**Literacy and Identity when Approximating African American Language on
Social Network Sites**

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Abstract

This study includes responses from two sets of focus group participants, comprised of African

American Language (AAL) interlocutors who communicate using digital AAL in online spaces.

Participants shared their thoughts about language, identity, and research regarding AAL. Focus

groups were recorded and transcribed so that topics could be coded and categorized. Five core

topics emerged: 1) *History of AAL*, 2) *Digital Composing Choices*, 3) *Digital Research Methods*,

4) *Racial Issues*, and 5) *Personal Stories*.   The data obtained from the focus groups sheds light

on participants' initial feelings of mistrust when discussing their language as well as their learned

dislike for and unawareness of a language that they use every day.

        Keywords: African American Language, literacy, identity, social network sites, focus

groups

Introduction

African American Language (AAL) (Banks, 2006; Baugh, 2001; Billings, 2005;

Crawford, 2001; Delpit, 2004; Gilyard, 2001; Green, 2002; Labov, 1969; McWhorter, 1998;

Palacas, 2001; Rickford & Rickford, 2000; Smitherman, 1977, 2001, 2006) was first and

foremost a spoken form of communication that has taken written shape in a digital environment.

Given new technologies and ways to correspond easily with members of this particular

Discourse (Gee, 2001, 2011), interlocutors are afforded a sense of camaraderie and shared

identity in an online space, employing a hybrid literacy that combines elements of AAL,

Standard Academic/American English (SAE), and digital language in a specific and unique way.

The exigence (Bitzer, 1968) for communicating in AAL for these participants is a desire to create

a written style more akin to their home language and visually different from SAE. In many

ways, participants in this study use digital language features afforded them through a keyboard,

the SNS environment, and their literacies (SAE, digital language, and AAL) as a color palette, of

sorts, choosing specific features to compose creative linguistic works of art. Their

compositions—their messages—become a representation of who they already are. This kind of

new language construction and new literate practice can be seen across time, especially in

American history, as so-called stories of literacy crisis (Graff, 1986, 2011). However, this study

argues that social languages like AAL and digital language allow for a more robust linguistic and

literate repertoire. New digital language practices and the emerging written form of AAL are

examples of the ways that technology and identity are collaboratively creating and exposing

different literacies, preparing communicators for a rapidly changing, increasingly diverse global

village.

Participants and Sample

To better understand a specific kind of hybrid literacy that exists in online spaces, I

conducted two focus groups comprised of interlocutors who communicate in digital African

American Language (AAL) on SNSs, explaining to participants that I study the kinds of writing

people use to communicate in digital spaces when composing in AAL. I conducted the first focus

group at a large, Midwestern, research university with over 19,000 undergraduates, 11% of

whom are African American. Participants included a 19-year-old female and former student, a

21-year-old female and member of the church, and a 21-year-old male who was a friend of the

church member.

In order to find participants for the second focus group, I contacted a colleague at a large,

Midwestern, urban community college with over 24,000 students, 30% of whom are African

American. Four students agreed to participate: a 20-year-old male, a 29-year-old female, a 22-

year-old female, and a 20-year-old female. Both focus groups met for one hour in a classroom

on their respective college campuses and were videotaped to help with transcription. All

participants signed a consent form with the understanding that the videotapes would be kept

confidential.

Method

After conducting and visually-recording both focus groups, I transcribed each video,

coding and categorizing (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) possible themes or topics among the focus

groups. Topics were counted based on turns, which is a common method employed in

conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). As seen in Table 1, for example,

the following conversation, although comprised of nine sentences, consists of seven turns.

Table 1.

Coding Focus Group Transcripts According to Topic

Turn	Participant	Dialogue
1	Me	So you do, on purpose, make it look like how you would say it?
2	Participant 1	Right.
3	Participant 2	Yeah, because I don't want the expression to be lost.
4	Participant 1	Yeah, because some people will know it's not you like how you type. Like what you say and how you say it. They're going to know it's not you…
5	Participant 2	When you're writing papers, that's a totally different thing.
6	Participant 1	You have to pay attention to how you spell.
7	Participant 2	Not to be offensive, but you have to adapt to the Eurocentric way.

