

Ohio State University Inspire Podcast

Black English is fire, even in class

Too fly. Fire. Dope. So much of American expression comes straight from Black English, a.k.a. African American Vernacular English. But you won't find this colorful and dynamic language taught in schools. Ohio State education researchers say Black students need their language heritage to finally be validated.

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Robin Chenoweth: Maybe you've noticed. Black English — some linguists and educators call it African American Vernacular English, or AAVE — has moved into the national conversation. It's a driver in music and film.

X (with 2 Chainz and Saudi, Kendrick Lamar):
Somebody pop all day (hol' up)
Somebody on theyway (hol' up)
I wore the crown all day (hol' up)
Somebody can't relate (Black Panther, hol' up)
Stay down with no fakin' (go up)
Top-down, I been racin' (go up)
She wild and been dangerous (go up)
My crowd in rotation, yeah.

Robin Chenoweth: It's on social media.

TikTok: It's an unspoken Black girl rule not to say nothing when somebody box braids looking a lil raggedy and grown out. I know mine sho is. Cause it's like we could say something but yo not about to do is, "Help me take 'em out!" Me: Mmmm uh. It takes so long to do Black hairs, just like, alright, bro. You got it.

Robin Chenoweth: It's proudly and unapologetically spoken by Black youth, integral to American culture.

Donja Thomas: When it comes to AAVE, this is our communication, the ways in which we use language, which I think is very colorful and powerful.

Robin Chenoweth: Donja Thomas, who received three degrees from the college, including her PhD in 2017, teaches and develops Black Studies curriculum at Gahanna Jefferson High School.

Donja Thomas: Being or coming from a Black cultural community, our ways of speaking have influenced American culture in such profound ways. I hear myself saying, like, that's dope. Oh, that's fire or even the bomb. I always used that so much when I was growing up. And using opposites as emphasis. You know, a lot of people would look at a bomb or dope or, you know, dope is ... some people "Oh, you're talking about drugs?"

Like, no! These are all things that represent good things, even though, if you go off of the king's English, it will be deemed something that will be bad

Robin Chenoweth: The phrases, the memes, the culture behind Black English have become woven into American life. And that's not new. But one place you typically won't find AAVE? In American classroom instruction.

Donja Thomas: Classrooms have been, unfortunately, used to alienate kids, because of how they talk. April Baker Bell, who's an associate professor at MSU, she speaks about the concept of language wars, or how classrooms can be linguistic battlegrounds. And I can't agree more. We are really suppressing the beauty and eloquence and really the ancestral lineage of our students, when we try to tell them that they need to speak a certain way.

Robin Chenoweth: In this episode of The Ohio State University Inspire Podcast, we will dive into the history and influence of African American Vernacular English, and the decades-old controversy about using it in schools. I'm Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer. Kyle Bucklew is our student intern. Inspire is a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology.

Robin Chenoweth: Why do some scholars think it's imperative that Black English be incorporated into teaching? Inspire asked several educators, and they all told us you can't disassociate AAVE from its complex history. Professor Stephanie Power Carter studies language and human interaction at Ohio State.

Stephanie Power-Carter: When I talk about the language, I talk about how, how it speaks to the intelligence and intellect of Black people. You had slaves coming to the United States, all of them have their own languages. And they took a little bit of English, took a little bit of what they all had, and brought it together. And so you have this like beautiful, Gullah language, you have these beautiful languages.

Robin Chenoweth: Research shows that AAVE has influences of Gullah, Germanic southern English and structural similarities with other African based Creoles.

Stephanie Power-Carter: People understood to the point that, you know, they used Negro spirituals to escape slavery. It was a very coded language.

(Wade in the Water)

Robin Chenoweth: Donja Thomas.

Donja Thomas: We know the spirituals are definitely a way in which Black people were able to put codes and messages in their language through their singing, that will come off as just, oh, hey, there they go just making harmony. But not realizing that when we say 'Wade in the Water,' we're talking about literally giving our peers instructions on how to escape or ways in which to get the scent off of them when they plan to escape.

