

Research on African American Vernacular English --in the Film “Crash”

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Abstract:

African American Vernacular English, or called Black English, is one of the varieties of American English, also it is an important part of American's language system. In the past hundred years, although AAVE is often stamped with a degrading mark, or fallaciously recognized as a kind of slang, and subordinates to White English, AAVE carries tremendous power in shaping American culture, it exerted profound influence on the American society. Not only in the aspect of language, but also in movie, music, literature and so on. As far as whatever fields are concerned, economic, cultural or political field, American black people are gradually occupying more space. Therefore, it is necessary to carry out research on AAVE. Due to historical factors, the mainstream of AAVE is Standard American English, but it keeps the characteristics of their own original language—language in West Africa. In this paper, the author is going to takes the actor's speech in the famous African American film Crash as examples to analyze the linguistic features of AAE in terms of phonology, on the basis of fundamental theories of sociolinguistics—to some extent, languages can reflect people's social status. Particularly in the U.S.A., various ethnic racial groups and different cultures mixed up, language in various districts has its own features. Through discussion and detailed analyses, this paper advocates that as a well-established English variety, AAVE with its unique phonetic characteristics, makes motion pictures more vivid, and holds a significant place in the study of the development of America's multi-cultural society.

Keywords: AAVE, film, phonetic features, variant, racial discrimination, social tension

1. Introduction

African American Vernacular English (AAVE), also called African American English, or less precisely Black English. It has got many other names such as Black Vernacular, Black English Vernacular (BEV), or Black Vernacular English (BVE) and Negro Pidgin, Negro Creole, Negro dialect, Negro English and Non-Standard Negro English, among which the word “negro” expresses racial discrimination. In fact, AAVE is a

variety of American English; it is being widely used by working class African American people. Non-linguists sometimes call it Ebonics, a term combined by “ebony” (black) and “phonics”.

It shares a large portion of its grammar and phonology with the rural dialects of the Southern United States. Some linguists argue that AAVE shares enough characteristics with African Creole languages spoken around the world that AAVE itself may be an English-based creole language separate from English. However, mainstream linguists maintain that there are no significant parallels. AAVE is a demonstrable variety of the English language, having features that can be traced back mostly to the nonstandard British English of early settlers in the South American.

Whatever the others would call the AAVE, it always gives people the impression that it is a kind of language spoken by African Americans, in other words, all the speaker of AAVE are the Blacks. In fact, AAVE is not a geographic idea, neither an ethnic idea. But in fact, the middle class African Americans does not speak AAVE. Except them, the other African American take up 80% in the AAE speakers, and the other 20% speakers include white Americans in the south, Puerto Rican in New York, and some Indians. That means, not all the blacks speak AAVE, but most of the speakers of AAVE are blacks.

As a matter of fact, AAVE is different from Standard American English, but the differences between them are regular, it is neither changeable nor obscure. In other word, there is a pattern to go by in variation of phonetic sound, vocabulary and grammar of AAVE, it has its own linguistic features. Although it is always considered as a low-leveled variety, there is no evidence that AAVE should be regarded as a kind of inferior or degraded language variety.

In this paper, the author is going to focus on the analysis of phonetic features of actors’ language in the film *Crash*, and the differences between the language used in the motion picture and in daily life, to advocate that as a well-established variety, AAVE with its unique characteristics exerts great influence on the style and the profound meaning of the film and makes the film more vivid. And it holds a significant place in the development of America’s multi-cultural society. But the situation of racial discrimination still exists in nowadays’ American society.

2. The Development Process of African-American English

According to historical record, in 15th century, European colonists began to sale blacks from Africa to America. Half of those black people come into America, they are being sold to haciendados in the south part as slaves. Those haciendados afraid of the black slaves will get together and revolt them. So, they put slaves who were bought from different slaver dealer in one place. Those slavers are come from different area of African; they have various languages, like Wolf, Hausa, Twi, Ibo, Kango and Gola. Because they lack common language, they cannot discuss smoothly, they cannot plan revolution together. Also, they can seldom to learn their owner’s language. But they must communicate with each other in daily life, then a new Pidgin came out.

2.1 Pidgin Period

In 15-16th century, there are so many kinds of African languages and Africa dialects mixed up with little English vocabulary in America. In order to communicate with each other, those Black slaves developed a kind of Pidgin language which still maintain the main structure and basic vocabulary of African language but mixed with few English words. So that those slaves can understand and talk with each other basically in their live and work.

