rule, where SE allows for contractions, BEV allows for `be' deletion. *Be-deletion* and *invariant-be* are separate rules pertaining to different uses of *be*. In the case of *invariant be*, if the verb were to be added back in, it would become *is*, *am*, or *are*. For past action only recently completed and still relevant to the future, BEV speakers use the word *been*. "He been absent ten time this semester" and "I been knowin' him a long time".

To indicate past tense the speaker of BEV uses the context of the sentence or the entire conversation to signal



time as often as possible. As such, there is no *-ed* in past tense or past participle usage. A BEV speaker could correctly say "I pass my tes today" or "I pass all my tesses las year". Because the speaker used *today* and *las year*, there was no need for the past tense suffix. The deletion of the past tense or the past participle suffix also relates to consonant cluster simplification. Often these words end in a consonant and the addition of *-ed* creates a consonant cluster. If keeping to the rules of form, the BEV speaker will drop the *-ed* sound to get rid of the consonant cluster such as in the word *talked*, which would become *talk'*.

Likewise, most verbs in BEV are not marked for person and the same verb form is used for both singular and plural subjects. The sentences "He run fast" and "They run fast" both employ the same form of the verb *to run*; yet by using the context of the sentence it is perfectly clear what is being talked about. This same idea also extends to the ideas of possessives and plurals. BEV speakers will often not add an apostrophe *-s* or *-s*. Instead, the sentence context can clarify the meaning: "That Mary book on the table" or "Three boy went with him".

BEV will also place stress on the subject of a sentence so the BEV speaker will use another form of the subject for emphasis: "My son, he have a new car" or "The girl who left, she my friend" (Smitherman, p.29). This is a feature that may or may not be used all the time in BEV speech.

The pronoun *it* is used much in the same way as SE but there is one additional function. Sometimes *it* is used to introduce statements but has no real function to the sentence. An example of this can be seen in the statement

"It was a man had died" (Smitherman, p.29). Just as SE sentences sometimes require some type of filler words, so does BEV. The difference is while SE typically uses *there*, BEV uses *it*. The result is something like "It's a party tonight at Leah's" or "It's three girls in that family".

In addition to the aspects of grammar and pronunciation, there are stylistic differences of BEV that are quite distinct from standard English. These affect the meaning and response to speech within the BEV speaking community. These features can often be traced back to the African cultures from which they are derived. The BEV pattern of call-and-response is a vital part of black churches and religious as well as secular music. Speakers of BEV also place strong emphasis on the value of a strong oral language. Ethnic groups in Africa had no written language but did have a rich oral tradition. "Through song, story, folk sayings, and rich verbal interplay among everyday people, lessons and precepts about life and survival were passed down from generation to generation" (Smitherman, p.73) It was this oral tradition that prompted Zora Neale Hurston, an African-American author of the 1920's, to write some of her more popular works, and has helped to develop the gospel music of today. Today speakers of BEV tend to come from backgrounds where there is much higher value placed on the spoken rather than the written word. As a result, "...only those blacks who can perform stunning feats of oral gymnastics become culture heroes and leaders in the community. Such feats are the basic requirement of the trade among preachers, politicians..."(Smitherman, p.76).

It is also valuable in the BEV speech community to be

able to use the idiom. It is often used to convey a strong point in a short time. When added to the sounds and delivery of BEV (nuance, tone, and gesture), it often becomes even more powerful and accepted than SE. Why? It is often simpler and more to the point than SE. The following quote by the Reverend Jesse Jackson makes this very clear: "Africa would if Africa could. America could if America would. But Africa cain't and America ain't" (Smitherman,p.3). By using BEV tones and rhyming pattern, it becomes a strong, succinct concept. The metaphor is another feature employed by speakers of BEV to teach stories and lessons. It is often used by black preachers in their sermons and will be discussed more thoroughly later as it relates to the black preaching style.

The above samples are just a few characteristic of BEV speech. They include basic pronunciation differences and rules of grammar. They have not included the rich variety of words that have been added to the vocabulary of SE through its contact with BEV. These will be addressed in later chapters as they relate to different topics. The general rules of grammar and pronunciation provided above are a background for the next chapter, which discusses how a speaker or speakers of BEV face a greater challenge in the educational world because of their different background in the English language.

### CHAPTER 3

BEV undoubtedly affects the speech of people throughout the United States. Much of the slang and even some common SE words are the result of BEV being adopted into the language of mainstream America. Where it came from is a question many have tried to answer. There are several schools of thought concerning the origins of BEV. The creolist view is one of the more widely accepted and will be addressed in greater detail below.

Some of these words come directly from West African languages. Linguist Lorenzo Turner found almost 6,000 words during a fifteen year study of Gullah and other speech along the coastal regions of South Carolina and Georgia (Smitherman, p.43). Some of the following words were identified by him as being of direct African descent: yam, tote (to carry), gorilla, elephant, gumbo, okra, jazz, sorcery, banana, and banjo.

According to Smitherman, many other words have found their way into the vocabulary through loan translation as well. One such example is the BEV term *bad* which means *good*. It is adopted from the West African Mandingo *a ka nyi ko-jugo* which means *it is good badly, or it is very good* (Smitherman, p.44). Other words that are direct loan translations from West African languages are: bad mouth, hip, skin (as in "give me some skin"), bogue, and okay (Smitherman, p.44).

The connection between these West African languages and modern BEV is Gullah. Gullah was the midpoint of development of this language and the linguistic facts are

strong in support of the theory that BEV is "...now simply at a later stage in the de-creolization process" (Smitherman, p.15).

While many words have been borrowed, the other main reason for the development of BEV in the United States was the oppression faced through slavery and racism. Blacks felt a need to code or disguise their English from the whites. The resulting language had to have meaning for the blacks while at the same time sounding meaningless to any whites who might overhear it. An example is the term *Miss Ann* to denote a snotty white woman or *ofay* to mean foe. The latter term was a form of Pig Latin. Chapter 5 will discuss the effects this coded language had on the slave songs and spirituals that have become so well-known to the SE speaking world. After the abolition of slavery, the coded dialect was maintained as a means to exclude whites.

The black churches have also been influential in spreading BEV and the BEV tradition. Because of segregation, black churches have, historically, continued to grow, but in separate ways from the white churches. The reasons for this will also be discussed further in Chapter 5.

#### CHAPTER 4

When one considers all the components of BEV, it is easy to see this is not simply some errant form of English, but a complex system in its own right. This system is at the heart of many legal and emotional debates of people all over the nation. It was not until the 1960's that BEV really came into its own as being recognized by linguists as a valid and legitimate language, and this issue is still argued in the courts of this country today.

This debate manifested itself in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1977 when the parents of fifteen elementary school children brought suit against the Ann Arbor School Board for their "failure to take into account the cultural, social, and economic factors that would prevent them from making normal progress in school" (Labov, p.168). These parents argued that the teachers were not knowledgeable of BEV's linguistic features and therefore carried and conveyed negative feelings toward the children that were hindering the educational process. In addition to this the children were labeled as learning disabled, tracked into low achieving groups, and retained in their current grades without any clear reasons being given as to *why*.

In the face of the preceding discussion it was apparent the children of Ann Arbor were facing challenging situations, but some professionals still tried to put the blame for the children's failure in the home:

"...psychologists searched for explanations of educational failure in the early development of the child--bad nutrition, female-dominated households, inadequate cultural

stimulation, noisy surroundings." (Labov, p.174).

Despite these prevailing attitudes, a few linguists supported the parents and were able to point to evidence of linguistic bias in several instances. A specific example was found in the Wepman test, a standardized test used to test a student's ability to distinguish sounds (Labov, p.168-169). The linguists isolated several examples from the Wepman that used words that were homonyms in BEV. A few of these examples included "pin vs. pen", "sheath vs. sheaf", and "clothe vs. clove" (Labov, p.168-169). Due to the reasons mentioned above, all of these sounds are the same to the BEV speaker. This can be compared to the Midwesterner who does not make the same differentiation between *Mary*, *merry*, and *marry* that a person from the East Coast might. This occurs as the speakers substitute sounds from their own linguistic system or make insignificant sound differentiations in different places. The result is a change in meaning for the speaker or listener. This resulted in some of the students being labeled as hearing impaired when they were merely victims of inappropriate testing. Linguists also testified that children who spoke BEV in the home were having to learn what amounted to a new language before they could begin to learn to read and write SE. This was due to the differences between SE and BEV that the children encountered. In a sense, they were behind before they even started. Because the students did not differentiate between certain words, they were unable to give the teachers the "correct" pronunciation and spelling. Continued efforts made by the teachers who did not understand the BEV system could ultimately have resulted in children becoming ashamed of their language or self-

conscious and even more reluctant to read or speak aloud. Another problem is rhyming games, often popular in elementary schools. These are often problematic for the speaker of BEV. To the child who speaks BEV, *sin* and *lend* would sound the same, i.e. *sin* and *lin* (because of neutralization of front vowels and consonant cluster simplification). To the SE speaking teacher with no knowledge of BEV, this makes absolutely no sense.