There's lots of codes and messages that were incorporated, which to me represent our intelligence, represents our ability to adapt. But at the same time, I think also shows, once again, our ability to have to weaponize everything that we do have in order to help protect us and to allow us to thrive and help other generations also be able to thrive as well.

Robin Chenoweth: Stephanie Power Carter

Stephanie Power Carter: Even today, if you listen to hip hop language, you'll see some of the same things. And what I love about it is, kids particularly they do some really amazing things. The use of opposites, like, 'Man, that's stupid.' They don't mean it's stupid. But they mean that is like, awesome. Or, oh, that's a bad dress. It's not that the dress is bad.

Robin Chenoweth: Researcher John Rickford compiled a catalog of features distinctive to the language, using decades of linguistics research. AAVE has a structure. Auxiliary verbs – like is and are – are dropped because meaning is implied. Verbs are conjugated in third person plural. T-H is replaced with the letter D.

Stephanie Power Carter: The use of DIS you have the TH and the DIS. So there, there are certain features. that African American language users use. There are distinct rules in AAVE like the indefinite continual occasional tense. You'll hear students say, "He be tripping." What does that mean? Anybody knows that what they're saying, this is habitual. He's tripping now. He was tripping yesterday. And he's still tripping. And it's also this level of energy and rhythm that we bring. So you will hear the intonation at the end like, "Oh, girl, what's that?" Historian Bowder calls it a soul language; he talks about it, as a language that captures the essence and soul of Black people.

Robin Chenoweth: Author Claude Brown wrote in 1968 that it's not the words but the sound that conveys them. AAVE, he said, "possesses a pronounced lyrical quality which is frequently incompatible to any music other than that ceaselessly and relentlessly driving rhythm that flows from poignantly spent lives." There's something evocative and powerful about that rhythm.

Donna Ford: When you like, "Girl, shut up."

Robin Chenoweth: That's Donna Ford, EHE distinguished professor, during our group discussion.

Donna Ford: You keep on talking. You are saying something that I am connecting with ~~so~~ but and we get it. Because like you said, it has that rhythm. It has even the nonverbals go with it. The intonation.

Stephanie Power Carter: Yes, yes.

Donna Ford: We know exactly. And we are really in tune when we say something like that.

Stephanie Power Carter: No, but it's fun.

Donna Ford: Fun.

Stephanie Power Carter: You know, it's that community, right? It connects you in a way that for me, I'm energized when I hear young people using the language in interesting ways, but I study language and human interaction. So, I'm always attuned to body, and like Donna even mentioned that soul language. You move. You lean in. You use your voice. It's that call and response feature. That is just a part of it.

Robin Chenoweth: Among Black communities of aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings, neighbors... AAVE creates a circle of inclusivity, a code language that says, you belong. And yet, many Black children often aren't aware of the boundaries of that circle, until they venture out of it. Tanya Middleton is a clinical assistant professor of counselor education.

Tanya Middleton: My mother worked in administration roles. And so we would always laugh. She had this work voice that... When she's talking to us, you know, it's a different kind of vernacular, if you will. And then when the phone would ring, and it's a corporate call, voice switched up is what we would laugh about. We weren't scolded about how we spoke or anything like that. But I do remember the difference in her work voice and compared to her being at home. Just watching my mom and her mannerisms, so to speak, is where I learned that there was a difference in the two.

Donna Ford: I noticed it on television.

Robin Chenoweth: Donna Ford

Donna Ford, 5:30: We only had like three or four channels. I know some people can't imagine that that really was the case. I noticed watching these predominantly white shows, how the characters talked. And honestly, I thought it was something wrong with the way they were talking. I thought the way I was talking was the right way, or the correct way or the proper way to say things. But I knew there was a difference. And I definitely knew there was a difference once my sisters and I got in school. And that was when I would see teachers, unfortunately, correcting us, and using the term speak proper English. Use standard English. If you just listen to the words 'proper,' that means that our way of talking, which is Black English, is improper. If we use the word standard English, we're saying that, people are saying that the way we speak is substandard. Subpar. And, so, there's all this deficit thinking and disrespect and disregard for the way Blacks, in particular descendants of slaves, would speak. So, there's a lot of history, and it's very rich, in terms of why so many of us speak Black English. We are bilingual. What I'm saying is Black English is a language. It is not a foreign language. And because it is a language, and we speak mainstream and we speak Black English, Black people

should be considered bilingual. And in some ways you go ahead and say ELL students, like English language learner students. We need to get the same support that is given to those who are currently considered bilingual.