The above conversation remains focused on the topic of the *Composing Choices*, and each time a

participant (myself included) begins speaking, one turn ends and a new turn begins. In this way,

one turn can be comprised of a single word or one or more sentences. Each turn is then

categorized according to topic.

In order to sort data generated from the transcripts into topic categories, I systematically

coded and categorized according to general patterns and overarching topics that emerged before

collapsing and streamlining categories and topics that overlapped. Of course, the topic

categories were affected by my guiding questions and several times topics overlapped. For

example, while a participant was discussing issues of race, he also included personal stories to

reinforce his point. Also, it is worth noting that the idea that some participants discussed their

desire to "sound like [they] talk," was categorized as *Digital Composing Choices* rather than

Racial Issues because choosing to write in a way that represents how a person speaks is a

specific composing choice. The topic *Racial Issues* is more closely related to points of racial

contention that have less to do with AAL linguistically or as a written form and more to do with

African American history and culture more generally. The topic *History of AAL* suggests both

the general history of the language as well as participants' personal history learning to speak and

write AAL. After coding and categorizing, five core topics emerged: 1) *History of AAL*, 2)

Digital Composing Choices, 3) *Digital Research Methods*, 4) *Racial Issues*, and 5) *Personal

Stories*. Table 2 includes categories, codes, and explanations.

Table 2

Focus Group Topic Categories

Topic Category	Topics and Subcategories	Example
History of AAL	Explanations of spoken and handwritten AAL Slang v. language Improper v. proper Precursors to digital writing in AAL (e.g., note writing) AAL related to pedagogy Places AAL is found other than digitally	A participant talks about using AAL when writing a note to his friend in junior high.
Digital Composing Choices	Spelling Personal history Composing habits Shortenings Logograms	A participant describes how she employs zero copula (in not so many words) in order to "sound like [she] talk[s]."

	Texting Email Facebook	
Digital Research Methods	Obtaining consent Researching online Private v. Public	A participant expresses the need for a researcher to obtain consent before collecting data from her MySpace page.
Racial Issues	African American History Racism Language ownership This research project	A participant discusses specific historic instances when African Americans have felt that White culture has appropriated their style or customs.
Personal Stories	Digressions unrelated to AAL	A participant discusses what he is going to do after the focus group ends.

Based on the discussions about language, literacy, and identity as they relate to AAL in a

digital environment, focus group included the topics of 1) *History of AAL*, 2) *Digital Composing*

Choices, 3) *Digital Research Methods*, 4) *Racial Issues*, and 5) *Personal Stories*. See Table 3

below for examples of the topics included among the focus groups.

Table 3

Topic Category	Example
History of AAL (explanations of spoken and handwritten AAL)	I don't think that it should be called "slang." I don't think slang should be considered Black English, because there are so many different parts.
Composing choices (digital use)	I write the same way that I would text.
Digital research methods (ethics)	What's wrong with actually saying, "Hey," or first requesting and then sending a message letting them know what's going to be done. To me, it's just a respectful thing. Because if mine was not private and I saw that I'd be like, "Dang, you stole my…" You know, I'd be kinda upset. So I think it's more of a courtesy thing.
Racial issues (related to African American history)	But when White people use [AAL], they're considered "acting Black."
Personal stories (digressions unrelated to AAL)	There's broken words. Like when I lived in Arizona, and people spoke Spanish, it would be classified to someone who's Puerto Rican, because they're more Mexican down there then it was broken

	Spanish, which is slang Spanish.