William Labov, one of the expert witnesses for the plaintiffs, wrote that the judge in the Ann Arbor case ruled in favor of the plaintiffs based on USC 1703 (f):

"No state shall deny educational opportunity to an individual on account of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin by...(f) the failure of an educational agency to take appropriate action to overcome linguistic barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instructional programs."

(Labov, p.169)

The judge also "found nothing in the previous history of legislation that specified such barriers must involve foreign languages" (Labov, p.169). He mentioned that nonstandard English could just as easily result in a language barrier as a foreign language. In his decision the Ann Arbor School Board was instructed to: "...submit to this court within thirty (30) days a proposed plan...1) to help the teachers...to identify children speaking "black English"...and 2) to use that knowledge in teaching students how to read standard English" (Pietras, p.1).

The plan submitted to Judge Joiner outlined an inservice program for Ann Arbor teachers to focus on teachers' attitudes, knowledge and skills concerning BEV. The remaining problem is a lack of sufficient additions to the everyday curriculum that Labov and others feel are



necessary to show teachers how "to deal with students in the classroom who have a different linguistic system than that assumed in the curriculum" (Labov, p.194).

Ann Arbor is not the only school system lacking this desired curriculum. Many schools face the same problem, leaving educators in a difficult position. An encouraging note is that many universities are now requiring students in their education programs to take introductory linguistics classes that both discuss and expose students to different dialects, including BEV. If awareness and open-mindedness are increased, speakers of this dialect will have some assistance in being taught the standard.

This raises another point of concern. Should BEV be taught in the schools? Should students who speak BEV be taught by teachers who speak BEV, and, if so, should their textbooks be written in BEV? All of these questions have been raised in the days since Ann Arbor and have been met with mixed responses.

Depending upon who is surveyed, the reaction to those questions is varied. Some would answer "yes" to all three. Others would flatly answer "no". Most people, however, seem to fall somewhere in the middle. Linguists will tell anyone that "all languages and dialects are equally adept at communicating necessary information among their speakers" (Speicher/McMahon, p.383). If this were the only criterion involved, there would be no question about the validity of BEV as a language. These same linguists will also be the first to agree that there are other factors involved. Mainly, languages and dialects are seldom treated the same way by any society. Biases and prejudices will rear up and interfere. When the issue of dialect arises in education,

nearly everyone shares the same view. Speakers of all dialects recognize the need to teach and learn SE.

Negative attitudes toward BEV have arisen for many reasons although primarily because of racial tensions, and misunderstandings. Most early studies of BEV focused on the form of BEV spoken by lower-class street-wise young men. Not surprisingly, their speech was freely loaded with profanity and sexual references. It is also not surprising that most people would look down on this form of speech in educational, professional, and family surroundings. What needs to be realized is that most BEV speakers do not speak like that; they are merely using an alternate set of grammatical and phonological rules. It is important to realize that, like SE, BEV exists along a continuum. Therefore, educated BEV speakers will sound much different than streetwise adolescents even though they may share some of the same grammatical formations and phonological elements.

BEV speakers, themselves, are often the first to express their disapproval of BEV being taught in the schools. "This became clear when well-meaning scholars attempted to introduce elementary school readers that used vernacular Black English" (Hoover, p.65). A study conducted by linguist Mary Rhodes Hoover surveyed the attitudes of twenty-eight black parents and community people (Hoover, p.66). They were asked to respond to bidialectal speakers of BEV and SE and give their opinion as to which dialect of English they preferred. The results of the survey showed the informants generally preferred BEV in all areas but felt the ability to code-switch (change from BEV to SE) was highly valuable. BEV speakers do not hate their dialect but

they have accepted places to use it. School is not one of them. Parents, particularly those at low income levels, felt that their children would learn BEV from friends and the community and "that the school's job is to teach the 'other kind'--the kind they don't know" (Hoover, p.81). These parents felt they had to rely on the schools to teach the standard since they themselves did not have command of the SE dialect and it was important to help their children to get jobs. At the same time, they were also in agreement that teachers should be aware of the features of BEV to enable them to educate their students without offending them as well as to allow them to select curriculum that helps students overcome the disadvantages of speaking BEV. Most parents also felt that if non-BEV speaking teachers were to attempt to speak BEV to their children, it would sound patronizing.

In a study conducted by Speicher and McMahon on attitudes towards BEV, all of the informants rejected the idea of BEV being taught in the school setting. The informants were all selected from a university setting and included both students and instructors. All were African-American. Some informants rejected the idea of BEV entirely. Some used BEV to retain ties with their families and home communities. Those who cited it as a hindrance felt that they were unlikely to use BEV in either their community or professional settings. As one student informant said, "I don't think every African-American would need it. I needed it on the south side...[be]cause if I didn't have it I just would have found it very hard to socialize" (Speicher/McMahon, p. 398). Another informant said, "I think it is a disadvantage...I do not allow them (her

children) to speak that type of language, the slang, the dialect. I don't like it and I don't like for them to speak like that..."(Speicher/McMahon, p.400). Most of these people felt that SE was necessary for social mobility and that children needed to learn the standard at school. Most linguists will concur. Nearly everyone recognizes the need to learn SE to remain upwardly mobile in American society. Most will also recognize the need for teachers to promote SE in the school to assist this effort. BEV speakers need to know the dialect that will "get them the job", regardless of fairness.

Since many feel it is the responsibility of the educator to teach SE, the next step is to look at the barriers faced by BEV speakers which must be recognized and addressed by the educators before they can begin teaching SE. Two problems BEV speakers face are 1). being labeled as learning disabled and 2). being tracked into low-achieving groups that are not given opportunities or materials needed to excel academically. As seen in the Ann Arbor case, schools are sometimes quick to label and slow to question why some students score so erratically on special education tests. Two examples from the Ann Arbor case stand out, as in the instance of "M" and "R". "M" was certified as learning disabled. When questioned how and why this decision had been made, "Dr. K. said there was evidence of perceptual handicaps, a difference in his visual and auditory processes, and the pattern of scores showed extreme strengths and extreme weaknesses. It was a very irregular pattern" (Labov, p.168). When the Wepman test was given to "R" to test his ability to discriminate sounds the report went as follows: "...He was attending well to the

task, but he had extreme difficulty. This might contribute to his spelling problem. Mr. M. mentioned that this is a pattern in R's speech. He actually doesn't seem to hear sound differences" (Labov, p.168). Both of these cases go back to the homophone differences discussed earlier. Due to the child's substitution or non-differentiation of particular sounds ( *pin/pen, sin/lend* ) it is again obvious that a child who speaks BEV must be able to recognize auditory differences that exist between SE and BEV. Likewise, teachers must be aware these differences exist and do their best to understand the culture, language, and home environment of the child. A major problem in education today is that many teachers fail to recognize that their students sometimes function in two very different worlds. Those who recognize this will still sometimes fail to acknowledge that the differences exist. Either way, it makes the learning process painful or even impossible for both sides. Students become confused and angry; teachers become frustrated and angry. Little is being taught, nothing is being learned. Children are resentful of the teacher and the learning process. When they lose the desire to learn nothing can be done to force them to absorb the material. Learning is effectively stopped in its tracks. This was seen very clearly in Ms. Jones classroom, an eighth grade language arts class. The students were primarily speakers of BEV, Ms. Jones was a SE speaker, did not understand BEV and was clearly frustrated about the hostility of her students. During one class, a female student called out, "Ms. Jones, I need anurder one. This one tore up." The teacher shouts "What? I can't hear you"(Jordan-Irvine, p.21). In another incident, the

student was a young man who, in previous dialogue with the teacher had not had his question answered for the same reason. He became frustrated and put his head down. Ms. Jones was passing out paper later and shoved one under his arm. The following is what occurred: "The student lifts his head slowly, stares angrily at the teacher and says, 'What she be trippin' about now?' Ms. Jones shouts, 'What did you say?'" (Jordan-Irvine, p.22). A female staff member surveyed in the Speicher/McMahon study found evidence of this misunderstanding in a future teacher,

"One student said she had been doing some clinical experiences and she said 'When I'm in a classroom, and I see students who can't say *this*, and they say *dis* and *dis*,' she said, 'I just want to take them by the jaw and say 'Can't you get it right?'"

