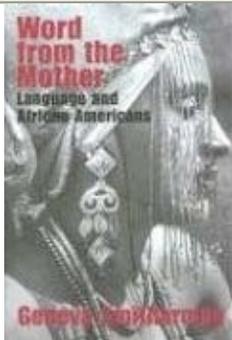


Word from the Mother: Language and African Americans

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Introduction

African-American Language (AAL), like all languages, is a tool for ordering the chaos of human experience. (. . .) 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. (. . .) Black folks are the masters of linguistic improvisation and manipulators of the Word. (p. 64)

As a sociolinguist, Geneva Smitherman needs little introduction; she has produced seminal works on the history, development and structure of AAL (African American Language) as well as having been at the forefront of the struggle for linguistic rights, what she terms the "Language Wars," since the 1960's. In this, her most recent work, she continues to explore the complexities and richness of African American culture and language in a style both engaging and passionate.

In *Word from the Mother*, Smitherman positions herself as a matriarch of the "Old Skool," the linguists who first brought forth the position that AAL is a legitimate language, and the rightful mother tongue of its speakers. To prove her point, she slides easily from LWC (Language of Wider Communication) prose to African American Language (AAL) throughout her book, as in the following: "But peep this: the LWC ain decreed by the Divine One from on High; naw, [it] gets to be considered 'standard' because it derives from the style of speaking and the language habits of the dominant race, class and gender in U.S. society" (p. 6). As a result, this is no dry or

ponderous academic text, but one that abounds with language play as well as being rich in cultural history and political commentary.

Word from the Mother does not lend itself to easy categorization, since each chapter seems to approach AAL through a different lens; indeed each chapter could easily stand on its own as a concise articulation of an issue in AAL linguistics, be it the use of the "N word" (Chapter 3), the evolution of hip-hop and its language (Chapter 5), or a list of AAL words and expressions (Chapter 2). Some of these discussions are political, while others are more linguistic in their focus. (Of course, Smitherman herself could well object to this characterization, given her stance that all language is political!) The author draws generously upon the song lyrics of contemporary artists such as Kanye West and Mos Def, poetry, cartoons (e.g., "The Boondocks"), and examples from a variety of media to illustrate her points throughout.

A brief discussion of the focus of each chapter will give an idea of the multi-faceted approach Smitherman takes to her topic. The first chapter is historical in nature, offering a discussion of the struggles to establish AAL as a legitimate language, particularly in education. She also documents the research efforts by linguists to establish AAL as a language in its own right and to debunk its characterization as "slovenly, lazy speech" (p. 9). This leads to what Smitherman terms the "linguistic push-pull," the ambivalence of AAL speakers who both love their language for its power and expressiveness, yet often reject and denigrate it in response to the stigma it carries in the wider culture. Ultimately, Smitherman notes, "The [African-American] language is bound up with and symbolic of identity, camaraderie, culture and home. And it ain going nowhere" (p. 19).

The next chapter offers little more than a list of common words, expressions and proverbs from AAL, representing "a cultural litmus test" of Black Linguistic Knowledge, according to Smitherman (p. 20). While some of her examples have become mainstream (e.g., a showboat or a sell-out), many might be unfamiliar to those who don't speak AAL and give a real flavor of its inventiveness and distinct character. Without any accompanying discussion, however, the chapter seemed out of place and might have better served as an appendix.

Chapter 3 moves into the realm of sociolinguistics and tackles the volatile topic of the "N-words" with Smitherman providing cultural explanations of the terms nigger/nigga, the "bad nigga," and the "Head Nigger" as well as the multiple layers of meaning these terms can convey in Black culture. She also offers a useful discussion of the debate over who has the right to use these terms and when, a discussion I think should be required reading for many young people who throw these words about easily without an understanding of the social or linguistic significance of their use. One couldn't ask for a better exemplification of the complexities of language use in a social context, particularly when a term is so charged with meaning.

In the next chapter, Smitherman moves on to explain some notable types of linguistic improvisation and verbal play typical of AAL. She comments that "Black folk applaud skillful linguistic inventiveness. . . . We likes folk who can play with and on the Word, who can talk and testify, preach and prophesy, lie and signify" (p. 65). Among her examples are such phenomena as "signification and signifying" (humorous statements with double meanings, used to make personal or social commentary), the

Dozens (a game of highly exaggerated insults, usually focusing on the opponent's mother), and "selling woof tickets" or "trash talking," both of which are styles of rhetorical bragging. Smitherman offers a number of examples of such language use, although I found myself wishing there were more such examples.

Chapter 5 delves into HEAR ("Hip Hop in its essence and real", p. 82), a complex term the author defines as much more than a style of music - rather, a cultural phenomenon that encompasses the "independent collective consciousness" of the inner city and includes dance, art, prose, poetry and all forms of performance. Smitherman traces its evolution into a political movement as well as discussing the linguistics of hip hop, whose "verbal clothing is the rhetorical garb of the outcast" (p. 99). For Smitherman, hip hop represents one of the best examples of language renewal and creation, and she continues this discussion in the subsequent chapter, where she documents the globalization of this culture. Here, she brings in a pointed discussion of "crossover" as well, the process by which black culture is appropriated and exploited by the mainstream media, even as African-Americans remain marginalized politically and economically.

This political focus carries over into the final chapter in which she poses the question "Negro Dialect, The Last Barrier to Integration?" (p. 121). Here, the intersection of the linguistic and the political is most evident, with Smitherman offering a variety of statistics documenting the poverty, unemployment, school segregation and other racial inequalities that continue to plague the United States. "So what we gon' do?" she asks (p. 135). She offers a number of directions she feels linguists should pursue: from a pedagogical standpoint, she believes all of the following would be important steps in the direction of fully appreciating AAL and valuing its vitality and richness: (1) developing linguistic awareness programs in schools, (2) bringing hip hop into classrooms as a tool for cultural awareness and critical thinking, and (3) initiating the study of African languages in schools, particularly those which have had a direct influence on the development of AAL.

This text would work well in a sociolinguistics class, or any introductory linguistics class in which language variety, dialects and linguistic diversity are discussed. I would argue that an American audience would be the most responsive, given that many of the cultural references would be lost on an audience not familiar with the media and music of the United States. While Smitherman does make the case for the increased globalization of Hip Hop as a musical genre, many of her own references are to television shows, cartoons and other popular culture that may not be widely known to international audiences. However, her analysis of the role AAL has played in American culture and language could certainly provide a useful case study for international scholars interested in a comparative look at linguistic diversity and its social and political repercussions.

The problem, of course, with trying to pin down a language evolving as rapidly as AAL is that in a short amount of time its vocabulary lists and idioms, the artists who use it, and the popular culture embedded in it may soon become dated, lessening a wide range of present-day students' ability to recognize its meanings. But in the meantime, this is a lively text that will have great appeal for both undergraduate and graduate students studying language--students who will no doubt appreciate its lively language and hipness (to use an AAL word), but who will also have their awareness of the cultural and political nature of language use greatly enhanced by reading it.

Greta Vollmer
Sonoma State University, California
<greta.vollmer@sonoma.edu >

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