

## REVIEW

Smitherman, Geneva. 2006. *Word from the mother: Language and African Americans*. New York: Routledge. xiii + 172 pages. ISBN: 0-415-35876.

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African American Vernacular English has been discussed abundantly in the subject literature since the 1960s and '70s of the last century. The book by Geneva Smitherman – an unquestionable authority on the language of the African minority in the US – claims to be an essential read to students of not only African American language, but also culture and its worldwide spread. It presents a *definitive* statement on AAVE and constitutes an attempt to offer an all-embracing and updated information on this variety of English. Moreover, *Word from the mother* conveys an unambiguous message posing that one cannot deny the fact that the language of African Americans is on a par with the mainstream varieties of English and both its structure and grammar are fully logical, to say the least. The whole discussion is exceedingly enlivened by a wealth of quotations from literature, political speeches, and hip-hop lyrics.

The book consists of seven chapters. The first part of the opening chapter tackles an array of issues: *inter alia*, the legacy of the African American Language inherited by General American English, the rebellious character of AAVE, its uniqueness in terms of lexicon and specific grammar as well as the act of “pushing the linguistic envelope”, where many of the supposedly Ebonic features cross over to mainstream English, for instance: stress patterning in such words as *Deee-troit* or the idiosyncratic spellings/meanings – e.g. *phat*.

What follows is a brief discussion of the educational programs for AAL-speaking youth and an acknowledgement of the complexity of the language under scrutiny. The latter is concurrently juxtaposed with the two disfavoring opinions on AAVE and its users voiced by Bill Cosby: the first one in the late 1990s, in which Cosby was vociferously oppositional to the Oakland case (1996 California School Board’s Ebonics Resolution), the second one – in mid-2004 – where he was severely critical (and, according to the author, wrong and inaccurate) of the Blacks of lower economics and their language.

The next part recognizes AAVE as a fully-fledged linguistic field worth investigating; the last sections, in turn, are devoted to the sociopolitical context in which the present-day AAVE took its shape and the question whether the speech of African Americans can be regarded a dialect or a separate language (the query is answered in favor of the latter); finally, the subchapter describing the users of the language under discussion is crowned with a declarative and self-explanatory statement that needs a verbatim quotation (p. 19):

despite elitist language pronouncements by folk like Cosby,<sup>1</sup> despite language eradication efforts in the schools, despite White America's ambivalence toward the language (borrowing and castigating it at the same time), 'speaking Negro' has persisted over generations and decades. The language is bound up with and symbolic of identity, camaraderie, culture, and home. And it ain't goin' nowhere.

Chapter 2 offers a list of approximately fifty words, idioms, and sayings of AAVE provenience, accompanied by short definitions collected by the author, many of which are heard across the whole US and some of which have been adopted in the (spoken) language of the Whites (to name a few: *afro*, *doofus*, *phat*, etc.).

In Chapter 3, the author embarks on the discussion of the N-terms which fell into linguistic disrepute – she focuses on numerous variants, both orthographic and phonetic, and provides the reader with a myriad uses and denotations of the un-PC and controversial words. In this attention-grabbing chapter, the reader is presented with the etymology and development of the terms (both *nigger* (*nigga*) and *Negro*), their current usage, as well as an array of connotations and implications they carry. The particular asset of the chapter is the use of copious illustrative and picturesque examples, real-life quotations, press-clippings, jokes as well as various contexts in which the variants of term appear.

The leitmotif of Chapter 4 is the concept of *language play* and the *pleya* – the latter handles and manipulates (plays with) the language not only to seduce women, but also wields it a means of controlling the discourse situation. The chapter comprises two interwoven parts: the first one focuses on word-manipulations and word games as well as the incorporation of street language into, for example, the solemn style of preaching. The second one concentrates on such phenomena, known conceivably not only to hip-hop or rap fans, as *signifyin'*,<sup>2</sup> *playing the dozens* or *yo momma jokes*,<sup>3</sup> whose etymology is traced back to verbal games in indigenous African cultures and, finally, the verbal art of *wooftickets*. The subchapter is ended up with an elaboration on romantic (or supposedly romantic) *lil mackin*, one kind of which is craftily compared to the nineteenth-century courtship rituals.