(Speicher/McMahon, p.396).

If one considers that "when high school students were asked who or what had influenced them to be the kind of people they were, 58 percent of them named one teacher or more." (Jordan-Irvine, p.48). It is a very serious matter. Teachers are extremely influential in shaping students' lives and attitudes towards learning. That chance be turned into a negative experience for the student. As the professor cited in Speicher/McMahon told the student above,

"Where does all this negative energy come from and what would make you think that you would be able to influence that child's growth and development if you touch them in that violent manner and wanted to impose who you thought you were on them? ...It would seem to me that you want to examine your attitudes about knowledge...and you want to look at the relationships you have with others, particularly those that you want to influence. And if we're going to be violent and disrespectful that's dysfunctional in the teaching-learning environment."

(Speicher/McMahon, p.396)

Simple understanding of a dialect could allow so many more young people to succeed in education and avoid falling

through those cracks in the academic system.

Two other reasons BEV speakers have difficulty in school are the speech styles themselves and the speech roles that are learned at home and taken to school. The talking styles have been described as: "exaggerated language, mimicry...spontaneity and improvisation" (Jordan-Irvine, p.27). Two names for this speech are "styling" and "signifying" along with many others. Many teachers are not aware of styling and signifying, which can lead to problems. In young black males, verbal sparring sometimes leads to rough play. Some researchers have speculated that this play may be misinterpreted by the teachers and other students as a physical attack and they become intimidated. This is due to the pushing and shoving that sometimes results as the styling reaches its high points. If this is the case, more separation and bias occur. More people need to be aware of this verbal repartee and, if possible, find some positive in it. In the Speicher/McMahon study, a female professor felt it was important to know the value of "the verbal repartee [of BEV], which is a very good skill and uses wit and humor and timing, verbal sparring, think[ing] on one's toes..." (Speicher/McMahon, p. 400).

The second problem BEV speakers face in a classroom is the question-answer patterns used by the teacher who speaks SE. Heath (1983) showed that very often white middle-class parents and teachers used the "known-answer" method of questioning. In the known-answer method the answer to the question is usually only one or two words in length. Conversely, parents and children who use BEV often use verbal storytelling, metaphors, and analogies to answer questions and explain ideas. One can only imagine the

irritation of the teacher and the frustration of the student when he or she attempts to give a lengthy and (what seems to the teacher) roundabout answer to a seemingly simple question! After being rushed to answer and then cut off, it is not surprising that the child may lose interest in the subject. When the teacher seems quite happy with a one or two word response the BEV speaker will probably become quite bored. If, in addition to this, they have been inappropriately tracked "...they lose interest, misbehave, and eventually drop out. In a recent national poll (cited in Honig, 1987), 60% of black children reported that school was too easy for them" (Jordan-Irvine, p.14).

The black child who manages to beat the system and learn SE because of a teacher, parent, or environment that encourages positive learning is often perceived as being of higher ability and more middle-class than black students who speak black English (Jordan-Irvine, p.30). This is only one myth that shows the strength of the negative attitudes that still prevail about BEV.

Many BEV speakers have chosen to adopt SE as their dialect of choice as well as necessity. As more and more BEV speakers adopt SE, questions have arisen about the future of BEV in the United States. Is it facing the same future as Gullah, as more and more assimilate to SE, is it remaining stable, or, as some claim, is it growing and changing in the ways all healthy languages change?

If one spends time observing and listening to adolescent speakers of BEV, one can argue that the latter is true. Language change is most often innovated by younger members of a speech community, so, by observing them, linguists can begin to make some determinations as to the



future of BEV in the United States. In listening to the informal speech of students in a seventh grade urban classroom setting, it appears BEV is stable at least among that age group. It is also apparent that BEV is exhibiting healthy changes just as any language must do in order to remain 'alive'. The following examples are taken directly from seventh and eighth grade students at McKinley Middle School in Flint, Michigan through either direct observations made by the teacher or conversations held with the students in which certain BEV terms were a part of the students' responses.

While the students who are involved with street gangs are at an extreme end of the BEV continuum, the average students at McKinley give a much more accurate picture of the BEV spoken in this school. Many of these students are members of a middle class community of quite highly educated parents, but still maintain some aspects of BEV in their speech, whether it is grammar, inflection, vocabulary, or all three. The lexical items are the most changed in the past two years. In the past, if a teacher verbally disciplined a student or made a smart comeback to an equally smart comment, the other students would say the errant student had been 'dissed'. Now, it is much more likely for the students to respond with 'snap!'. Both past and current fashion trends have made it popular for boys to wear their pants sagging around the hips with a pair of boxer shorts underneath. While the fashion has remained the same, the terminology has changed. Two years ago, one was 'busted' for 'having his butt in a sag', while today, that same student would be 'busted for saggin'. If something is displeasing or stupid by their standards, it is 'chatty' or

'janky' while the term 'dope' or 'straight' for something good has remained.

Keeping this in mind, a strategy for teaching SE in a positive manner and accepting the differences of BEV needs to be formulated. Since it is highly unlikely that BEV will ever gain equal status with SE, this needs to occur soon and in a way that will stand the test of time. If educators and researchers could find a way to work together with this in mind it would be of great benefit to all involved.

Proponents of BEV feel that since it is an adequate language for communication, it is also a language adequate for learning. These are the same people who argue for the use of a BEV textbook in the classroom and against the teaching of SE in the schools. Other people, including many of the informants cited in Speicher/McMahon, feel BEV should only be a bridge to learning SE and then abandoned. "The job market and the wider society expected a certain language use, and the teachers felt it their responsibility to prepare students to meet these responsibilities... 'if you speak this language (BEV) here... the interviewer may not even understand what you're saying, so it's best to change..." (Speicher/McMahon, p.396).

A third group, which many will claim has the most practical view, propose teaching SE in the school setting but encouraging the children to maintain BEV as a home language or to communicate with friends and community. Ideally this would allow the BEV speaker to maintain solidarity with friends and family while still giving that person a fair chance in the business world. None of these views seems to take into account any conflict that may be felt by the BEV speaker who must still live in two

linguistic worlds.

In the school setting solutions to this dilemma are beginning to emerge. "Traditionally, black children who spoke a non-standard dialect were viewed by educators as being in need of remediation" (Cullinan, p.3). Cullinan believes that learning to read will be facilitated by the extent to which the written language corresponds to the child's spoken language (p. 15). If beginning textbooks would present information in a way that would match the children's vocabulary and culture, it would speed the reading process. The children are not necessarily in need of remediation, just realignment while they are learning the standard. A prime example of this can be seen in the author's classroom. Students are aware of the differences in speech between themselves and the standard. As a result they will hypercorrect some words in an attempt to follow the established patterns of acceptable speech. In one writing assignment the students were asked to write a modern fairy tale that began "Once upon a time...". Many of the papers of students who used BEV began the story with the words " Once a pond a time..." This shows an awareness of consonant cluster deletion (even if the students are unable to put a technical name to it) and the attempt (although unnecessary and incorrect) to correct that error. If adjustments were to be made in the traditional "spelling test" and put more emphasis on the *content* of what children are being taught, there would be less fear of failure. An example of this fear was witnessed in the author's classroom when it was announced there would be a spelling bee as part of the review for the final exam (to help students recognize the words in print that they had been hearing and working

with). There was no grade on the spelling bee as it was just designed to be a fun activity to facilitate studying for the final exam. What occurred was terrible fear on the part of some of the BEV speakers, almost to the point of refusal to even try to spell a word! They had given up before they had even begun. What was occurring in other classes or in previous experiences to make them that fearful of failure?

