Gloria Swindler Boutte

Kindergarten Through **Grade 3**

Four Things to Remember About African American Language: Examples From Children's Books

OU IS KIND. YOU IS SMART. YOU IS important." This is the affirmation that Viola Davis's character Aibileen gives the young child whom she cares for in the 2011 movie *The Help* (Al Mazrouei) (based on the book of the same title by Kathryn Stockett [2009]). These three simple, beautifully profound statements are spoken in African American Language (AAL), and they capture the essence of the power and wisdom of the language that many people miss—even the speakers themselves. As the wise godmother character in Irene Smalls's children's book *Don't Say Ain't* reminds us, "People judge you on how you speaks!"

In this article I use examples of AAL components from children's literature for children ages 4 to 8 to demonstrate the communicative virtuosity and rules of AAL. I begin by providing four broad, basic guidelines to help educators understand AAL.

Four basic guidelines

AAL is rule governed and systematic

African American Language—referred to by a number of names, such as African American English, African American Vernacular English, Black English, and Ebonics—follows a set of linguistic rules (Linguistic Society of America 1997; Boutte 2008; Kinloch 2010). Many

African American Language speakers and their teachers are unaware that AAL is not "broken English." Such misconceptions about AAL are pervasive and longstanding (Boutte 2008). For example, some AAL features (e.g., using terms like *swag* or saying, "You don't have no . . .") are mistakenly thought to be slang or grammatical errors (Boutte 2008), when in reality, AAL follows a set of rules for sounds, grammar, and social usage (Smitherman [1977] 1986, 2006; Linguistic Society of America 1997; Rickford 1999; Alim & Smitherman 2012).

AAL and Standard English are parallel language systems

Because African American Language has linguistic structures and rules, it should be thought of as a parallel language to Standard English (SE) instead of somehow lower on a hierarchy of language systems (Smitherman 2006). Viewing AAL and SE as parallel languages means that both are valid in their own right.

Our goal as educators is to respect and extend whatever languages children speak. It is important that we help children add SE to their language repertories without denigrating the home language. As examples from a variety of texts and media—including children's books—demonstrate, there is much cognitive complexity in AAL and in the expression of its related thought processes. The opening quote, "You is kind. You is smart. You is important," drives this point home. Aibileen, one of the wisest characters in the story, understands the importance of conveying to a young child that she is highly capable and valued—a point that the child's mother has obviously overlooked. It is not uncommon for AAL speakers who show high levels of competence and intelligence in their homes and communities to be viewed from a deficit perspective at school (Volk & Long 2005).

Our goal as educators is to respect and extend whatever languages children speak.

It is essential for educators to note that linguistically, the structure of AAL is just as strong as other language systems' structures and that African American Language presents no inherent instructional problems (Hilliard 2002; Purcell-Gates 2002). Teaching practices that honor and build on AAL are likely to be more effective in helping

About the Author

Gloria Swindler Boutte, PhD, is a professor of early childhood education at the University of South Carolina. Her scholarship and teaching focus on equity pedagogies. Her third book, *Educating African American Students: And How Are the Children?*, is forthcoming.
gsboutte@gmail.com

© Ellen B. Senisi

AAL speakers add SE forms of literacy and language usage than ones that position AAL as broken English (Wheeler & Swords 2006, 2010).

AAL speakers are emergent bilingual/bidialectal and biliterate learners

It is useful for teachers to recognize bidialectalism/bilingualism and biliteracy in 4- to 8-year-old children who speak African American Language. Acknowledging an overlap between AAL and SE while also accepting that AAL is distinct from SE leads to the realization that children who speak both AAL and SE are dual language learners (Kinloch 2010). Hence, AAL is more than a "pass-through language, only to be used to get to Standard English" (Perry & Delpit 1998, 15). Although for the most part, AAL speakers need to learn SE to be successful in US society (Delpit 1995), children's linguistic fluency in both African American Language and Standard English should be encouraged and honored (Perry & Delpit 1998; Boutte 2008; Kinloch 2010).

Primary grade children who come from AAL homes can be considered emergent bilinguals or biliterates who are eager to learn aspects of a second language system (in this case, SE). Typically, they are confident in their usage of AAL and, in fact, quite proud of it (Boutte & Johnson

© Ellen B. Senisi

2013a; 2013b), but also enjoy trying out SE literacies and language introduced in school. Regrettably, many teaching approaches used in classrooms prematurely foreclose AAL speakers' biliteracy and bilingualism development and force students to be monolingual by default (Boutte & Johnson 2013a; 2013b).

