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### **Connections Between BASL and AAVE**

Communication is integral to human interaction, drawing upon aspects of culture, society, and language for extensive understanding. Language, whether spoken or signed, displays changes over time, mainly influenced by younger generations. Textbook versions of languages tend to lack the nuance of real-life language usage, often excluding dialects that exist within the language which reflect the subcultures within broader societies. Black American Sign Language and African American Vernacular English represent dialects of American Sign Language and English, respectively, that are both shaped by distinct parts of Black American history. Both languages are mirrors to each other as they developed similarly and often borrow from one another. Black American Sign Language and African American Vernacular English share more than they aggregate from each other. The similarities between Black American Sign Language and African American Vernacular English are supported by their shared linguistic features, such as shared slang expressions and non-verbal communication patterns, and connections to Black history and culture.

#### What is BASL and AAVE?

Black American Sign Language or BASL is a dialect of American Sign Language (ASL) that developed during segregation amongst Black students within Black Deaf Schools. BASL became a topic of conversation following integration by Carolyn McCaskill. McCaskill attended a school for Black Deaf children in Alabama and after integration went to a white school.

Following this racial change in her school, McCaskill noted the difference in signing between the Black and white students, though the schools were minutes away from each other the children could not understand each other due to the significant difference in their signs (Baudoin, 2021). BASL has significant differences from ASL, many of which lie in the facial expressions and amount of space that Black signers use when communicating (Toliver and Gentry, 2017). Since integration, education and usage of BASL is confined to families and many Black Deaf people learn BASL from their elders. As elders within these families begin passing on, young Black Deaf people are attempting to find ways to preserve their language, many falling back on social media to both spread and save the language (Baudoin, 2021). BASL's cultural and historical ties are important to understanding the language's significance to the Black Deaf community.

Similar to BASL, African American Vernacular English or AAVE has a very deep foundation within the Black community as a whole. AAVE has attempted to be classified by those from outside of the Black community which has caused a rift in the understanding of the language. AAVE is often defined as a vernacular or dialect, but many Black people do not see it like that and see AAVE as its very own language due to the many grammar rules and geographic dialects that exist within the United States. Understanding this aspect of AAVE, many still wonder about the origins of the language. AAVE's origins tend to be muddled due to the lack of attention on Black people and the multiple ways they have formed community across history. Some believe that AAVE came from a mixture of slavery and the Great Migration while others believe that the language came from mixture of East African and Creole language (Chery, 2022). Outside of the history surrounding AAVE, the language has become a topic of conversation recently because of its relevance on social media, as non-Black youth co-opt AAVE as "Gen-Z slang" which has caused the Black community to become more protective of the language

(Chery, 2022). AAVE, despite its unclear history and contradictory understandings, is a pillar within the Black community.

### BASL, AAVE, and Black History

BASL and AAVE have culturally deep histories and prevalence within the Black community as both languages originated and developed during times when the Black community was very self-reliant. BASL originated during segregation, Black and white Deaf students went to different schools and received drastically different educations. Initially, both Black and white Deaf students were learning sign language within their schools, but around the 1860s oralism began to be introduced. Oralism was the philosophy where Deaf children were taught only to speak and were forbidden to sign, as it was thought that speech was crucial to development, speaking was better than signing, and speech helped people to continue to see the normalcy and humanity within the world (Lucas et al, 2023). Oralism teaching ran so deep that many of the Deaf teachers within these schools were replaced with hearing teachers. Though Deaf children were forced to talk within the school setting, many of them still signed amongst one another which help keep ASL itself alive, especially since oralism teachings did not end until the 1970s. But oralism was only taught within the white Deaf schools, Black Deaf children never received oralism education, which is why BASL had been shown to have more standard aspects of ASL (Lucas et al, 2023) As Black Deaf children lacked oralism education, many older native BASL signers do not mouth as often when they sign, compared to their white counterparts. But this difference between education levels showed when integration occurred and the Black and white Deaf students struggled to understand one another, even though their schools were minutes away from each other, as noted by Gallaudet University Professor Carolyn McCaskill (Baudoin, 2021).

While BASL's acknowledgement and research is extremely far behind, most of the history surrounding the language is well documented and preserved due to lack of care from white people. Contrarily, AAVE's history is lined with discrepancies and discriminations that can be traced to the current day. AAVE has a plethora of names, Ebonics, African American Language, African American English, and Black English. Though AAVE is a relatively new name for the language, it still carries many aspects of Black history along with it. Across the United States, AAVE often has a negative connotation following it which is rooted in racism and classism. Many people believe that Black people who use AAVE are unintelligent or uneducated which has caused Black people to begin code-switching and exclusively using AAVE amongst other Black people (Chery, 2022). Black people have become particularly protective over AAVE usage outside of the Black community because of discrimination and racial stereotypes that they have had to face. The commercialization of AAVE has caused non-Black people to use the language to gain popularity without facing the same injustices, discrimination, and social pushback that Black people have. Outside of the negative impacts that using AAVE has caused Black people, non-Black people do not have the cultural nuance of AAVE which also causes them to misuse the language and negate the importance of the language (Chery, 2022).