Teachers themselves must be knowledgeable of BEV to both communicate with the student (to understand what the student is saying) and to target the areas in which problems are likely to exist (homophones, spelling problems, pronunciation and grammatical differences). After teachers recognize these 'danger zones' to learning and adjust their lessons to address and resolve these difficulties, students can begin to achieve more. These teachers should, if necessary, create new materials which function as a bridge to the reading material to be learned.

Cullinan and others believe that younger children have the easiest time learning the standard. This information was taken from a study cited in Black Dialects and Reading, a publication of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). In addition to elementary school being an age at which learning comes quickly, it is also an age at which children are beginning to develop attitudes and perceptions about themselves as worthwhile people. Teaching needs to take this critical age into mind and create a safe environment in which these children can learn. They are beginning to form attitudes they will take with them and into every classroom they enter for the rest of their lives. The manner in which they learn should not cause them

embarrassment or in any way threaten them so the learning process stops.

As was mentioned earlier, BEV speakers tend to use a more elaborate verbal system than do SE speakers. To prevent and alleviate the boredom these children may feel, all students should be given work that allows for free expression. This can be done in addition to the known-answer work so all learners have a chance to be successful. The possibilities for this type of work, particularly in language arts or social studies classrooms are considerable. Letting children develop their verbal skills in a time when the job market is crying out for people who can think and speak critically and creatively is good for lifetime learning. Children should be able to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of concepts before the 'red pen' is introduced. After the students have had time to put their thoughts on paper, corrections can be made. Teachers should not have students so fearful of making mistakes on rough drafts that freedom of thought is inhibited. One method, used in a middle school classroom in a local urban school is to have students do a 'free write' in which students do not worry about spelling, paragraphs, grammar, etc. After the free write, students pair up and exchange papers to critique in a positive manner, offering suggestions for changes. When this is completed, the teacher collects the work and reads over it, adding the final corrections before passing it back to the students. At this time, the students recopy their rough draft and make the necessary changes. There is no grading done until the final copy is correct. This allows students a 'failure-free' environment in which to work, while learning the

grammar and spelling of the standard.

When creating materials for youngsters to use, it is important to locate or make items that draw on and serve the unique experiences of all the students. Any teacher will be quick to agree that when the students connect with the subject, learning is much quicker and easier for both sides. Likewise, the teacher who treats BEV with respect and sensitivity will find his or her students more receptive to learning. An example used by Cullinan (p. 73-74) was a dialogue containing both SE and BEV. The text is a conversation between two sisters, one who uses BEV and one who uses SE. The goal of the dialogue is to have students listen for differences and later use this as a model for role-playing SE and class writing activities. Getting speakers to recognize differences and be non-judgmental at an early age helps to erase the problem of bias at later ages.

If the above methods are not successful and there is reason to believe a learning disability or hearing impairment does exist, it is necessary to look carefully at the tests to be administered. They should be screened in advance to make sure they are equally fair to both BEV and SE speakers. Testing officials will need to make certain there is no conscious or unconscious bias in the tests that might be unfair to speakers of non-standard dialects. This means the minimal pairs using sounds not discriminated in BEV need to be eliminated from the test and replaced with some more appropriate. There have also been suggestions that special education tests need to be made more individualized and allow for more free expression. This permits children to explain answers in their own words and

eliminates the `right answer/wrong answer' problem.

The issues raised by an examination of BEV and its place in education are complex and controversial. It is also unlikely they will ever be resolved to the complete satisfaction of all involved. It is up to educators and researchers to continue to work hard in their respective fields to erase the barriers that separate speakers of BEV and SE and make the problem of living in a dual world non-existent. BEV continues to heavily influence many aspects of daily life and will be discussed further in the following chapter as it affects different aspects of secular and non-secular lives of the American people.

## CHAPTER 5

BEV is a dominant force in American lives today. It permeates the culture of the United States in the areas of music, literature, and theatre as well as the American church. Many of today's popular hymns have their roots in the cabins and fields of former slaves. The styles of worship in many Christian churches today were influenced by the slaves many years ago. Writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Paul Laurence Dunbar used the black dialect as a way to express racial pride while still pleasing the mainly white audiences they wrote for. The impact BEV has had on American society has been great and widespread. This chapter will focus on BEV as part of both the religious and secular worlds. BEV developed in both at nearly the same time but for different reasons. The roles of the black preacher and the black author or musician were not very different in the eyes of white society in those years. All of them were used for the entertainment of the white audiences they catered to. The following pages will discuss how this occurred and what its effect has been on the modern world.

Black preaching has existed for many years. Early records show that blacks were being converted to Christianity in the United States as early as 1623 (Mitchell, p.66), and by the year 1763 schools had been established to help train blacks for missionary work (Mitchell, p.66). There was controversy among the slave owners about encouraging the slaves to convert to Christianity. They feared the onset of revolts should the blacks be allowed to congregate for worship. They were also



concerned with what might happen once the slaves were allowed to hear the teachings of the Bible. They feared that slaves might then question the legitimacy of slavery as it related to this new religion they were being taught. Some owners even questioned the very humanity of the slaves and wondered if they even had souls to save.

Black preaching took decades to develop, and it was also something that helped the continued development of BEV. The first black preachers were trained because it was difficult to find white men who were willing to work the long hours for the meager monetary reward that preaching offered. The irony was they were not allowed to preach before black congregations. Because of the fear they would incite their groups to insurrection, early black preachers were forced to address mainly white congregations. These early preachers were popular among the whites for two reasons. First, they were a novelty to whites who seldom had the chance to see black people. Second, they were more interesting than the white preachers of the day. The intonation patterns and rhythmic cadences of BEV were pleasing to the ear and encouraged white listeners to hear them.

Upon closer consideration it is clear to see what was so interesting about the black preachers. Because of their African culture they spoke with a musical or pleasing cadence in their voices that was pleasant to the ear. There would often be chanting or moaning, which has also been traced back to the languages of Africa where nearly everything in ceremonies and religious rites was either sung or chanted. Black preaching also relied heavily on the use of imagery, something common in the BEV of today. Often

the preachers would use animals as characters in their stories to help teach the moral lessons of the day.

As mentioned previously, the pattern of call-and-response was also used. This feature is also common in modern BEV both in secular and religious practices. The call-and-response required the participation of a congregation that calls back to the preacher as a regular part of the church service. Call-and-response was common in both white and black churches up until the nineteenth century. This began to change as white preachers gained more access to higher education and their sermons began to resemble scholarly recitations. The content of these sermons was soon above the heads of the white congregation, who, in turn, became more inhibited about responding, lest they do so at an inappropriate time. They were also uncomfortable with interrupting the 'lecture' being read to them. The result of this was the gradual diminishment of spontaneous oral response in the white churches. It does still exist in some instances, even in relatively conservative churches in Flint, Michigan, but is much less common than in earlier eras.

Today black and white churches vary in style much more than they did in earlier times. This was due, in part, to the isolationism that occurred in the aftermath of the Civil War. Blacks and whites were separated by the discrimination that manifested itself in segregation. As a result, each continued to grow and evolve without the influence of the other into what exists today. Christianity became more popular among both free and enslaved blacks, and church membership among blacks grew substantially in the nineteenth century. Between 1860 and 1870 "the African Methodist

Episcopal Zion Church grew from 20,746 to 200,000 members, by 1880 the African Methodist Church was claiming 400,000 members, mostly ex-slaves" (Broughton, p.30). After separation from the white Anglo churches, black churches added much of their own background into their worship. African influences permeate many aspects of their services from the sermon to the music.

Part of these African influences are seen in their world view, which also affects the shape and movement of the service. African culture believes the world moves in a rhythmical and cyclical fashion as opposed to linear (Smitherman, p.75). This element is evident in black sermons. To the SE speaker or someone used to the strict agenda of many white Christian churches, the sermons do not tend to sound very organized, yet they proceed in an orderly way. The preacher guides the congregation rather than merely arguing opposing points or delivering a scholarly address as many white preachers do (Mitchell, p.179). Example 1 in the Appendix demonstrates how the preacher probes the question but moves from point to point until he has the congregation focused. Closely associated with the concept of cyclical movement is the premise that God alone controls the service. Therefore, black services are relatively free from the time constraints that govern most Anglo churches. Worshipers in a black church tend to feel that the service will conclude when God deems it appropriate, not when people feel they have sat long enough. This attitude also frees these churches from following a written schedule (if there even is one). Historically, many early black worshipers were unable to read or write so there was little need for a printed

bulletin. Church members simply memorized the responses they needed to know. Today this manifests itself in a relative lack of printed prayers and responses.