AAL speakers benefit from specific strategies and approaches

In general, 4- to 8-year-olds who are AAL speakers benefit from literacy strategies that are taught in a very visible and explicit way (Delpit 1995; Lapp & Flood 2005). Thus, for students trying to acquire proficiency in an unfamiliar dialect or language, the importance of explicit guidance, scaffolding, and practice cannot be understated (Delpit 1995; Fogel & Ehri 2000). For example, consider the classroom interaction in the dialogue that follows:

> **Denise (AAL speaker):** Jameka have two balloons.
> **Teacher:** Yes, she does. Do you know how to say that in Standard English?
> **Denise:** Is it, "Jameka has two balloons"?
> **Teacher:** Yes! Wow! You know how to say it two ways!

Some scholars suggest that it is difficult to learn a new dialect (e.g., AAL, if we consider it a dialect) because speakers may not be able to distinguish between linguistic forms that are common to both dialects (Fogel & Ehri 2000). For example, a 4- to 6-year-old AAL speaker who says, "I axed him for a pencil," typically has not developed the metalinguistic skills to hear the difference between what she says and the standardized version of it (I *asked* him for a pencil), since the meanings of both sentences are the same even though the phonology (pronunciation) is different. Additionally, in the case of AAL, speakers often

have to contend with negative teacher attitudes about their language, such as mistakenly considering AAL to be broken English or slang (Boutte 2008; Souto-Manning 2009; Boutte & Johnson 2013a).

There are times when Standard English is appropriate; at other times, speakers' natural vernaculars are more important.

Contrastive analysis—explicit comparison and contrasting of the two language systems—has been shown to be an effective strategy in increasing children's use of SE (even as early as 4 years of age and extending to young adult college students), whereas conventional instructional literacy strategies, such as modeling the "correct" pronunciation (e.g., *brother* instead of *bruva*) and marking such pronunciations as miscues, have not (Wheeler & Swords 2006, 2010). It is important to note that comparisons and contrasts between AAL and SE should be bidirectional. Teachers can sometimes start with books written in SE and translate them to AAL. Another effective strategy for promoting SE is code-switching—helping speakers learn how to modify their language style based on the setting. For example, there are times when SE is appropriate; at other times, speakers' natural vernaculars are more appropriate. (See "Resources for Contrastive Analysis and Code-Switching in the Classroom.") Both contrastive analysis and code-switching provide affirmative and culturally relevant ways of teaching speaking and writing with children by building on their existing language (Smitherman & Dyson 2009). Using contrastive analysis and code-switching activities in classrooms can help young children think about how and when to use the two types of discourse.

Since most teachers of young children value books and many use them regularly in classrooms, children's literature is a natural and accessible resource for teaching literacy and language. In the next section, excerpts of AAL from children's literature provide insights about features of the language to illustrate the four basic guidelines.

Examples from children's literature

Most authors who use AAL in their books do an amazing job of capturing language as a way of thinking (Fanon [1952] 2008) that is tied to dimensions of Black culture (Boutte & Johnson 2012; 2013). As examples, here are selected excerpts from older books that are likely to be well known, although books published more recently can also be used. The following descriptions of their stories give readers some context:

- *So Much!*, by Trish Cooke (1994). Family and love are at the center of this book as family members visit a baby

Resources for Contrastive Analysis and Code-Switching in the Classroom

Many educators are likely to be unfamiliar with contrastive analysis and code-switching, and may not use them in their classrooms (Wheeler & Swords 2006; Boutte 2008). To learn more about these strategies, and for a list of books that use AAL, consult Boutte (2008), Boutte and Johnson (2013a, 2013b), and Wheeler and Swords (2006, 2010). These resources provide examples of oral and written code-switching and of contrastive analysis in a variety of activities, such as dramatic play, creative writing, and discussion of children's literature, that teachers can use in K–3 classrooms. The resources can also help educators recognize the sound, grammar, and social features of African American Language when they hear them in everyday speech or read them in books.

boy for a family celebration. The book uses a version of AAL typically spoken in the Bayou (Louisiana).

- *Flossie and the Fox*, by Patricia C. McKissack (1986). In this folktale, the wise, young heroine, Flossie, on her way through the woods to deliver a basket of eggs, outwits a clever fox. The book captures both AAL and SE: Flossie speaks in AAL and the fox speaks in SE.