Robin Chenoweth: The use of AAVE in classrooms has been a focus for Professor Elaine Richardson for years. She was mentored by Geneva Smitherman, a trailblazer in the field. Though she was unavailable for this podcast, here's what Richardson had to say in an interview with Grand Rapids Community College in 2014.

Elaine Richardson: For the most part, curriculum is not designed to empower people of color. It is designed to assimilate you into American society. It does not take into account, in a deep way, your language background, your linguistic background, the power circumstances for why you may be disempowered, why you are in the hood, why maybe you're the first person in your family to go to college. There's a big disconnect I think even beginning in the lower grades. Because when they even teach you phonics, they're teaching you the standardized phonics. So, if you speak African American English, for example, if you speak that, and they're showing you w-i-t-h. And they're telling you that that TH is "th" but you pronounce it "ff" with an F. That's already a disconnect for you. And they're not telling you that what you speak is a language system. They're telling you, "You're wrong and it's TH." So, it's a disconnect for many people of color. I wouldn't say for all, but for many is, you know, things like that. It's disconcerting for you. Until you learn how to play the game that is education, you have to get your own education alongside the traditional recognized curriculum. Because for the most part, you're not going to get it in school.

Robin Chenoweth: I asked Tanya Middleton how those messages affect the well-being of Black children.

Tanya Middleton: It's a belonging. It's a sense of becoming comfortable with who you are, and what your race represents in your culture. And if you're being told that this is unacceptable, or that, "Oh, no, this is acceptable if you do it this way," then you tend to get confused, and you're not really building who you are as a person. I'm thinking about the speaking piece to it, with Obama. "Oh, he speaks so well." That's one of the worst things. I can't stand when I hear that. I have kids. And so when my children were little, and I would bring them around different people: "Oh, my gosh, they speak so well," as if they're surprised by that. And if you think about what does that do to a child, you know, if I'm behaving this way, then it's considered to be a good thing. But if I'm behaving in my in my environment, and who I really want to be, then that's considered to be a bad thing. And as we're growing up, and we're really cultivating who we are, and we're in a sense of becoming, it sends contradictory messages. And then the other thing I want to mention is that, it seems as though it's okay when the dominant culture takes it on. You hear a lot of a lot of whites, newscasters or media personnel using words and using the language, and then, "Oh, that's acceptable," because they're doing it.

Robin Chenoweth: Educators have made attempts to correct harm done to speakers of Black English. Most famously, California's Oakland Unified School Board in 1996

proposed a resolution promoting Ebonics, a hybrid of “ebony” and “phonics,” which would be recognized as its own language. The resolution aimed to help Black students who were not thriving in Oakland Unified schools.

Robin Chenoweth: Stephanie Power Carter.

Stephanie Power Carter: It hit the news, and everybody lost their mind. The school board got together a group of people, and it was parents and community members. And one of the things that they said was, “Hey, we want to honor students’ language. We want them to use their language to learn.” To think of it as translation. To not devalue them or mess with their personhood. And you would have thought the world lost their mind. I mean, Congress held a session on it. Oklahoma, did some interesting stuff. What’s so sad is, it just goes back to the same conversation we’re having about critical race theory, all these conversations about the humanity of Black people in this country. And it is ridiculous, that in 2021 that we are still having to say, that things about us are okay, our language. It should not be up for debate.

Robin Chenoweth: Donna Ford.