As indicated earlier, call-and-response patterns are vital to the function of the service. The reason behind this stems from the African belief in harmony and balance among all things in the universe. Repetition of short, easily remembered phrases elicits a spontaneous response from the congregation. This does not result in chaos during the sermon because protocol is being followed. It is perfectly acceptable to respond to something in the sermon that moves a person, however if the preacher is 'announcing the text,' or reading a scripture and the introduction to the service, it is not appropriate to interrupt (Smitherman, p.87). The success of call-and-response stems from the preacher's ability to make the congregation feel at home while addressing the problems they face on a daily basis. In addition to the required responses that occur at specified times during the service, there is a type of spontaneous response called 'real dialogue' that occurs when the preacher says something particularly relevant to the congregants' lives (Mitchell, p.97). Real dialogue can only occur when the congregation is comfortable with the issues the minister is addressing through the use of allegory and scriptural references (See Example 2 in Appendix).

How black preachers do this is explained below. First, they must be in tune with their worshipers. As the people become comfortable they feel the preacher is addressing each one of them personally and often find it difficult to not respond. Next, since the call-and-response pattern of black preaching depends on audience participation, the minister

must connect with them from the start to assure the congregation's role in the service (Mitchell, p.110). This is accomplished using one of BEV's most powerful tools, the story. Preachers are able to illustrate sermons through storytelling or implying they are telling a story. They again pull on their strong oral tradition and depend heavily on timing, and their ability to gain the audience's understanding through the use of their characters, the plot, suspense, climax, and, ultimately, a message (Mitchell, p.132). While not exclusive to black churches, another example of the use of oral tradition is the use of the familiar (daily events) to illustrate the unfamiliar (scriptural events). An example might be found in the person who gave up the lead in a race to help an injured person. The preacher would relate the unselfishness of the runner who gave up the certainty of a win to help someone in need to the good Samaritan of the scriptures.

Since BEV is not merely grammar but a set of stylistic conventions as well, material is presented in "familiar and folk-art form" and reinforces the identity of blacks by "putting into the mouth of God the language of the people" (Mitchell, p.155). Many preachers use BEV in their sermons even if they are fluent in SE. Many will use grammatical features that are similar to SE while changing the cadence and sound of the words so they take on the familiar sounds of BEV. Such examples may be the consonant cluster deletion mentioned earlier or the softening of certain vowel sounds so they take on a more relaxed but more highly stressed tone. An example could be seen in the addition of a diphthong sound /ay/ as a substitution for the more tense vowel sound of /i/. An example of this can be seen in the difference

between the two pronunciations of 'mine'. In the first case, the word would be pronounced as /mayn/ rather than /min/. Many black clergy are bidialectal because they must not only be able to communicate with their congregation, but with the SE speaking community as well (Mitchell, p.161). In preaching, BEV is the dialect of choice as "the vast majority of Black-culture churches have found it difficult to understand or relate to trained black clergymen preaching whitese to them" (Mitchell, p. 149). Solidarity is another factor. As previously mentioned, the success of call-and-response depends on the preacher being able to communicate with the congregation and "neither faith nor culture will be communicated by a preacher whose language sounds to the ghetto resident as if he is putting on airs" (Mitchell, p.153).

Closely related to the black preaching style in the United States is the domain of gospel music. The roots of gospel music in the United States date back to the eighteenth century, when English church hymns met the African slaves in America (Broughton, p.16). Later, in the 1730's, the Great Awakening came and brought new life to American churches, which were experiencing a decline of membership due to the strict religious beliefs of the day. The old hymns were often dull chants left over from England, which did little to generate new audiences. This changed when Dr. Isaac Watts began to provide new melodies and lively tunes to old hymns (Broughton, p.17). It was at this time that the hymns gained the interest of the slaves, whose own backgrounds were rich in African melodies. Black folk music was born from these tunes and was based on real life and death in the New World. These songs expressed their

faith, mourned their lives as slaves, and expressed hope and deliverance from that fate. Like the sermons, their songs were based on the stories of individuals that were also the common experiences of many. Gospel showed a rising over one's problems into a type of victory. One of these problems was slavery. Bernice Reagon, a gospel singer, expressed it the following way:

"Into our songs we worked the full range and intensity of our legacy in this land that made us slaves. Into our singing we forged the sounds of a people of resolute spirit and fortitude in this land that debated our worth as human beings"  
(Broughton, p.7).

Reverend A. W. Nix said, "Gospel songs come from prayer, meditation, hard times, and pain. But they are written out of divine memories, of the feelings in your soul" (Broughton, p. 43). Any way one looks at it, gospel music has heavily influenced the world of music.

In earlier years gospel hymns became a part of the encoded dialect of BEV, a way to signal slaves of the various stops of the Underground Railroad. On one plantation the hymn, Steal Away to Jesus was sung by slaves after they were forbidden to attend worship services at the Indian mission across the river. The hymn was sung on the days of the worship services as a way to inform one another of the services, and as a signal that later that night they would 'steal away' to the freedom of worship at the mission after the overseers had all retired for the evening (Broughton, p.24). Harriet Tubman, a conductor on the Underground Railroad, regularly used hymns to notify slaves she was nearby and was preparing for a run to freedom.

After the Civil War the South was a poor place for the

former slaves. Some, finding white audiences clamoring for their music, went on 'gospel tours' to raise funds for their colleges. However, there was a need to adapt BEV to the white world, and the music they sang was not true gospel but rather a form of traditional folk hymns sung just a little differently. Like the black sermons, true gospel music is formed on a 'small word base' and is repeated slowly for emphasis in a call-and-response pattern. An example of this can be seen below in the Negro spiritual "In the Mornin'":

Call:	"In the mornin' when I rise,
Response:	Give me Jesus!
Call:	You can have all the world, but
Response:	Give me Jesus!
Call:	'Twixt the cradle and the grave,
Response:	Give me Jesus!
Call:	You can have all the world, but
Response:	Give me Jesus!

It also follows the "natural pattern of Black singing and speaking, neither of which is prone to depend on great numbers of words in a brief utterance" (Mitchell, p.175). This call-and-response pattern in gospel, like preaching, attempts to unite the speakers and listeners in a harmonious movement.

Music and the written word are often closely connected in the form of songs and poetry. Some of these songs gained great popularity in the 1800's as a new genre of theatre developed, the minstrel show. The minstrel show in the United States was one avenue that African-Americans, among others, used to develop their own form of folk-art. Because the early shows carried little equipment they were able to perform virtually anywhere, including the frontier of the West. The minstrel show contributed greatly to the development of the American musical theatre and was a mainstay of American popular music for well over fifty



years.

Minstrel shows developed from a variety of sources: "Eighteenth century plays...around the time of the Revolution, and, of course, on the plantations of the South, where many African elements found their way into the country" (Mates, p.76). The first successful minstrel was Thomas Dartmouth Rice, a white man, who gained recognition for his portrayal of a crippled black man. His character, Jump Jim Crow, helped to create the first minstrel characters, using this character in an "...attempt to emulate the dress, the manners, the speech, the song, and the dance of blacks from various parts of the United States" (Mates, p.80). The following example from Jump Jim Crow, incorporates one of the most commonly stereotyped aspects of BEV in the minstrel show, such as the substitution of the /b/ sound for the /v/ and /d/ for /th/:

So I wheel about,  
I turn about  
I do just so,  
And ebery time I wheel about,  
I jump Jim Crow.