- *'Twas the Night B'fore Christmas: An African-American Version*, by Melodye Rosales (1996). This is an African American version of the classic Christmas Eve verse "The Night Before Christmas." The book contains beautiful images of an African American family.

- *The Barber's Cutting Edge*, by Gwendolyn Battle-Lavert (1994). The author shares a young boy's visit to the barbershop, where he engages in a word game with the barber. The book provides a glimpse of the barbershop as a central and pivotal institution in the Black community and illustrates community members' support for education.

Pronunciation of Select Standard English Words in African American Language

Standard English words	Pronunciations in African American Language
ask	ax; ast
with, this, that, these, those, tooth	wif/wid/wit; dis, dat, dese, dose, toof
police	po' lice
find	fine
sister; brother; later	sista; brotha; lata
test; street	tes; skreet
looked	look or look-ded
four; door; running	foh; doh; runnin'

The excerpts that follow highlight the following language components: (1) sound system, or phonology; (2) grammar, or syntax; (3) word meaning, or semantics; (4) units of meaning, or morphology; and (5) social rules, or pragmatics. AAL features in the excerpts are italicized.

AAL sound system in books—*Fo' real*

Phonology refers to the sound system of a language. Every language has a unique set of sounds. While a discussion of the linguistic genesis of the sound system for AAL is beyond the scope of this article, there are a few examples in the table "Pronunciation of Select Standard English Words in African American Language." The following excerpt from 'Twas the Night B'fore Christmas is an example:

> **They were wrapped up in blankets all snug in their bed,**
> ***Dreamin'* of candy *an'* sweet *short'nin'* bread.**

This excerpt and the table of pronunciations show how word endings are often not voiced in AAL. Likewise, medial sounds may be omitted (e.g., *short'nin'* for *shortening*). As mentioned earlier, language is not separate from people's cultures. Embedded in this African American version of "The Night Before Christmas" are stunning illustrations showing cultural nuances of a Black family that tug at my memories as a child and as a parent of my own children when they were young. For instance, one custom among some Black families is to allow young children to sleep in bed with their parents, thus creating a "family bed" rather than separate beds for children and adults. The illustrations of this sleeping arrangement, which reflects the communal nature of Black culture, is different from depictions of mainstream bedtimes that typically show children in their separate beds. (Needless to say, parents often do not get much sleep in the family bed, but the child is comforted.) The author's use of AAL, along with her beautiful illustrations and cultural story line, is engaging and endearing.

AAL grammar in books—*How it be*

We often think of syntax as the grammar of a language. Syntax includes the rules for combining words into acceptable phrases, clauses, and sentences. In general, the rules of syntax for African American Language are different from those for Standard English. For example, linking verbs (i.e., verbs that do not show action) are not required in AAL sentences or questions. Double or multiple use of negatives is permitted, and *be* is used to suggest a habitual or perpetual state of affairs. The excerpt below is from *The Barber's Cutting Edge*:

> **"What *you* got up your *sleeve* today, *my man*?"**

This example has several AAL features, but the primary focus is on the sentence structure (syntax). AAL does not require a linking verb, so in this case, instead of asking, "What *have* you got," saying "What you got" follows the rules of AAL. The use of the word *got*, however, is not strictly an AAL feature, because it is used colloquially in SE

as well. The two other AAL features—the sleeve metaphor and the term of endearment, *my man*—are examples of semantics (AAL vocabulary or lexicon).

In this book, there are implicit affirmations of the beauty within the Black community and among the children. The barber, Mr. Bigalow, is interested in Rashaad, the child. Mr. Bigalow offers an enthusiastic greeting and queries Rashaad about happenings in his life. It is important to note that he lovingly challenges Rashaad to define vocabulary words from school, thus defying the common narrative that the Black community does not value education. This story, which effectively pairs the use of AAL with caring acts by community members, demonstrates why educators should not alienate children from their home/community language.

AAL morphology in books—*Baby mama (and daddy)*

Morphology comprises the rules for combining the smallest units of meaning into complete words. For example, morphology includes the way words can be changed from present to past tense, the way they are made plural, and the way possessives are formed.

The Daddy *rub* the *baby* face.

