

## **The African American Vernacular English in Walker's *The Color Purple***

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### **Abstrak**

Variasi atau ragam bahasa tidak hanya terjadi antara bahasa satu dengan yang lain, namun juga terjadi pada satu bahasa yang sama. Penggunaan Bahasa Inggris di negara asalnya juga berbeda-beda. Ragam bahasa Inggris umumnya dibedakan menjadi dua, yaitu bahasa Inggris standard dan tidak standard. Makalah ini bertujuan untuk memberikan deskripsi tentang bahasa Inggris tidak standard yang terdapat pada novel *The Color Purple* karangan Alice Walker. Kasus-kasus *subject-verb agreement*, bentuk *be*, penyimpangan bentuk kata kerja, negasi ganda, penggunaan *ain't*, dan kata ganti orang yang ditemukan di novel ini menunjukkan bahwa bahasa Inggris yang tidak standard digunakan dalam novel ini.

Kata kunci: language variation, standard English, nonstandard English, AAVE

### **Introduction**

It is obvious that people all over the world use various languages to communicate. People from different places speak differently; people from Japan speak Japanese, people from Indonesia speak bahasa Indonesia, people from UK speak English and so on. The variety, however, also exists within the same language. For example, Javanese, Madurese, and Gorontaloese people speak different bahasa Indonesia.

In English speaking countries, English is also spoken differently. The variation of English can be distinguished in two kinds of English: standard and nonstandard English. Fitch (2004:4) states that people using standard English is perceived as well-educated people while people using nonstandard English is considered uneducated. However, it cannot be said that nonstandard English is

worse than the standard one since variation in language is natural reflection of cultural and community differences (Labov in Christian, 1997:43).

According to Bonvillain (in Widyastuti, 2005:20), nonstandard English has distinctive rules which may be different from the speech forms of the standard one in the choices of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Furthermore, Birk (in Widyastuti, 2005:20) says that nonstandard English is usually spoken; it is rarely used in written form except in fictions that reproduce this type of speech. Walker's *The Color Purple* is one of the fictions exposing a story of people using nonstandard English. The language used in this award winning novel is African American Vernacular English that is considered as nonstandard English. This paper presents the descriptive analysis of the language used in the novel. The sentences or utterances of African American Vernacular English were taken randomly from *The Color Purple*.

As stated previously, nonstandard English can be distinguished in the choices of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. This paper presents the grammatical features restrictedly; it discusses the verb, multiple negation, and personal pronoun of the African American Vernacular English used in *The Color Purple* that is about black women who are joined by their love for each other, the men who abuse them and the children they care for.

## Discussion

### Standard and Nonstandard English

Standard English, as stated above, is associated with well-educated people. It is used as official language in many countries. Standard English is considered as prestigious and influential. It came out naturally in the fifteenth century from a regional English variety since it was used by the Court and powerful merchants in Britain (Holmes, 2001:76). In other words, people using standard English are usually people who come from certain social groups.

Language variation is primarily connected with language users. People coming from certain geographical area will use regional variety while people from certain social group which is determined by a range of features such as education, occupation and income level will share the same variety with speakers from the same social group (Holmes, 2001:147). In addition, Bloomfield (1976:52) classifies language users in complex speech community into five classes.

1. Literary standard

It is used in the most formal discourse and writing. For example, *I have none.*

2. Colloquial standard

It is used by people from the privileged class. In England it is spoken with the Southern “public school” sound intonation. For example, *I haven't any* or *I haven't got any.*

3. Provincial standard

It is used by people from middle class in the United States. It might slightly differ from one province to another.

4. Sub-standard

It is used by lower middle class people in European countries and the United States. For example, *I ain't got none*.

5. Local dialect

It is used by the least privileged class people. It is developed in the United States as well as in Switzerland as a domestic language. It differs from village to village.

From the information above, it can be said that the nonstandard English comprise sub standard and local dialect types of speakers in complex speech community.

In order to give clear illustration of standard and nonstandard English the following examples are presented.

<b>Nonstandard</b>	<b>Standard</b>
The dog is falled asleep.	The dog has fallen asleep.
Ever since he lost his job, he be sleepin' all day long.	Ever since he lost his job, he usually sleeps all day long.
You usually go to the one you want, but me never.	You usually go to the one you want, but I never do.

The first and second sentences are the problems of the verb form while the last sentence has problems in the personal pronoun choice.

**African American Vernacular English (AAVE)**

African American Vernacular English is a variety of English, particularly American English that is formerly known as Black English Vernacular or Vernacular Black English among sociolinguists. It is also commonly called Ebonics

outside the academic community. It is used by many African Americans in certain settings and circumstances. It is a systematic language variety that is different from the standard English in terms of its pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar.

Wardhaugh (1992:334) states that Black English has certain phonological, morphological, and syntactic characteristics. Pullum (1999) emphasizes on some characteristics of AAVE. Some characteristics are stated below.