In Chapter 5, entitled “‘I used to love H.E.R.’ Hip hop in its essence and real”, the author presents the rap/hip hop culture in an immensely positive light. The reader is given a tour – in which, s/he encounters such lofty statements as: “Rap, neither strictly music, nor narrowly song, is a rich, postmodern Black art form” – from the creators of the term hip-hop, through the “complexity” and the implications the hip-hop culture

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance <<http://www.gather.com/viewArticle.jsp?articleId=281474976904223>> for the entire quotation. (Date of access: 02 Jan 2007.)

<sup>2</sup> The discussion is backed up by an entertaining signification quiz – see p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the “yo momma” jokes caught on in many distant countries, for example, Poland – their popularity still lingers on the Internet.

carries,<sup>4</sup> to the spiritual dimension of a number of so-called “gangsta” rappers. The discussion is wrapped up with a manifesto directed to hip hop artists and African American youngsters to put a stop to the generational and class conflict, the end of which is necessary “for the survival of youth, our communities, and our people”. All in all, the undertone of the first part of the chapter is that there is a lot more to hip hop than “beemers” and “bling-bling”: in fact, next to commercial and slack rappers, there is a group of spirit-filled or politically conscious underground hip-hop activists engaged solving of social problems.

The last part of the chapter is more language-oriented and presents hip hop (raw) linguistics. As broad as the section may seem, the discussion is restricted to the bawdy, braggadocious talk of the rap lyrics, as well as new additions to American English, like *phat* (again), or the etymology of *peace*.

Chapter 6, in turn, elaborates on the issue of the absorption of the language, fashion, music, and attitude of African Americans by the whites (the process of “AfroAmericanization of youth”); at the same time, the borderline between *us* (“the repressed” involved into endless struggle) and *them* (the white oppressors) is accentuated:

Notwithstanding the creative genius of Black Style, it is a culture of struggle that gave birth to the “nigga metaphor.” Whites get it at bargain-basement prices, don’t have to pay no dues, but they reap the psychological, social-and economic-benefits of a culture forger in enslavement, neo-enslavement, Jim Crow, U.S. apartheid, and continuing hard times. (p. 110)

A little further into the chapter, once again the author proceeds to the discussion of the African American contribution not only to American but also Global English in the area of lexicon – syntax and phonetics are just mentioned in passing – focusing on such phrases and words as *hit on*, *phat*, and *loving care*, with much emphasis laid on the history and present-day usage of the *high five*, *hip*, and *baby*.

In the ensuing part of the chapter, the reader has a chance to familiarize himself/herself with the public media use of certain expressions and idioms of African American origin (*what’s up*, *chill*) as well as their transfer into international usage (ranging from Germany through central Europe to South Africa). Again, the negative flair of the accession of Black culture by the whites (dubbed *wanna-bes* or *rip-offs*) led by greed is underscored: “Black people have no culture because most of it is out on loan to White people. With no interest” (Wiley 1992, cited on p. 118).<sup>5</sup> All of the sudden, one

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<sup>4</sup> Once more the reader has to face some lofty statements, e.g.: “Although forgotten today, Hiphop was (and still is) the collective consciousness that created and expressed Rap music, Graffiti art and Break dancing. Such expressions saved thousands of families from the more destructive effects of poverty and injustice” (KRS-ONE 2003, pp. 179-181, quoted on p. 84).

<sup>5</sup> The negative overtones of pp. 118–119 are softened by the claim that the crossover of African American culture and language enriches communities around the globe and simultaneously might contribute to the “generational continuity” of the Black Culture.

may witness a rapid sway of the discussion topic into the issues of economic disparity, social contradiction, and hegemonic commodification in present day America.

The final chapter of the book deals yet again with social injustice and overt racism. The author provides facts, data, and statistics retrieved from various sources with rates of unemployment and imprisonment of African Americans. The author further ponders on the education of the minority at issue in the post-Brown era (the period after *Brown vs. Board of Education*) pointing out the permeating racial inequality manifesting itself in, among the other things, re-segregation, less qualified and experienced teachers, outdated schoolbooks, poor quality of accessible facilities and curricula.