In this excerpt from *So Much!*, the description of a father caressing his child's face is powerful on many levels. The illustration shows a Black father in a suit hugging his son, thus providing a nice counternarrative to the stereotypical view of African American fathers being absent and uncaring. In AAL, syntax rules do not require the past tense of regular verbs to end with the SE morpheme *–ed*. In fact, the linguistic rule is that the verb in this instance would remain the same regardless of whether it is present, past, or future tense. A similar rule governs the form of the verb *to be* in the opening quote, "You is kind. You is smart. You is important." Unlike Standard English, in which the verb form changes depending on the subject (e.g., he is, you are), the verb remains the same throughout. In other instances, the complexity of AAL is apparent, as sometimes one verb can be used to express several tenses.

Likewise, other aspects of AAL are more complex than SE. For example, AAL has five verb forms for present tense, and each one is different from the one SE uses (Rickford 1999; Smitherman 2006). The linguistic complexity of AAL flies under the radar of most educators. For young AAL speakers to have grasped these rules indicates that they, like other children, have made sense of the language rules of the people around them—their family and community members. This is an enormous accomplishment indeed.
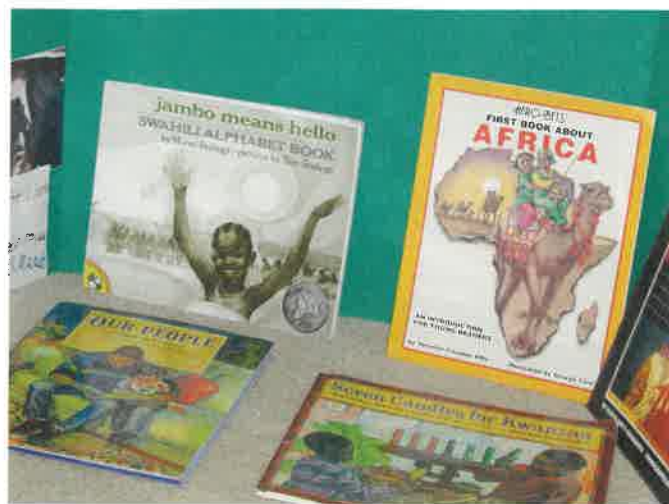
The second AAL feature that is highlighted in this line from *So Much!* can be seen in the way the word *baby* is possessive. Simply put, the possessive in AAL is not shown by adding an apostrophe and *s* (the *baby's* face). Rather, the possessive is indicated by adjacency (*baby* being next to *face*).

AAL semantics in books—*That's cool!*
Semantics includes the individual meaning of words or the vocabulary of a language. In AAL, new words are always

© Ellen B. Senisi

being created. Likewise, figurative language (metaphors, idioms, and such) are common. Sadly, most assessments that survey children's language and vocabulary emphasize words that children *do not know* rather than finding out which words they *do know* (Hilliard 2002). While AAL speakers may not be familiar with the words in some assessments, they do know many words because ever-changing vocabulary is a key social feature of AAL. Because AAL terminology is constantly morphing into new forms, many people mistake the continual development of new words as slang. Like SE, AAL can use slang at times, but AAL's use of double meanings and codified words, phrases, songs, and artwork has a long history in Black culture. While slang exists in any language system, underlying rules for African American Language include continuous suspension of literal definitions and inverting the meanings of Standard English words (e.g., changing the meaning of *dog* to a term of endearment, *dawg*). Historically, it has been necessary for African Americans to speak in codes that others could not understand. For example, many spirituals, folktales, and quilts contained symbolism and messages that were purposely disguised so that White enslavers could not detect them.

The sound of *Big Mama's* voice floated past the cabins in Sophie's Quarters, round the smokehouse, beyond the chicken coop, all the way down to Flossie Finley.

In this excerpt from *Flossie and the Fox*, the use of the name *Big Mama* to refer to Flossie's grandmother is classic and symbolic. *Big Mama* does not refer to the physical size of the grandmother, but to the largeness of her significance to the Black family. She is bigger than life and omniscient—a sage. Suspending literal definitions and terminology is an essential mandate of the semantic feature of AAL.