2.2 Creole Period

As time goes on, in 17th century, with the influence of English, many English vocabularies entered Pidgin. It appears more and more characteristics of English. In the several hundred years, many Black baby born in America. They grow up in there and got the language of their parents and the people who live around them. Their language developed more completely as a system. At the end, it changed into a new period called Creole language, which is the language of decedent of African American.

2.3 The Fracture Period

With the abolition of slavery, Black people no longer need to serve for their owners, large number of Black slaves moved forward the north and west, they settled their home in new place. Although they got rid of the slave identity, they still separated from the society of white American but live in their own circle because of that they are Black. The influence of ethic, class and social environment put them at a disadvantage place. Black people bring their language to all around the American, but due to the strong influence of SAE and their inferior situation, their own language system begins to change. The original language system fractured, and more SAE words and grammatical principle entered their language.

2.4 Independent Period

The most famous one of Creole language is the Gullah dialect of black people in South Cary Rhone State and the coast area of George State. After the independence of slaves, blacks go to everywhere in American and live together with white American people. In order to get adapt to the new environment and communicate with the local people, they absorbed the principal part of Standard General American English. But they still keep some characteristics of the original language—Creole language, because the survival of their culture and language may give them a feeling of intimacy in the society dominated by the white. At last, their language became almost same with Standard English; it still retained few original features. The new and independent language called African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

3. Phonetic Features of African American Movie Crash

In this part, the author is going to deal with linguistic features of African American English in the film Crash. At the beginning, related information about the film is introduced, which includes the background, general plot, main actors of the film. Then, the phonetic features of the movie Crash are analyzed.

3.1 Introduction to the Movie

Crash is a very famous African American movie, it is directed by Paul Haggis and acted by Matt Dillon, Thandie Newton and Ryan Phillippe, mainly discuss the terrible racial discrimination existing in the USA up to now. This film concretely describes racial and social intention in Los Angeles. For Haggis, Crash was inspired by a real-life incident in which his Porsche was carjacked outside a video store on Wilshire Boulevard in 1991.

This film talks about a set of things caused by a traffic accident. It describes the things which happened to the related people the two or three days before the traffic accident in a series of flashbacks. It calls on people's understanding and intentness to each other through drawing the clash between white people and black people. This film finally won three Oscars for Best Picture, Best Original Screenplay and Best Editing of 2005 at the 78th Academy Awards.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

Before analyzing the phonological features of black actors' speech, let's pay attention to the phonological features of AAVE.

As Hilton and Pollpck pointed out that AAVE is the everyday language spoken by many, but not all African Americans (2000). In movies, it is also like that. Not each Black people speak African American Vernacular English. The ones who speak AAVE usually belong to lower social class in the society. For example, the poor locksmith Daniel, and the police's little brother who is a stealer, they only can speak ungrammatical and nonstandard English. On the contrast, the famous film producer can speak standard English.

According to Taylor and Dorsey Gaines (1988), AAVE is used by working class African Americans, especially in informal situations and within their speech community. Lower socio-economic African American than middle and high socio-economic African Americans, because of their isolation from the mainstream culture, may speak AAVE. (Hinton:2000)

Labov and Bailey suggest that linguistic divergence of AAVE from SAE occurs because of isolation African Americans within inner cities or from their contact only with other culturally and linguistically diverse populations. Vaughn Cooke contends that the advancement of educational opportunities has created more of a linguistic convergence of AAVE with SAE.

3.3 Analysis of Pronunciation from Actors' Speech

The pronunciation system of AAVE employs the same number of sounds as ASE but these sounds exist in a few different patterns of distribution. Many times, AAVE sounds tend to be generally like those of white speakers of any given region of the county. In the following the author of the paper shortly presents the most important phonological features in the film *Crash*.

Some aspects concerning consonants are presented. A lot of sounds are systematically reduced in AAVE. One important feature is the consonant cluster reduction which occurs most often word-finally. Word-final cluster are shortened so that while the black police speak "hand" and "post", they become "han" and "pos". Another feature is "r" always dropped from the sequences and for this reason, while the two UCL students talk about the toy, the big one says "throwdown" as "thowdown". The third feature is after a vowel, "l" and "r" are selected or vocalized, which means that /l/ and /r/ are pronounced more like a vowel and usually then it sounds like a schwa. That's why while the famous female film producer says "help" as "hep". This process occurs in many varieties of English, but most of it is not possible to delete the /r/, when it is between two vowels such as in the word "Paris". In AAVE, the deletion in this environment can occur. One example for the vocalization of /l/ is the word "pill", while the shopkeeper wants to buy a gun and he pronounces the "pill" as /pia/. And then he has fight with the gun because the gun sales person teased at his mispronounce.