Broadway is a pretty place  
And de Battery has de bench  
All for to accommodate  
De handsome nigger wench  
(Mates, p.77)

Early emphasis in the minstrel show was on authenticity and "the 1820's and 1830's found the main styles of black impersonation being set" (Mates, p. 77). Later, however, "it came to lean more heavily on some aspects of black people's lives and less heavily on others, particularly as caricature became the dominant mode." (Mates, p.83). Later, American minstrel shows contributed much to how blacks were treated in song and dance. These shows mocked and ridiculed the black race. The characters spoke in thick, exaggerated

dialect and portrayed blacks as lazy and foolish (Brasch, p.46). White audiences from the North found the minstrel shows fascinating since most blacks were so far removed from white society, and whites were curious about them. This factor helped the minstrel show to retain its popularity for many more years. It was not until the 1860's that blacks themselves were allowed to perform in the shows, mostly after the conclusion of the Civil War. The first all black minstrel show, the Georgia Minstrels, was opened in 1865 by Charles Hicks. What was happening almost at the same time was the emergence of slave narratives that told what life in bondage was really like. The narratives were written in BEV but were published mainly in SE with only the direct quotes of the slaves remaining in BEV. These narratives were not the first dialect writings to appear in print. As early as 1767 people were attempting to write in dialect (Brasch, p.17). Written mainly by whites in the Colonial period, it was not truly accurate, but did contain some basic elements and followed simple rules of BEV. James Fennimore Cooper was the first major American author to give the slave a major role in his stories, but his writing still contained dialect errors and inconsistencies.

The mass media have broken the history of dialect writing down into several cycles. Brasch lists the Antebellum cycle as the era of the minstrel show, followed by the periods of the Civil War and Reconstruction in which blacks were stereotyped as the happy slaves of the pre-Civil War South. In the 1920's blacks again gained the interest of the whites and stereotyped writing continued. At this time, however, more blacks were beginning to write in an attempt to understand themselves and their place in society.

It was not until the 1960's and the Civil Rights era that people began to purposely write in BEV and not use it only as the speaking voice of a character. Brasch notes it was also at this time that people were beginning to recognize BEV as a legitimate form of English and begin conducting serious linguistic studies in the area.

The nation's first successful newspapers began to evolve during the Ante-bellum cycle. The nation's new upper class had the time and money to read for entertainment. The common man had the magazine. It was in the nineteenth century that interest in the slaves grew among the whites. The idea that slaves could sing and appear happy (singing encoded spirituals) even among hardship was fascinating to them. The media picked up on this and dialect writing became popular. Early dialect writing was not very accurate (Brasch, p.25). Most of the writers were whites who followed and wrote in the exaggerated dialect of the minstrel shows. Following the Civil War, however, research was done by author William Francis Allen, who documented the history of BEV and Gullah in the United States as well as some of its distinct dialect features (Brasch, p.61). After this, dialect writing became more accurate, particularly as blacks were allowed to begin publishing. One such individual was Paul Laurence Dunbar.

Paul Laurence Dunbar was born in Ohio in 1872. His parents were former slaves who had moved north after they had gained their freedom from their masters in Kentucky. Dunbar's father died in 1885 and Dunbar was raised primarily by his mother. They moved often as he was growing up and he attended predominantly white schools. Most of his friends were white as well. In school he was the editor of the

school paper and was active in the debate clubs. As a result of his education, Dunbar both wrote and spoke in SE. He began writing his first poetry at age 16, using SE.

It was unfortunate for him that he lived at a poor time for blacks. His writing had to please the white audiences in order for him to gain any success as a writer. This was also an era of intense interest in dialect writing. Black writers had to either conform to the thought of the day (and write dialect) or risk jeopardizing their careers and incomes. Dunbar, although writing for mainly white audiences, wanted to write for black audiences. At that time in history there were relatively few black readers. Most were simply too poor to subscribe to the newspaper and their educational level in general was very low. This left Dunbar little choice. When he began his career in the 1890's, dialect writing was distorted, stereotyped and vulgarized. He had to either share in this or ignore it. In the late 1800's, there was a great interest in the groups that made up America and the dialect poetry of the "uneducated black" was well-established among both white and black authors (Revel, p.43). Dunbar's early works were poems written in clear, simple language but they were not dialect (Revel, p.42). Dunbar faced the dilemma of all black writers of the day, doing what he wanted, or doing what earned him money. "The black writer must not merely live in two worlds; he invariably writes for two worlds" (Revel, p.17). Dunbar was recognized mainly for his dialect poetry, a style he was not at all happy with. He never even traveled to the Deep South until 1898, six years after he wrote his first dialect poem. He wrote his first dialect poem in 1892, but it was not until 1894 that he had his

first poem published by Century. It had to fit the style of the day, which was every stereotype that could be affixed to the black. Despite this, he was a hero in the black community early in his career because he had been successful. It was not until the 1930's and 1940's that blacks rejected his dialect writing as a derogatory portrayal of blacks.

Dunbar himself was well aware of the conflict. He held the opinion that dialect was an inferior medium and "chafed at the popular demand for dialect work" (Revel, p.55). Dunbar was an eloquent speaker in SE and was in demand for his pleasing voice. He wrote dialect merely to please those who paid him because he was, first and foremost, a writer, something he did not want to give up. The dialect he wrote in was not solely BEV. He was also popular for his writing in the German, Irish, and Hoosier dialects of the day. His own words give feeling to the frustration he dealt with in his world, "You know, of course, I didn't start out as a dialect poet...I could write it as well, if not better...and now they don't want me to write anything but dialect." (Revel, p.52).

Dunbar's early collections of poetry were written mainly in SE, with the dialect poems pushed far to the back of each volume. This does not indicate an embarrassment of his background. Dunbar was very proud of his racial heritage and often chose to write about it. Many of his poems written in Literary English have black themes. Unlike modern writers, Dunbar made little use of dialect to express protest or racial pride. Revel illustrated it the following way:

He retained to the end a sense of the  
validity of an African American view of

life and served this as and when he could. But to do so when he frequently felt compelled to disguise or muffle this view inevitably contributed to the 'double consciousness', the sense of divided purpose, that is a fundamental part of his experience as of all African American's experience at that time

(Revel, p.52)

Dunbar died of tuberculosis at an early age, but left behind a substantial body of work, and the first large quantity produced by a black American author. His works include over 400 poems, four collected volumes of short stories, enough uncollected to complete two more volumes, four novels, essays, and lyrics for theatre.

Another black writer known for her dialect work is Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston was a controversial writer who lived during the years of the Harlem Renaissance ( a period of creative expression of the Negro that was not stereotyped ) ( Hemenway, p.28). The Harlem Renaissance reached its height during the 1920's in the United States. She was praised by whites and scorned by blacks for her use of black dialect in her writing. Stories such as her collected short stories used BEV for the voice of the characters, but SE for the rest. Her short story "Sweat" is one example. The characters in "Sweat" speak in dialect that is relatively accurate. The following excerpt from "Sweat" illustrates this. Note the presence of the /th/ to /d/ transformation: "Skyes, what you throw dat whip on me like dat? You know it would skeer me--looks just like a snake, an' you knows how skeered ah is of snakes" (Hurston, p.39). Hurston, many felt, "played the white man's game". There is little reliable information on her life because she was very private. Much of her writing reflects this. She attended

white colleges and spent a great deal of time collecting folk stories for her work as a folklorist and anthropologist, but she also wrote to publish fiction. Her stories, such as "Spunk", "Isis", "Sweat", and "The Gilded Six-Bits" are just a few examples of some of these short pieces. Her writing included "extensive dialogue in Black English" (Brasch, p. 192), which was meant to give a feel of the language as it related to the culture. Brasch (p. 190) notes that Hurston is inconsistent and inaccurate on paper. There are really no clear reasons for this except that possibly her own linguistic system blocked certain sounds which were not distinguished in print. She was a speaker of SE and her dialect writing, like Dunbar's was done for money.

Hurston was heavily influenced by the black story telling tradition of her home town. She was a great storyteller and many of her stories were told at parties (using the oral tradition) rather than written down. Why? She was raised in a culture where the ability to act and hold attention was the mark of an artist. There was little reason for her to write the stories down (Hemenway, p.64). It was also difficult to tell a story on paper with the same effectiveness with which one could tell it orally. It is hard to insert nonverbal nuances such as tone and rhythm into the written word. Hurston did try to do this with some of her stories but they were not as effective as the original stories she created using the influences of her past. Hurston's popularity lessened, and, when she died in 1960, she was poor and relatively forgotten.

Today, prominent writers such as Alice Walker and Nikki Giovanni have brought attention back to Hurston as they have

used her as an inspiration in their work. As mentioned earlier, there has been an increasing interest in BEV in literature as the dialect of pride and choice. "Today's black writers are making Herculean efforts to create a literature that will reach and reflect common black folks" (Smitherman, p.179). The new black poets are leading this movement. People such as Sonia Sanchez use BEV to project not only the voices of black characters, but their own voices as well. There is growing pride among a group of people whose lives have been oppressed and ridiculed for decades. From the sermon, to gospel music, to the words of their authors, they have made a lasting impression and have begun to gain some legitimacy. However, some question the effect the use of this dialect (as the only dialect spoken by a person) will have on an individual's success in the job market and in social mobility in general. Many parents of BEV speakers fear the consequences their children will face in a society that places such a high prestige on the standard. Chapter 6 will discuss these issues as they relate to social mobility in the United States and the possibility that it is not and never will be accepted by the 'establishment' as a valid form of speech.