1. It involves misuse of copula, the forms of be, been, being, am, is, are, was, and were. It is omitted or it is in incorrect form.
2. The negation in AAVE can be multiply marked as seen in the following examples.
  - a. I ain't no ugly, dude.
  - b. I ain't never seen nothing like this.
3. AAVE leaves consonants off the ends of the words. AAVE speakers say *res* for rest, *lef* for left, *han* for hand and so on.

#### **Grammatical Features of AAVE in Walker's *The Color Purple***

As stated above, the paper only discusses the verb, multiple negation, and personal pronoun used in the utterances found in Walker's *The Color Purple*. The data were selected from page 12 to 60.

1. The verb

The following chart shows deviation of subject-verb agreement.

Figure 1. Utterances containing deviation of subject-verb agreement

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|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. He don't say nothing. (12)</li><li>2. She smile. (22)</li></ol> |
|--|

3. Don't she look like Olivia to you? (24)
4. He do look all right, I say (23)
5. I sleeps like a baby now (47)
6. But I calls her Olivia (24)

From the examples above it is clearly seen that AAVE deviate the subject-agreement commonly used in standard English. In sentence (2) there is no –s in the present tense verb form for subject *she*. Instead of saying *he doesn't* or *doesn't she*, AAVE speakers say *he don't* and *don't she* which are not standard in English grammar. On the contrary, the present tense verb form for subject *I* which are not added by –s in standard English grammar, is carelessly added by –s by the AAVE speakers as in utterances number (5) and (6).

The deviation also happens in the construction of verbs. Here are some examples.

Figure 2. Utterances containing deviation in the construction of verbs

1. She was kilt by her boyfriend ...(14)
2. I ast her to give me the picture (16)
3. I ast him to take me instead of Nettie...(17)
4. I seen my baby girl (22)
5. Well Sir, I sure hope you done change your mind (17)
6. I knowed it was her (22)

The verb form used in the examples above fails to follow standard English. The verb forms expressing past events used by AAVE speakers are not commonly used

in standard English. The –ed in killed and asked are replaced by –t. The verb seen and done also function as past verb form while the past form of know is knowed as the AAVE speakers often over generalize the rule.

AAVE speakers say *ain't* to express *is not*, *are not*, *has not*, and *have not*, such in *he ain't leaving*, *she ain't got any*, *they ain't going*. The *ain't* cases are also found in *The Color Purple*.

Figure 3. Utterances showing the *ain't* cases

1. I ain't never really look at that one, he say (18)
2. Whore, you ain't got no place (36)
3. I ain't living in the street (38)
4. You here, ain't you? (35)
5. He ain't so bad looking (31)
6. Ain't I been helpful? I ast (45)
7. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men (46)

There are some cases that show the misuse of copula. The form of be, am, is, are, was, were, and been are commonly called copula. Copula is always omitted in AAVE. This phenomena can be seen in utterances number 1 to number 6 in the chart below. The last number is an utterance with misuse of *be* form. In standard English the utterance should be *By the time I get back from the well, the water will be warm*.

Chart 4. Utterances showing the misuse of copula

1. She too old to be living here at home (18)

2. My mama dead (12)
3. He fat and playful, ...(20)
4. He twelve (21)
5. I think she mine (22)
6. He a fine looking man, she say (23)
7. By the time I get back from the well, the water be warm (12)

## 2. Multiple Negation

Double negation or multiple negation, the employment of additional negative words to emphasize a negation which is already expressed, is characterized as nonstandard English. The following chart shows multiple negation in *The Color Purple*.

Figure 5. Utterances showing multiple negation

1. I don't have nothing (13)
2. ... he don't say nothing (18)
3. She hadn't never seen his (27)
4. Us don't say nothing to each other (34)

The examples above can be changed into the following utterances based on the standard English.

Figure 6. The Standard English of Utterances in chart 5

1. I don't have anything.
2. ...he doesn't say anything.



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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>3. She had never seen him.</li><li>4. We don't say anything to each other.</li></ol> |
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### 3. Personal Pronoun

The misuse of personal pronoun is also found in the novel. AAVE speakers use *us* for the plural first person in the subject of a sentences instead of using *we*, which is commonly used in standard English. The following chart shows some cases of personal pronoun failure.

Figure 7. Utterances showing cases of personal pronoun failure

- |   |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Us plan to marry (30)</li><li>2. Us fall on each other neck when she say that (26)</li><li>3. Me and Sofia piercing another quilt together (60)</li><li>4. Us don't say nothing to each other (34)</li><li>5. She hadn't never seen his (27)</li></ol> |
|---|

## Conclusion

The standard English speakers are considered more educated than those who speak nonstandard English. Besides, standard English is considered prestigious and influential. However, nonstandard English is often used in English literary works, as seen in Walker's *The Color Purple*.

It can be concluded that there are several characteristics of African American Vernacular English that are used in *The Color Purple*. Some cases of disagreement of subject and verb, the use of *be* forms, the deviation of verb forms,

and the *ain't* cases can be found in the novel. In addition, multiple negations and personal pronoun failure are also found in *The Color Purple*.

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