The frequency of the reduction depends on the environment in which the sound occurs, if the next word starts with a consonant it is more likely to reduce than if the next starts with a vowel. Therefore, even sometimes the past tense morpheme "ed" is completely reduced so that there is no difference anymore between present tense and past tense. For example, while the the poor black policeman asks his partner pick up the card, he just says "picked" as "pick".

The other one vary systematic features is the special pronunciation of "th". In AAVE, "th" is pronounced as /t/, /d/ and /v/, depending on the position in the word. When it is located at the beginning of a word, the voiced "th" is pronounced as /d/. For example, with the two UCL talk the discrimination situation, they always pronounce "this" as "dis". When it is located word-medially or word-finally, the voiced "th" is pronounced as /v/. For example, when the black woman asks her old son to find her little son, she always pronounced "brother" as "brover". When it is located word-initially, the voiceless "th" is pronounced as the

usual voiceless /th/ or /t/. The example for this is that “thing” becomes “thin” or “tin”. Finally, when it is in word-medial or word-final “th” is pronounced as /f/, sometimes also as /t/. For example, when the black locksmith Daniel tells story to his daughter, he pronounced “month” as “monf”.

The last feature concerning consonants is the reduction of the ending “-ing” to “-in”. Usually in AAVE it occurs within verbs with more than one syllable, which have the suffix “-ing”. For example, while the black actor try to speak standard English as “talking”, but the assistant director insists that it’s wrong for him to speak as “talking”, but rather he should pronounce it as “talkin”.

The author of this paper also wants to mention some aspects which concern vowels. AAVE speakers often change vowels in certain environment. Firstly, it nasalized vowels, when a nasal follows a vowel. If this happens, then the nasal is deleted. For example, in the movie, the locksmith Daniel wants to advise the shopkeeper to change his door rather than just repair the lock, but the shopkeeper thinks he is a cheater and try to cheat for his money. While they quarreled, Daniel always says “man” to stop the abuse of the shopkeeper. In the word “man”, the nasal follows the vowel /a/. Therefore, /n/ is deleted and /a/ becomes nasalized; so “man” becomes /ma/. Secondly, AAVE speakers merge short /e/ and /i/ before nasals which is very typical of Southern English. So, word like /pin/ and /pen/ are pronounced with the same vowel and become homophone. The third phonological feature concerning vowels is the monophthongization of /ai/, sometimes also of /oi/. It means that the diphthong /ai/ in words like “time” and “side” becomes a monophthong /a/. It happens most often before voiced consonants, or at the end of words. Fourthly, in AAVE sometimes a vowel lowering of short /i/ occurs when it is followed by a velar nasal. For example, in words like “sing”, the vowel is lowered and therefore it is pronounced as /seng/.

Finally, the author of this paper still wants to mention some aspect, which concern stress. There is a limited set of words in which the stress is on the first syllable instead of the second syllable. For instance, the word “police” belongs to this category. Usually it is stressed on the second syllable but in the movie, while the black policeman manifest his identity, he stressed on the first syllable of “police”. In addition to that, unstressed syllables are often completely deleted, which is very common in AAVE. Examples for that are while the two Black students talk in the car, they say “bout” instead “about” and “menber” instead of “remember”.

As a matter of fact, it is very difficult to make a very clear distinction between African American features and General American features, because Black English and White English influence one another as time goes on. But some features are unique for AAVE. The appearance of these words does contribute a lot to the success of the film.

4. Influence of Discrimination and Relations between Language and Film

In the film, *Crash*, social intention is serious. Racial discrimination not only aims at Black people, but also other ethics. The shopkeeper refuses to sale gun to a Persian because he speaks his or her own language and not so standard English. Most white men insult others just per their skin color and their language but regardless their identity and dignity.

4.1 Influence of Discrimination

For more than 100 years’ history of African American movies, African Americans have struggled not only for equal rights, but also the guarantee that black people would be portrayed on screen with dignity and respect. Unfortunately, at earlier times, many of those films showed black characters in negative stereotypical roles, the average African Americans would never identify themselves as being what they are in these films.

Before the 1940s, if African Americans appeared in movies, they were often forced to play servants, faithful companions or figures of comic relief, which had low social status and cultural quality.

In order to change the stereotypical images in movies, a number of Black people established independent film companies, producing what were known at that time as “race movies” films, which aimed at black audiences, and provided African American actors with a wider variety of roles. These movies portrayed Black people in positions of authority and respectability as well.