Topic Category Examples

Reliability

As when determining inter-rater reliability when coding the textual data, I selected a

random sampling of 10% of the turns (30 turns out of 295 total in Focus Group 1). Using

Excel's RAND function, I generated 30 random numbers and listed each respective turn in a

blank document. I emailed a colleague who also helped me when determining reliability during

my textual analysis. I attached the document with the 30 random turns along with Table 7 and

Table 8 (making certain that no turns included in Table 8 were also included in the document

with 30 random turns). I asked the coder to cut each turn and paste it under one of the five topic

categories. The simple agreement for placing each turn within one of the core categories was .95

with a Cohen's Kappa of .7 ("Online Kappa Calculator"). I expect that the Cohen's Kappa was

slightly low because turns were acontextualized and, therefore, it might have been difficult to

determine a specific topic pattern if a particular turn was relatively short (i.e., "That's how mine

is.").

Language, Literacy, and Identity in a Digital Environment

Linguists and educators, in the past and more recently (see specifically: Crawford, 2001;

Green, 2002; Rickford & Rickford, 2000; Smitherman, 1977, 2001, 2006), have had to dispel the

ideas that AAL is comprised of nothing but Standard academic English (SAE) errors. Digital

language features are currently being discussed and supported in a similar way by writing

scholars (Baron, 2000, 2008; Crystal, 2001, 2008, 2011; Haas & Takayoshi, 2011). Given its

burgeoning visibility and use among SNSs, digital AAL—and its users—will have to face

similar challenges. These specific non-academic languages and literacies are related in the way

that scholars try to educate and change the stigmas surrounding these different forms of

communication and ways of being. Many scholars (Cook-Gumperz, 2006; Gee, 2004, 2011;

Gilyard, 1991, 2011; Labov, 1969; Stubbs, 1980; Trudgill, 2000) point out the important

connection between language and identity. Because AAL is a literacy, devaluing it as a language

and form of spoken and written communication goes much deeper than simply discrediting a

language. AAL, specifically, is linked to identity because of its tied to an African American

culture and history in the United States. By discrediting a person's language we also discredit

his or her identity, which is tied to that person's childhood, home, family, culture, and, in a very

intimate way, to his or her self.

      New digital language practices and the emerging written form of AAL are examples of

the ways that technology and identity are collaboratively creating and exposing different

literacies. Brandt (2001) asserts that "what is new in literacy learning comes not merely from

new technologies and their implications but from the creation of new relationships to older

technologies and ways of writing and reading" (p. 11). SNSs are one way that technology is

bringing together new "ways of writing and reading" (i.e., digital language) with older ways of

writing and reading (i.e., SAE). AAL seems to be a phenomenon that can blur the lines between

what is "new" and "old" because it has been spoken for decades, yet has never been as

observable in written form as it is now that people can more easily communicate in alphabetic

and logographic text via the internet. As Lewis and Fabos (2005) write, "It is not the computer

or the Internet itself that is central to literacy but the way that these tools of technology shape

social relations and practices" (p. 475). Likewise, it is not SNSs or digital language or AAL, but

all of these factors working together with the appropriate audience, purpose, and rhetorical

experience to produce written AAL.

Participants' Acquisition and Understanding of AAL

Something worth noting that became apparent during the focus groups is participants'

apparent lack of literacy and linguistic understanding of their home language. Even though

participants were able to discuss times when they could identify AAL features within their

writing (e.g., note writing, communicating on SNSs, and text messaging), they were unaware

that the way they spoke also incorporated AAL features. One participant discussed her disdain

of AAL, reducing the entire language to "slang." However, this reduction is understandable and

somewhat expected, given the general valuation of AAL among the United States and the fact

that a person's home-language knowledge is tacit and not overt. While discussing her dislike of

the language and how she discouraged her daughter from using it, one participant's speech

incorporated many AAL features: "*Ain't* is improper to me, and I tell my daughter, 'You say

what?' and she be like, 'Am not.' No, I do not like the word *ain't* . . . I'm not big on Ebonics."