## Chapter 6

Language holds the key to many doors. In this world it is the determining factor in many aspects of an individual's life. From the first words one utters to the last, language is used, judged, and decisions are made based upon what flows from a person's mouth.

This occurs not only in Third World dictatorships or class-structured societies such as Great Britain, but in the United States as well. Speech and power have long held corresponding roles in this world. If one is able to 'speak properly', he or she has access to education, jobs, and positions of power. Conversely, if one fails to acquire this 'proper' speech, that individual may be forever relegated to lower level jobs, fewer opportunities for advancement, and denial of social mobility.

"Linguists argue that all languages and dialects are equally adept at communicating necessary information among their speakers. Unfortunately, no society behaves as if all dialects are equal" (McMahon, p.383). Within the United States, especially when considering dialectal differences in areas such as New York or the South, judgements about social class, intelligence, and even friendliness are made solely on the basis of the way in which one speaks. In Europe, primarily England, dialect affects judgements about social class. In Germany, dialect affects education and what schools a student can gain entrance to (which, in turn, affects job opportunities after graduation). How a person speaks when entering school and the subsequent years are often the determining factors on what type of job and

opportunities he or she may have upon graduation.

Many studies have focused upon the advantages the middle class have over the working class in the areas of economics and opportunity. Newer studies have begun, increasingly, to focus on the idea of a language barrier that puts the working class at a general disadvantage in the area of education, which, in turn, affects social mobility.

"Working-class school children, being native speakers of nonstandard dialects, have an inadequate command of the standard language, and they therefore fail to perform adequately at school, where all education takes place through the medium of the standard language, and their poor school performance compounds and perpetuates social and economic advantages"

(Barbour, p.227).

Reasons for this are both psychological and educational. Students who speak the standard when beginning school need only to go in and learn the required material for study and concentrate on the tests needed for admission to high school (where these tests exist), or college. Those students who do not speak the standard enter school needing to essentially re-learn their language in addition to the normal educational workload. These students are also at the greatest economic disadvantage. Their parents can not afford private teachers and tutors. The parents of these children are also of little help themselves since they are not usually competent in the standard either. Many linguists are also convinced that the lack of success of the working-class children is also related to problems of self-esteem. They see the students as not only lagging behind because of educational differences, but also having "...less confidence in using certain linguistic registers." (Barbour, p.228).

In Germany, the school system is constructed such that those students not speaking the standard are tracked into special educational settings which lead to training for different careers than those who speak the standard and are able to pass the entrance exams required for admittance to the top schools and, hence, career opportunities. This is also seen in some English-speaking societies in Europe and Australia. Studies conducted in England and Australia have introduced the theory of the 'lexical bar' which, in short, claims:

"There is a semantic barrier in the English lexicon which hinders the users of some social dialects from access to knowledge categories of the school curriculum...the existence of this barrier is a principal cause of school failure for some social dialect users"

(Corson, p.213).

These linguists have further theorized that the lexical bar serves to produce different rates of success in school which, in turn, serve to "reproduce a social class-based division of labour in English-speaking societies" (Corson, p.213). Their research led to a study of why this occurs and what the reasons were for the success or failure of students from working-class backgrounds.

Readers should note that the context of the lexical bar theory in this case will refer to difficulties speakers may have in *interactions* themselves, rather than the *ability* to interact. Studies conducted by William Labov in New York (1969) show that many factors combine to produce results that could be interpreted as a lack of ability.

Labov and his assistants interviewed several BEV speaking youngsters in a New York ghetto. He found that in instances where the exchange was between the interviewer (a

fluent BEV speaker who had grown up in the neighborhood and retained close ties there) and the respondent (a young boy), there was little speech elicited, and most of that was initiated by the interviewer. In another setting, however, the interviewer had the boy's friend present, and found there was much more spontaneous speech produced. Labov used the results of these two interviews to suggest that *perceived* power differences between the adult interviewer and the child respondent (fearful of 'saying the wrong thing') were diminished when the child's friend was also present and the two boys were engaged in conversation. The result was a substantial increase in the amount of speech produced. The results of this study help support the theory that speakers of a vernacular are not necessarily *without* the speech needed to comprehend new material. Rather, they feel uncomfortable in a situation where they perceive power differences, and, therefore, withdraw from the situation completely instead of using what they already know.

Yet another factor against the working class child is the speech in the home. Working class adults do not tend to have the extensive vocabularies their upper class counterparts do. As a result, most of their children will not either. There are four things working against the child in the working class family: experience, motivation, modelling, and habit. All four influence language and are often lacking in the working class home. Children as well as adults have to identify with the standard in order to use it. Since there is little need for it in their lives, they often choose not to use it. In school, this allows "children who can impress with their oral language to steal an advantage over their peers that early and recent research

on the 'pygmalion concept' confirms as an enduring one." (Corson, p. 218). Children who learn how to do this at an early age steal a long-term advantage, especially as it relates to higher education and upward mobility.

"...teachers do make initial evaluations of pupil potential on the basis of language used in performance...Higher School Certificate and School Certificate examiners...are more likely to be impressed by the meaning levels conveyed in such answers (GL vocabulary) than by answers that lack precise and abstract terminology"

(Corson, p.218).

The United States has long represented itself as a classless society where all can be equal. It has however, been plagued by high unemployment, escalating high school drop out rates, and a growing number of poor and working class citizens.

Early in the United States people were encouraged to speak 'properly', although no-one was really in agreement about what exactly was 'proper'. There were no language academies to tell people what was correct so the citizens did largely as they do now, depended upon the media to set the standard. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries speech was closely tied to the idea of social advancement. To appear well-bred, one must "speak correctly, enunciate clearly, and avoid vulgarisms" (Nettels, p.10). Those who did not follow this etiquette were branded as illiterate which "...seriously injures the influence of even a powerful writer with the educated man and impairs it with the uneducated" (Nettels, p.10). Social mobility was not limited by a class system and a person could climb the ladder by acquiring the manners and, especially, the speech which were the "surest mark of a gentleman" (Nettels, p.11). In this new society money could buy power but not the

approval of the upper classes. In many areas of the nation today, people are still judged by how they speak.

In the United States SE was brought here by the London Merchant class. As mentioned previously, American writers helped to build and reinforce current linguistic barriers by using dialects for certain groups and caricaturing them in their speech and writing. Economics was also involved. Those who wanted to get ahead and gain power used language as a means to maintain that power. "Access to a high level of literacy is a precondition for a variety of socially valued 'goods', including most rewarding and well-paid jobs" (Fairclough, p.64). It also seems that class was involved as it related to money.

"The establishment of the dominance of Standard English and the subordination of other social dialects was part and parcel of the establishment of the domination of the capitalist class and the subordination of the working class"

(Fairclough, p.57).

The conclusion drawn from this was that, although SE aspires to be a national language, it remains a class dialect. If such is the case, those who are denied access to SE through education will also be denied access to jobs and positions of power based on the language they speak.

Fairclough (p. 65) states: "The educational system reproduces without dramatic change the existing social divisions of labour and the existing systems of class relations".

In the United States, SE is the accepted standard while, BEV remains one of the rejected dialects. Speakers of BEV face many of the previously mentioned barriers that nonstandard speakers in other countries face. The place, once again, is the classroom. Since many BEV speakers are

from a large population of working-class and predominantly African-Americans, they may face difficulty or even failure in school followed by difficulty or failure to find an adequate job. " A large amount of research has shown that working-class children do not do so well in school as middle-class children of the same intelligence" (Trudgill, p.133). One reason for this is that often middle-class children will often have access to the standard somewhere in their lives and learn it while lower-class children who are just as smart are prevented from learning because they do not have access to SE in their homes.