Donna Ford: We still have speech and language specialists who believe that when they hear us speaking Black English, that we need intervention. So, it remains problematic. In my area, gifted education, the top things that educators look at when they think a child is gifted is their language. I believe, and I’ve said this over and over and over again, for 30 years, that teachers will under refer us for gifted programs, because we are not speaking mainstream English. When I think of bilingual education, I view it in a spirit of advocacy. And so, this is where we are not trying to take away children’s language, people’s language, because in doing so you take away their heritage. You take away their identity. Instead of trying to be subtractive, taking away their language, you’re being additive. You’re adding a language. And to repeat. And I’ll say this forever: We need educators to do the same thing with those of us who speak Black English. Do not take it away. You are adding mainstream English and it puts us in a win-win situation.

Robin Chenoweth: And so, where does this leave educators and the Black students they teach? Education systems have a long way to go to realize improvement when it comes recognizing Black English. But there are some bright spots. One is Donja Thomas’ African American Voice Black Studies Black Lit class. In her TedX Talk from 2019, she described her class as concealed from the outside world, its own Wakanda Nation — a reference to the popular movie, *Black Panther*,

Donja Thomas: There’s a huge exclusion of Black cultural contributions, in classrooms in all subjects, which is just blasphemous to me when we understand the influence and importance of Black culture, even worldwide. So that really was my drive for starting this class on top of the fact that when I came in, there was hardly any, Black representation in the literature that was being shared and studied in the classroom. It was important for

me to push against that and to create the space for students to be able to learn the things that I wish I was able to learn in the class when I was in grade school.

Robin Chenoweth: So was the course material available just not being used? Or did you have much trouble finding it?

Donja Thomas: Oh, no. That's one thing for me. I was thankful because I grew up in a house from day one, from a little age, I had a plethora of Black literature that I had exposure to. For me, it was as easy as going home and pulling things from the bookshelf. I'm using my own resources to bring into the classroom, so that we had, even to this day, a rich variety of literature. And bigger than literature because I think this Black lit course really encompasses a lot of things. We study music as literature. Coming up in this unit *Thieves in the Night* is a song we're going to be looking at by Blackstar, which is a hip hop group out of New York that has the two artists, Mos Def and Talib Kweli.

Thieves in the Night: Yo, I'm sure that everybody out listening agree
That everything you see ain't really how it be
A lot of jokers out running in place, chasing the style
Be a lot going on beneath the empty smile
Most cats in my area be loving the hysteria
Synthesized surface conceals the interior
America, land of opportunity, mirages and camouflages
More than usually, speaking loudly
Saying nothing, you confusing me, you losing me

Donja Thomas: And KRS One, *We Must Learn*, where he shares the backstory of Black excellence and establishing certain civilizations throughout the world, but also, the social construction of race itself.

We Must Learn: When one doesn't know about the other one's culture, ignorance swoops down like a vulture. Because you don't know that you ain't just a janitor. No one told you about Benjamin Banneker, a brilliant Black man that invented the almanac. Can't you see what KRS is coming at?

Donja Thomas: We're going to learn about the connection of Benjamin Banneker to the creation or the architecture of Washington, DC. They're going to read the letter that Benjamin Banneker wrote to Thomas Jefferson, and also look at the letter that he responded back to him, and in many ways, pay attention to a lot of the things that are being said, as well as understanding the contradictions that exist within this communication as well. I try to make these experiences as rich as possible. So I'm actually having a speaker come in, once we do that work, that actually is an ancestor of Sally Hemings.

Robin Chenoweth: Thomas Jefferson's slave and also mother to several of his children.

Donja Thomas: to come in and speak about Monticello. So that they can really get a true understanding. They're going to look at these pieces and learn about Thomas Jefferson from the Benjamin Banneker perspective, but also learn about it from an experiential perspective from someone who is, connected directly to him, his bloodline. I feel like this generation is full of creatives. And a lot of my students I think, are visual learners and when they are engaged with art, it gives them an opportunity to connect with their emotions, and realize that they can have creative ways of expression. We're going to the Columbus Museum of Art to see the Amina Robinson exhibit. I like to also incorporate experiential aspects into the class. The students are going are learning obviously about great Black artists. And they have also documented history and learning about Columbus as a city, the social aspects of Blackness that exist here in this city that they might not have been exposed to, as well as give some background and to the King-Lincoln Bronzeville area, which is pretty much like our Black Wall Street.