What this participant failed to notice was that as she discredited AAL, she incorporated AAL

features like *Zero Copula* and *Habitual be*. As Figure 1 below shows, there is an explicit

difference between AAL and SAE and the use of *be*.

Fig. 1

Habitual Be in African American Language

A. SAE	→	I am swimming right now.
AAL	→	I swimmin.
B. SAE	→	I swim every day.
AAL	→	I be swimmin.

In order to suggest that someone is

doing something at the moment, in SAE, a communicator would use the conjugate *am*, as shown

in example A, whereas AAL interlocutors adhere to *Zero Copula* or the absence of *to be* and its

conjugates. Example B, on the other hand, is an example of *Habitual be*, demonstrating that, in SAE, interlocutors must indicate explicitly that they are doing an act regularly or consistently by including a phrase such as "every day" or "all of the time." AAL, however, uses *Habitual be* to indicate regularity. Students and participants who communicate using AAL consistently incorporate *Zero Copula* and *Habitual be*, often without any awareness (because after all, our home language and grammar are innate and we are not cognizant of the ways we conjugate verbs or order nouns and adjectives until we learn a second language).

Another participant explained her disapproval of AAL, saying,

"My mother raised me good, real good. Like, my faults is my faults after that, but my mother always taught me how to use English and to pronounce words and stuff like that, but when I look at some of my friends and some people that is coming up under me, they have no structure at home so it is all they know is *dat* and *da* and that is how they talk . . ."

This participant is discussing *Voiced and Voiceless th*. As Figure 2 shows, AAL follows specific phonological rules relevant to words that begin and end with *th* in SAE.

Fig. 2

Voiced and Voiceless th *in African American Language*

A. Voiced *th*	SAE	→	those, this, they
	AAL	→	dose, dis, dey
B. Voiceless *th*	SAE	→	with, tooth, breath
	AAL	→	wif/wit, toof, breaf

The *th* sound found in SAE is one of the most difficult sounds to pronounce if English is not a

person's first language, because the *th* sound is rare among other languages, including West

African languages. In that way, AAL interlocutors replace the *th* sound according to specific

linguistic rules. If a word includes a voice *th* sound (e.g., this) where the act of pronouncing the

th sound vibrates a speaker's vocal cords, another voiced sound (typically a *d* in AAL whereas

French typically uses a *z*) is chosen to replace the *th*. In AAL, voiceless *th* sounds (e.g., with)

that do not vibrate vocal cords are replaced with other voiceless sounds (most often *t* or *f*).

When I pointed out the fact that this participant was using AAL (i.e., *Agreement*: "my

faults is my faults") as she discounted it, she went on to say, "Right, but it is embedded in me,

but it is not fully who I am though." Her comment serves as an excellent example of how

language is tied to identity—it is innate. She recognized that how she spoke is part of who she

is, even though it is not "fully" who she is. It seems as though this participant (and several

others) had a difficult time accepting her home language and identity while trying to assimilate

to academic standards and norms that discount her home language and literacy.

Although participants can speak about audience awareness when composing,

unfortunately, they seem less cognizant of their home language and literacy. Participants tended

to reduce AAL to "slang" and often did not realize that they were using AAL to discredit it. This

emphasizes the travesty occurring when our society considers a particular language and literacy

worthless. AAL communicators are relegated to believing that their home language—their

identity—is somehow undesirable and unworthy of being counted as valid. In that same breath,

however, participants were quick to encourage me, as a white researcher, to learn more about

their language and help linguistically validate it among other instructors, students, and

community members. Likewise, participants also discredited digital language as a valid form of

communication. Although they enjoy the creative freedom and concise nature of communicating

in digital language, participants were quick to judge negatively the literacy in the same manner

that they regard their home language as "slang." Rather than understanding and valuing all

forms of communication for what they afford interlocutors alone and when combined, these

participants seem to be immersed in rich literacies with the innate ability to make composing

choices based on audience and context, yet, given the hegemonic push for SAE, these

participants blindly discredit their own abilities.