The roles of African Americans after the 1940s saw the rise of black actors seeking work but only receiving roles dealing with light comedy, music, or dance. Gradually, Black actors can play different types of character in the film, including positive role and negative role, famous black actors even can play successful agent who was very well-educated. In recent 50 years, there are many famous African American superstars such as Denzel Washington and Will Smith, and African American directors such as Spike Lee and John Singleton became significant forces in Hollywood. However, they still faced greater obstacles than their white counterparts. Fortunately, Black film accepted widely by more people, with its profound meaning, it brings great influence on the American movie culture. Nowadays, it becomes an important part of the American culture.

4.2 The Relations between Language and Film

Motion pictures can reflect social and culture attitude. The language in the movie is obviously not the same as language for daily communication; it does represent the language of the role in the movie. Analyzing the language used by characters in film then the difference between real life and changes that occurred in the characterization acceptable roles revealed.

Based on the motivation and purpose above, this study will analyze phonetic features of African American English in the film *Crash* through actors’ lines, and briefly describe the application of AAVE to films. The author will take the famous African American film *Crash* as example.

Linguists hold that language can reflect people’s social status to some extent, at the same time many of them believe that such kind of evaluation can be harmful. Take AAVE as an example. It is a kind of variety, but it being considered as one subordinate to Standard English, because of its linguistic divergence from SAE. The so-called divergence hypothesis maintains that AAVE is evolving that independently in ways that increase its difference from other vernacular dialects of English (Wolfram:2008). The reason for such divergence is that African Americans are isolated with inner cities, most of them contact only with alike people, because AAVE is considered as the lower-leveled one in languages. Such findings exemplify there is still discrimination of African American people until now.

To sum up, by comparing the phonetic features of the language in African American motion pictures with the language, which used in daily life, we can find that those features in movies are less prominent. The higher the screen images’ social status, the weaker their linguistic features. That is to say, the black people who get high education or are part of higher social class speak Standard English in the movies, and other black person such as robber, driver speak AAVE. And through comparing the phonetic features in black people who have lower social status with the features of AAVE in daily life, and the compare of the black people who have higher social status with Standard English. The conclusion is that the black actors who have negative screen images mostly speak AAVE in movies. However, when their roles are positive or higheducated, their speaking is close to Standard English, or just be it. Their language reflects their hierarchy, which has less status and prestige. It is unreasonable.

5. Conclusion

5.1 The Major Findings

Language is a very important part of culture, it is a tool to express feelings and convey information to people. Actors in movies use language to characterize different roles, so the language used in film is different to the daily life. However, it does reflect the real life.

With the development of African American movies and the appearance of Black actors, the discrimination in American Film Market is better than before. Before the 1970s, the audience was used to accept Black people play an immoral character in the movie. Usually, those actors' language has many typical features of AAVE, in some degree, it is very difficult to be understood. However, something happened at the beginning of the 1970s, African American actors could play more important characters in the movie such as detectives, superheroes and successful merchants. Their language has less features of AAVE and tends to be "standard".

In the 1980s, certain African American names on a marquee could identify them as "stars" of the movie business. The relationship between white people and black people become equal and close. In 2001, African American actors won in both the Best Actor and Best Actress categories. From then on, audience watches more and more Black actors. Almost of them can speak very standard English but they would like to change their accent per the characteristics of the role in film. Different kind of phonetic features of the role's language could make the image more vivid and distinctive.

The situation of discrimination gets better and receives more attention as Black actors are growing up in this field, and excellent African American movies increase gradually. Meanwhile, more people are conscious that African American as a special group is a very important part of American society, its language and culture should be respected.

In conclusion, AAVE with its unique characteristics exerts great influence on the style and the profound meaning of the film and bring the film distinguished features. And it holds a great significant place in the development of America's multi-cultural society. African Americans and their language-AAVE, they really contributed a lot to the development of American movie industry.

5.2 Limitations and Suggestions

Due to the available access to materials and the length of this thesis, it is a regret there are some regrets and limitations in this paper. Firstly, this paper fails to work out a more careful and comprehensive examination of the variation tendency of linguistic features in African American movies. Excessive resources cause some difficulties for the author of this paper to choose the suitable films. Secondly, due to the length of this thesis, there is limitation for the number of the chosen movies, and there is lack of careful analysis on how to determine the nature of screen images.

In the future study on AAVE, it is recommendable to include the variation tendency of AAVE in daily life and entertainment. On the other hand, more practical study should be carried out to reduce the discrimination of black people.

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