Donja Thomas: And they're also going to be doing a haiku assignment based off that. And those haikus are going to be tied to Sonia Sanchez's work, which we know definitely utilizes AAVE. She was one of the first poets that I came across at a very young age that utilize AAVE in a powerful way that spoke to me. So, we're going to be looking at several of her pieces, as well as allowing students to like be empowered or inspired by that, and their engagement with the art, to create their own haikus. And to create a photo essay.

Robin Chenoweth: If you didn't notice, a lot of learning is going on in Thomas' class, including through African American Vernacular English. And her curriculum changes each year, but also day to day, depending on what students are seeing in the world around them.

Donja Thomas: Students also co-create with me. So I try to establish really strong relationships with my students, to the point where sometimes I'll get emails throughout the day. Some of them I'm actually connected to on social media. So, I'll get DMs. And it might be something like, "Look, Dr. Thomas. Did you see this?" We talk about it, "Okay, let's bring this into class tomorrow. And let's talk about this in relation to what we're learning."

Robin Chenoweth: An interesting side note: 35 percent of Thomas' students are white. I ask her if she thinks the topics they study invoke guilt in any of them.

Donja Thomas: I don't, because I think it's the way in which I set up the class, that they don't feel guilty. They definitely feel miseducated. But I think that's why they're so excited about taking the class. And that's why we're all able to grow as a community. They're able to learn and embrace that learning and allow that to impact how they navigate throughout the world, and the role in which they play as community members. I personally feel like none of us are really, truly defined by race. We live in a society that does, and that's why I have to keep it 100, and keep it real and share how these false narratives continue to impact us and how, as new leaders, they should be aware of these things, so they can push against them, and therefore really create the world in

which they want to live in. But they know I'm coming from an authentic place of love. And that even when we are transparent about certain things that are impacting us, in this in this world, or in this in this country, because of the way in which the classes have been set up, and the energy that we have in here on a regular basis, I think most of my white students actually feel more educated, empowered from having this class.

Robin Chenoweth: Are you hopeful, given the response that you're seeing from this generation taking your class?

Donja Thomas: Oh, oh, my goodness. 100%. I tell people all the time, I feel like I have the best job ever, simply because I'm able to be around these young people and see who they truly are, and understand their perceptions, understand that they really, ~~you know,~~ are here to create a new way of thinking. They are so talented. They are so gifted. Many of them are sensitive, in the fact that they are privy to like, obviously what's going on around them. Hence, why we always do meditation or give tools so they can ~~like~~ not be impacted so much by what's going on around them. But at the same time, that sensitivity, that emotion also gives them power to be change agents. It makes them more aware of the fact that they aren't here to do things the same way.

Donja Thomas: When I was in school, I questioned a lot of things, and I just wasn't given the opportunity, to make that apparent to my environment. As opposed to me allowing students to ask those questions and to seek the answers that they need, and to openly, critically think about the things that are happening around them. So, they gave me so much hope. Like, that is really one of the main reasons why I'm very optimistic about the future, simply because I'm around these young people. I honestly know that there is a light at the end of this tunnel, because of the fact that I'm able to fellowship with these beautiful spirits. So yes, my students in this class, oh, yeah! They shine bright.

KRS One: The point I'm gettin' at it might be harsh
'Cause we're just walkin' around brainwashed
So what I'm sayin' is not to diss a man
We need the 89 school system
One that caters to a Black return because
You must learn.

Credits:

X- 2018 Kendrick Lamar (featuring SchHoolboy Q, 2 Chainz & Saudi)

TikTok audio, cstreeblvd

Wade in the Water, 2002, Blind Boys of Alabama

Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (ODEI) at Grand Rapids Community College

Thieves in the Night, 1998, Mos Def & Talib Kweli, Black Star

We Must Learn, 1989 KRS-One/Boogie Down Productions 'Ghetto Music: The Blueprint of Hip Hop'