Issues of Race and Identity

Given the intrinsic link between digital AAL and language, race, and identity, focus

group participants also disclosed culturally sensitive ideas and opinions. Discussing ethical

issues provides a lens from which to better understand the ways that language use is related to

and inseparable from identity. The emerging patterns found for the purposes of composing a

digital hybrid literacy give a window into the ways that a specific group of people are

incorporating several social languages in order to make meaning while also establishing a

particular online cultural identity.

In speaking about how he acquired AAL, one participate articulated, "It's just like how

you would learn Spanish in your house. You just learn it because everyone else is doing it, and

you just kind of pick it up." Another participant explained language acquisition and context in

her own words, saying,

> I dealt with [acting white] because I was born here [in the Midwest] but I grew up
>
> in Phoenix, Arizona and Louisville, Kentucky so I was taught to 'talk proper.'
>
> So, it's like the way that you use it, I can talk proper at home and have the most

> educated conversations. Then, I could be down in the hood hollerin at my girls
>
> and doing like that. It's being versatile.

These participants understand that language acquisition is related to where a person grows up

and, further, they innately seem to understand the ways that language is related to context and

identity—with whom they associate. As Gee notes (2010) language and identity are intrinsically

linked; the acquisition of language is innate, unconscious, and what helps tie our language to our

identity. The language we acquire as children—our home language—becomes more than a way

we communicate; it becomes our way of being, knowing, thinking, and doing. In this way, when

discussing these participants' home language (i.e., AAL), issues of ownership, mistrust, and

respect arose because participants were doing more than explaining their language use—they

were defending their identity.

Ownership, Mistrust, and Respect

When discussing whether I, as a white researcher, needed to obtain consent from people

who compose using digital AAL on an SNS, and who are, therefore, likely African American,

one participant said,

> Yes [how you approach this research matters]. Because, and I don't want this to
>
> sound bad, but you're white. Black people are very protective and territorial, so
>
> like this is my stuff and like this is my language and you want to study it and you
>
> have to tell me that you want to study it before you can take my stuff and study it.
>
> And this is kind of what I was getting to when I was like, because I guess I'm
>
> very territorial and I feel like I don't, I'm kind of torn, because I don't know if I

want people studying our language, because [another participant finished the

sentence: they'll try to take it].

This participant went on to explain that he was hesitant about joining the focus group in the first

place and only did so because of my relationship with another participant who "said it was cool."

Otherwise, he went on to say, "I would not discuss this, because it's like I don't want to help you

take my language . . . I kind of have to be wary because everybody ain't as nice as you." This

conversation is rife with language that suggests concern over ownership (e.g., *protective*,

territorial, *my language*, *my stuff*, *our language*, *take*) as well as mistrust of whites (e.g., *you're*

white, *black people*, *wary*). This participant's admission that his involvement was only because

of his relationship with another participant is important and has been represented in other

language studies (Labov, 1969).

After I explained that the purpose of my study is not to co-opt AAL, but to understand it

as a legitimate form of communication, this participant commented, "That's cool. I get where

you're coming from with language and not necessarily worry about someone co-opting my

language. I'm worried about the discrediting of it." Here, he suggests that he does not want his

language "taken" by white people, but that if a white person wants to understand his language—

without taking it or "discrediting" it—that would be acceptable. This desire for validation was

reiterated among other participants.

Participants either felt leery of my research in fear of having their language co-opted or

felt empowered, hoping that more people would understand and respect AAL. One participant

explained,

> I would basically encourage you to find out, because what's left unnoted and
>
> misunderstood is left to ignorance. So, if you understand, you can pass the word
>
> along and, therefore, other people won't look at it in a derogatory kind of way.

This quote speaks somewhat to Cushman's (1996) notion of reciprocity because, by taking part

in my focus group, participants were able to voice their opinions and concerns about my study

and analysis and, possibly, have their language further understood if only on a small scale; I was

able to gather responses that would help me triangulate my data and enrich my study.