Teachers may compound this problem by setting the students up for success based solely on their language. If this is the case, many students are, in fact, being set up for failure. Studies on people's reactions to dialects have shown that people are most often judged first on how well they speak as opposed to how intelligent they actually are. Trudgill's 'matched guise study' took tape recordings of five speakers reading the same passage in five different accents of English. He then had people judge how intelligent the person sounded. He did not tell the informants that two of the recordings were of the same speaker. The results were consistent: Those who spoke in the standard form were judged to be more intelligent than those who did not. If this happens in a classroom, there are a large number of children who face failure in school because of how they speak.

Within the United States it appears that speakers of BEV are on the receiving end of much bias and difficulty in school. While other groups are certainly facing the same problems, the Ann Arbor case helped BEV gain national

recognition. As previously mentioned, the trial resulted in some progress toward erasing the bias faced by speakers of BEV, and recognized the need for the school to overcome barriers which impeded progress by all in the educational system.

Attitudes toward BEV vary amongst its speakers. Many see it as a useful tool for communication within the black community while others view it as a hindrance for themselves and their children. Most BEV speakers are proud of their heritage and see BEV as an important part of it, but are also quick to note that it is often linked to social class and inferiority. "In white eyes Black English not only stamps one as black, but as lower-class black" (Hoover, p.84). Add to that the need to find a job and many BEV speakers would add: "...and if you speak Black English there's no way you are going to survive. There's no way you're going to get a job you really want. There's no way that you're going to make an income that's going to make you live right" (McMahon, p.399).

The classroom and community are rich sources of examples of the continued stability and renewal of BEV as a legitimate dialect in the United States. They are also places to observe all of the things mentioned previously in this paper such as the effect of BEV on education, the influence of this dialect on writers, music and theatre within the United States, and the dangerous effects that can occur as a result of misunderstanding this dialect and failing to recognize its importance in the lives of many people. Taking and using knowledge gained from an understanding of BEV is crucial to the future success or failure of many of its speakers. It appears that BEV is not



going to 'disappear' overnight or any other time in the near or distant future, therefore, it should be studied and understood as well as possible. It is a rich, complex, and logical way of speaking, and is also an important part of understanding the cultural makeup of the United States in greater detail.

## APPENDIX

EXAMPLE 1

(Mitchell, p.180-181)

Jesus and Your Jailer

Jesus says in Luke 4:18, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he anointed me to preach deliverance to the captive and to set at liberty them that are bruised."

If I were to vote the house tonight by asking the question, how many of you have ever been in jail? I feel confident that but few hands would go up. Although the church has not been successful in making mature Christians, the church has been effective in keeping its members and friends within the bounds of law and order. And say what you will or may, it is an achievement to be able to say, "I've never been in jail"....

I have a man in my church who has eleven children. I was talking to him the other day and he said: "Rev, I've reared all of my children and I've never had to go down to talk with the judge--or get any of them out of jail." And that was something to rejoice about. But before you decide, before you make up your mind that you are fully free...before you get too happy and pat yourself on the back...I think you ought to bear in mind that there is another kind of jailer, prowling this land, handcuffing and hooking folk...

It is interesting to note that many of the things that would send you to hell, won't send you to the city jail. [Great response] So don't be too delighted over the fact that no policeman has never handcuffed you! But while I talk tonight, don't look around at anybody else; go *self*-searching and see if anything has you imprisoned...That kind of a jailer is moving through our world today. And he's impartial too. He'll lay hands on the pulpit, just like he does on the pew. So you've got some *preachers* in jail--prisoners, prisoners!

Whatever you will want to quit and can't, that's your jailer. Now, you think about this: whatever exerts itself against you, whatever is not good *for* you--and it's so good to you that you can't let it alone--that's your jailer...Whatever reduces your freedom, restricts your operation, limits your performance, whatever keeps you from doing your best--that's your jailer! It--it has you handcuffed and hooked! And I'm here to tell you that whoever you are--you'd better do something about your jailer. For, eventually, every jailer leads his victim to judgment. Some folks are just worried about the *final* judgment, but...life judges us *here*...And some folk know what I'm talking about. There are Judgment Days right here--where a man stands face to face with his sins, and sits down to a banquet of consequences, of foolish choices, incoherent decisions. Judgment Day right here!

So--whatever has you in jail tonight, you'd better *plan* to do something about it and try to get free from it--'cause it'll destroy you! Whatever it is, it's likely to let you run a long time. But Judgment Day is coming. And that thing that menaces you and makes you do what you don't want to do--that thing will mess you up! Just keep messing with it, and it will *mess* you up!...

EXAMPLE 2

(Smitherman, p.104)

Church

Preacher ("caller"): My theme for today is Waiting on  
the Lord.

Congregation ("responders", Take yo' time, Fix it up Reb!  
all speaking simultaneously) Preach it Reb!

Testifier ("caller", Giving Honor to God, Who is the  
Head  
speaking from her seat): of our lives, to His Son, Jesus,  
that  
Man from Galilee, who set *me* free!

### Bibliography/Works Cited

- Barbour, Stephen, "Dialects and the Teaching of a Standard Language, Language in Society, Volume 16, Cambridge University Press: New York, 1987.
- Bontemps, Arna, Editor, American Negro Poetry, Hill and Wang: New York, 1963.
- Brasch, Walter M., Black English and the Mass Media, University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst, 1981.
- Brawley, Benjamin, Paul Laurence Dunbar: Poet of His People, Kennikat Press, Inc.: Port Washington, New York, 1936.
- Brooks, Charlotte K., Editor, Tapping Potential: English and Language Arts for the Black Learner, Black Caucus of the National Council of Teachers of English, National Council of Teachers of English: Urbana, Illinois, 1985.
- Broughton, Viv, Black Gospel: An Illustrated History of the Gospel Sound, Blandford Press: Dorset, England, 1985
- Corson, David, "Social Dialect, the Semantic Barrier, and Access to Curricular Knowledge", Language in Society, Volume 12, Cambridge University Press: New York, 1983.
- Cullinan, Bernice E., Editor, Black Dialects and Reading, National Council of Teachers of English: Urbana, Illinois, 1974.
- Davies, Peter, Editor, Success with Words, The Reader's Digest Association Inc.: Pleasantville, New York, 1983.
- Dunbar, Paul Laurence, Candle-lightin' Time, AMS Press, Inc.: New York, 1972.
- Fairclough, Norman, Language and Power, Longman: New York, 1989.
- Foster, Michele, "It's Cookin' Now", Language and Society, Volume 18, Cambridge University Press: New York, 1989.
- Giglioli, Pier, Paolo, Editor, Language and Social Context, Pelican Books, Ltd.: Middlesex, England, 1972.
- Hemenway, Robert E., Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography, University of Illinois Press: Urbana, Illinois, 1977.
- Hoover, Mary Rhodes, "Community attitudes toward Black English", Language in Society, Volume 7, Cambridge University Press: New York, 1992.
- Irvine, Jacqueline Jordan, Black Students and School Failure, Greenwood Press, New York, 1990.
- Labov, William, "Objectivity and commitment in linguistic science: The case of the Black English trial in Ann Arbor", Language in Society, Cambridge University Press: New York, 1982.

- Mates, Julian, America's Musical Stage: Two Hundred Years of Musical Theatre, Greenwood Press: Westport, Connecticut, 1985.
- Mitchell, Henry H., Black Preaching, Harper and Rowe: San Francisco, 1979.
- O'Donnell, Paul E., "Black English Revisited: Style and Grammar in a Social Dialect", Unpublished paper, University of Michigan-Flint, Flint, Michigan, 1989.
- Nettels, Elsa, Language, Race, and Social Class in Howell's America, The University Press of Kentucky: Lexington, 1988.
- Pietras, Thomas P., and Lee H. Hansen, "Accounting for Black English Vernacular While Teaching English: The Ann Arbor Plan", private paper, no date.
- Revel, Peter, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Twayne Publishers: Boston, 1979.
- Smitherman, Geneva, Talkin' and Testifyin': The Language of Black America, Wayne State University Press: Detroit, 1977.
- Speicher, Barbara L. and Sean M. McMahon, "Some African-American Perspectives on Black English Vernacular", Language in Society, Volume 21, Cambridge University Press: New York, 1992.
- Trudgill, Peter, Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society, Penguin Books: New York, 1983.
- Sullivan, Nancy, Editor, The Treasury of American Poetry, Dorset Press: New York, 1978.
- Wolfram, Walt, Dialects and American English, Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1991.