The subsequent parts of the chapter touch upon the issues of social, economic, and opportunity equality, negative stereotypes and perceptions of Black Americans as well as certain long-standing myths and misconceptions about their language (here the role of the author in combating those and other racist claims, for instance, the ones posing the genetic inferiority of African Americans and their predisposition to “warp” the language is underlined).

The very last part of the book deals with plausible improvements of the situation described in the preceding sections of the chapter – according to the author, there is a need for the following:

- the perception of AAVE should be broadened considerably rather than being associated exclusively with youngsters in “baggy pants” but with “brothas and sistas” of all walks of life;
- the dearth of scholarly interest in the speech of Black women should be remedied;
- language awareness programs should be introduced to American schools, and a policy of bi- or multilingualism should be commenced statewide;
- a thorough study of AAVE and the black culture by Black high school students should be envisaged;
- last but not least is the incorporation of hip-hop (its lyrics and culture) into the classroom, which, in turn, might be used as a vehicle for scrutiny stipulating further discussion(s).

However interesting the book is, it is not devoid of certain drawbacks. Firstly, the title suggests a more language-oriented book, whereas the ratio of culture to language is to the advantage of the former. Secondly, frequent repetitions – especially in the parts dealing with AAVE – as well as sudden sways of topics might surprise the careful reader, somewhat blur the picture, and make the discussion a little confusing and disorderly. In addition, not rarely does the author use certain non-standard spellings or unorthodox grammatical forms of African American provenience, to mention a few: *they done dip, nevah, naw, it ain got nothin to do wit*. This usage is a proof of Smitherman taking pride in the language she uses and her regarding AAVE as a fully-fledged vehicle to convey information in a written form. It serves a stylistic purpose and gives credibility and genuineness to the text; however, they are used in an inconsistent manner.

The book is also jam-packed with semi-propagandist statements and praise of the African American genius, inventiveness, etc. – the “brothas” and “sistas” talked about are usually promising, talented, educated, brilliant, or gifted. Certain chapters are spiced with an idealistic tinge, oftentimes on the verge of glorification of African American Vernacular English and its speakers as well as hip-hop,<sup>6</sup> e.g.:

African American Language (AAL) [...] is [...] explanation to the condition of U.S. slave descendants and functions as a mechanism for teaching and learning about life and the world. Our language practices reflect a generational continuity that has stood the test of time and they continue to demonstrate the uniqueness of Black folks’ journey in this land. These styles and ways of talking Black have persevered in African America because they allow for the fullest expression of the mind and the heart. (p. 64)

This bias as well as the usage of AAVE forms can be explained by means of the statement in one of the last paragraphs of the book, in which Smitherman claims that in spite of her being a scholar and once ashamed of the way she talked, she never stopped using the language of the speech community in which she was raised. Also, her involvement in the Black Liberation Movement made her understand that “language is a people’s identity, culture, and history, that language is power” (p. 145).

Occasionally, certain items of information should have been verified by the author: the claim on p. 87 (copied from Snoop Dogg’s autobiography) posing that Snoop Dogg’s artistic work is god-inspired and he himself is a spirit-filled person can be undermined by his career in the porn industry.

Finally, the purpose of Chapter 2 is not clear; additionally, the criteria governing the word (phrase) choice have not been apparently specified – hence it is not clear why certain words/phrases/definitions found their way into the book while others remain omitted. As for the words and their definitions given, a scrutiny of numerous dictionaries available online did not retrieve the offered definitions; for example, the meaning ‘marijuana’ assigned to the word *gangsta* has not been found in any of the numerous “marijuana dictionaries”, hip-hop dictionaries, or the *Urban Dictionary*.

In conclusion, setting aside the drawbacks mentioned above, *Word from the mother: Language and African Americans* by Geneva Smitherman is an important contribution to the discussion on the language of African Americans in its cultural setting. It provides a wealth of information for laymen and linguists alike and is rendered immensely attractive by numerous real life examples and citations.

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<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, to give justice to the author, she touches (albeit sometimes only superfluously) upon the bulk of negative things connected with hip-hop, namely the overwhelming materialism, praise of crime, thug life, and misogyny.