With both focus groups, participants were leery of my intentions at first, which may have

happened regardless of a researcher's race. One participant's comments sum up the sentiment of

both groups:

> See, now I look at you differently, because I feel like you are on the right track
>
> with what you doing. I can respect it, because you know, I mean there's so many,
>
> like, I wish that you could just come with me, like, if I could just video tape.
>
> Because there are so many people who speak Ebonics and never learn how to
>
> speak correct English and then when they get to school they're not accepted or it's
>
> people who—but I think if you keep going where you're going to get people used
>
> to Ebonics and then standard English then Ebonics will be accepted if you can
>
> intertwine with both.

I would expect that the fact that I am a white researcher investigating a racially and culturally

stigmatized language, exacerbated participants' feelings of mistrust and reluctance to participate.

After I "proved" myself, however, participants were quick to note their hope that I could help

validate their language and, thus, their identity.

Conclusion

According to the focus group data, the privacy of participants' digitally-composed messages seemed to be of little concern and they had mixed opinions about whether or not consent was necessary when collecting textual data from social network sites. After further discussion, participants were more aware of social, racial, and privacy implications, but had little regard for such issues without being prompted to consider these matters.

Although there were no current guidelines regarding ethical procedures related to digital textual data (e.g., messages on social network sites) during the data collection for this current study, McKee and Porter (2008) establish the importance of recognizing that we are studying texts *and* people (p. 717). This research is especially sensitive because I studied a particular group of people who compose texts that are intrinsically connected to their racial identity—an identity that has been misrepresented and undermined by white culture. I believe that, because these members suppose a certain amount of privacy and may not even be aware of the implications of being research subjects, and, further, because SNS comments (those written in AAL, especially) are not only texts but represent the Discourse of a specific, stigmatized community of people, SNS comments should be treated as private texts that represent a specific group of people. I argue that it is the ethical duty of researchers to protect and keep research participants' privacy in mind, even if they are not aware or mindful of the possibilities of risk or exploitation.

My research warrants more attention to educate young people about ethical privacy. For me, the cognitive dissonance lies in the fact that participants from my study typically set their privacy settings as "private," yet seem to think that if an interloper (e.g., non-SNS friend, stranger, researcher) views their page and even collects data from their public walls, then that is

acceptable and not worth scrutinizing. Speaking to this issue, Ess (2009) explains this problem

as a generational disconnect, writing,

> it is frequently noted that younger people seem less concerned about protecting
>
> their privacy, at least as traditionally conceived. Perhaps as having grown up in a
>
> cellphone culture—along with the many other digital means of communication
>
> that saturate our lives in the developed world—young people have simply had less
>
> *experience* of the sorts of privacy available in the pre-digital era? (p. 49)

Further, Ess discusses unfortunate circumstances when younger generations realize,

perhaps all too late, that "what they believe to be (at least relatively) private information is

oftentimes far more public than they would like" and that "generations may disagree on the

nature and limits of privacy" yet "we all nonetheless expect, and, in some cases at least, require,

some form of privacy and data privacy protection" (Ess, 2009, p. 50). I argue that it is our

ethical duty as researchers to protect our participants' privacy, even if they do not understand the

importance.

Within my focus groups, participants were less skeptical of someone reading or copying

and pasting what they had written online than someone studying what they had written as an

example of AAL. This leads me to another issue brought up by McKee and Porter (2008): Are

the digital texts we study only examples of alphabetic or logographic communication or are they

also representations of the people who compose those texts? And, in that way, are we studying

texts only or texts and people? Again, a case-by-case consideration might best answer that

question. As far as this study is concerned, I argue that, given the intrinsic connection between

language, literacy, and identity as well as the racial and cultural importance of the literacy being

studied, I am examining both digital AAL (i.e., the text) and the people who compose it. The

two are inseparable.

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