Both BASL and AAVE have gone through significant amounts of time where both languages were seen as illegitimate, which is why the histories of both these languages are very recent. BASL had not been considered a language prior to research being conducted. BASL had not been discovered until the late 1960s, but back then it did not even have a name. Dr. Carolyn McCaskill recalls her time in the first integrated class at the Alabama School for the Deaf and she mentions how she could not understand her white teachers, nor did she know why her understanding was lost (Waller, 2021). Through this misunderstanding, McCaskill spent much of

her life both studying and teaching about BASL, so much so that she opened a Black Deaf studies center at Gallaudet University in 2020 (Baudoin, 2021). McCaskill's firsthand experience and research into BASL has helped to begin to bring attention to the language itself and the ways that BASL is attached to Black history and Black culture. However, AAVE is trying to reclaim its place within the Black community. As non-Black people continue to commodify AAVE, Black people have continued to call out the misuse of AAVE and the ways that non-Black people benefit from using AAVE. Openly discussing the ways that non-Black people's usage of AAVE is actively taking from Black people and mentioning the connections it has to minstrel shows allows for non-Black people to see the harm in their actions (Chery, 2022). Though BASL and AAVE's individual histories are extremely different, both highlight the importance of acknowledgement and understanding how history and language are extremely intertwined.

#### BASL, AAVE, and Black Culture

As BASL and AAVE are language mostly used by Black people, both languages have significant and deep ties within Black culture. Since BASL and AAVE are often only understood by other Black people, both hearing and Deaf Black people have had to learn to code-switch with their language to communicate with non-Black people. Code-switching is the way that people adjust the way that they communicate to make themselves easier to understand, specifically Black people changing the way they speak so their white peers can understand them (Waller, 2021). Hearing Black people often code-switch due to social pressures and stigma that surround usages of AAVE. Many still perceive AAVE as a language that is used by those who are uneducated, though many Black people are proud of using the language, they are often reminded of the racial and social stigma that come along with AAVE (Chery, 2022). Code-switching amongst BASL users happens for a similar reason. Though there is no stigma surrounding

BASL, many BASL users still code-switch to be understood by their white peers. McCaskill explains that code-switching allowed her to both communicate with her white peers, but she was still able to keep the style she had when she was using BASL, similar to many other Black signers (Waller, 2021). Though code-switching is a common experience between both hearing and Deaf Black people, the underlying differences seem to clash significantly. While Black Deaf people are able to keep their style, many hearing Black people have to cleanse their personalities when switching to an English that is easier for their white counterparts to understand.

Though Black people alter their speech patterns to be understood by others outside of the community, dialects exist between both languages that cause AAVE and BASL users to misunderstand each other as well. Relying on the theory that AAVE was created during slavery by enslaved Africans and dialects developed during the Great Migration, separate vocabulary developing within AAVE makes sense (Chery, 2022). Words such as “jawn” from Philadelphia and “finna” from the South are either solely or more likely to be used in these areas. Though “finna” has become more widespread across the United States, “jawn” is unique because it is used solely within Philadelphia. “Jawn” is essentially a noun; it refers to a multitude of things depending on the context in which someone is talking. Similar to other aspects of AAVE, “jawn” has begun to be used by the white people within the Philadelphia area, though the meaning of the word has not been completely lost, it has begun to be misused due to lack of understanding.

Similar to AAVE, certain words within BASL differ but they mainly differ through age groups. Though BASL is passed down through generations, younger BASL signers have had more exposure to medias that contain AAVE (Lucas et al, 2015). Due to this, younger BASL users have incorporated more AAVE into their signing than their older family members. Though elder family members still have AAVE present within their signing, it is not to the same degree

as the younger generation, wherein issues begin to pop up. As the signing done by the elders within the Black Deaf community seems outdated, younger BASL users often notice the generational difference in signing and at times, problems within communication arise (Waller, 2021). Through connections from the Black community, AAVE and BASL being fundamentally different languages has not stopped the similarities between the languages from shining through.

### Linguistic Ties Between BASL and AAVE

BASL and AAVE share linguistic features such as slang and nonverbal cues which highlights the way that Black culture and history tie both of these languages together. Within both languages, slang is often curated and changed by the younger generation. Younger BASL users have begun incorporating more AAVE within their signs and younger AAVE users have come up with creative ways to use the language, both aspects can be attributed to the high use of social media (Lucas et al, 2015). Within English and AAVE, there are words that are shared that have completely different meanings depending on the context, such as the word “lit,” in BASL a similar thing occurs. When looking at the sign STOP TRIPPING<sup>1</sup> in BASL signers who reside in Alabama, the sign itself, handshape, and movement, is identical to the sign for TRIP. But the sign for STOP TRIPPING is made at the forehead to exhibit the underlying meaning of the word, “stop imagining things” (Lucas et al, 2015). Placement of signs within BASL is similar to the way that tone is used within AAVE, without the difference in placement of the sign STOP TRIPPING, the meaning would be lost completely, Tone is extremely important within both languages, they are just exhibited in drastically different ways. Outside of slang incorporation, usage of space is another aspect of both languages that ties them together. BASL users tend to sign outside of the traditional box of space at the torso and face of the body like ASL users do. Additionally, BASL users were found to be using more exaggerated facial expressions and body

movements when communicating which was attributed to Black culture as a whole. Specific movements entailed rhythmic shaking of the head, finger shaking, and putting hands on hips (Toliver-Smith and Gentry, 2017). Though this description of movements seems a bit regressive, they are bodily habits that are found within hearing Black people as well. Generally, Black people overall are known to be more expressive through their bodies and express a bigger message through bodily movements. Noticing how BASL users continue to use those ways of expression display how interconnected and accessible parts of the Black community are.

Exploring Black American Sign Language (BASL) and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) reveals the various ways that both languages are related to each other and have deep roots within the Black community. BASL and AAVE reflect the intricacies of communication within the Black community, highlight the struggles for respect and recognition of both languages, and show how vital they are to the identity of Black people, both hearing, Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Understanding the significance of both languages displays the importance of honoring and celebrating the different ways that communication occurs within the Black community.



## Note

1. STOP TRIPPING and words capitalized outside of “AAVE” and “BASL” are examples of sign language gloss. Since the signs themselves are being discussed, sign language gloss is usually used.

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