AAL pragmatics in books—Communicate impressively

Pragmatics includes how language functions in social contexts. For example, knowing what is permissible to say, how and when to say it, and to whom one can say it are all pragmatic or social aspects that young children are learning about their language. We may think of pragmatics in terms of what is appropriate and polite to do. For example, taking turns when speaking is a Standard English pragmatic rule that is diametrically different from the rule for African American Language conversations. AAL allows for more than one person speaking at once (overlapping) and permits conarration instead of individual speakers sequentially contributing to the conversation. The general linguistic AAL pragmatic rule is to "communicate impressively" (Hilliard 2002). This means that language should not be boring. So, for instance, language play (e.g., signifying, like "yo' mama" jokes) is encouraged as well as the use of a repertory of nonverbal communication. AAL speakers also are likely to use direct versus indirect commands. Here is an example of pragmatics from *Flossie and the Fox*:

> **"How *do* a fox look?" Flossie asked. "I *disremember* ever seeing one." *Big Mama* had to think a bit. "Chile, a fox just *be* a fox. But one thing for sure, that rascal loves eggs. He'll do most anything to get at some eggs."**

This excerpt richly demonstrates several language features that distinguish AAL from SE—sound, grammar, vocabulary, and social use of language. Beginning with the feature of AAL syntax that does not require subject–verb agreement ("How *do* a fox look?"), to the use of clever words like *disremember*, the text revels in AAL. We get an idea of how conversations are structured in AAL.

The AAL style of questioning differs from the SE manner of posing a question. Flossie's grandmother does not give the child a "school-type" response, such as, "A fox is a furry animal with four legs"; instead, her answer is very abstract. Readers of the book, however, will find that Big Mama's response is adequate for helping Flossie identify a fox when she sees one.

Conclusion

The four things for educators to remember about AAL that were highlighted in this article are not new, but they are not often used as a starting point for thinking about the linguistic strengths of AAL speakers. Observing and collecting language samples from children, television, children's books, and other sources provides a wonderful start for examining AAL language patterns and features. Although African American Language speakers are rarely viewed as bilingual and biliterate in early childhood classrooms, they are as capable as other emergent bilingual/bidialectal and biliterate children. Even linguists who consider AAL to be a dialect and not a language agree that it is linguistically strong and is one of the most complex English dialects in the United States (Alim & Smitherman 2012). Finally, it is important to remember that using AAL as a basis for developing Standard English proficiency will require ongoing and systematic instructional and curricular changes.

References

Alim, H.S., & G. Smitherman. 2012. *Articulate While Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the US*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Al Mazrouei, M.M. (Producer). 2011. *The Help* [DVD video]. United States, IMDB.

Boutte, G.S. 2008. "Teaching African American English Speakers: Expanding Educators and Student Repertoires." Chap. 3 in *Language, Culture, and Community in Teacher Education*, ed. M.E. Brisk, 47–70. New York: Erlbaum.

Boutte, G.S., & G. Johnson. 2013a. "Do Educators See and Honor Biliteracy and Bidialectalism in African American Language Speakers? Apprehensions and Reflections of Two Grandparents/ Professional Educators." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 41 (2): 133–41.

Boutte, G.S., & G.L. Johnson Jr. 2013b. "*Funga Alafia*: Toward Welcoming, Understanding and Respecting African American Speakers' Bilingualism and Biliteracy." Special issue, Social Justice Approaches to African American Language and Literacies. *Equity and Excellence in Education* 46 (3): 300–14.

Delpit, L.D. 1995. *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflicts in the Classroom*. New York: The New Press.

Fanon, F. [1952] 2008. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press.

Fogel, H., & L. Ehri. 2000. "Teaching Elementary Students Who Speak Black English Vernacular to Write in Standard English: Effects of Dialect Transformation Practice." *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 25 (2): 212–35.

Hilliard, A.G. 2002. "Language, Culture, and the Assessment of African American Children." Chap. 6 in *The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom*, eds. L.D. Delpit & J.K. Dowdy, 87–105.

Kinloch, V. 2010. "'To Not Be a Traitor of Black English': Youth Perceptions of Language Rights in an Urban Context." *Teachers College Record* 112 (1): 103–41.

Lapp, D., & J. Flood. 2005. "Exemplary Reading Instruction in the Elementary School: How Reading Develops—How Students Learn and How Teachers Teach." Chap. 9 in *Literacy Development of Students in Urban Schools: Research and Policy*, eds. J. Flood & P.L. Anders, 153–79. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Linguistic Society of America. 1997. "LSA Resolution on the Oakland 'Ebonics' Issue." www.linguisticsociety.org/resource/lsa-resolution-oakland-ebonics-issue.

Perry, T., & L.D. Delpit, eds. 1998. *The Real Ebonics Debate: Power, Language, and the Education of African-American Children*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Purcell-Gates, V. 2002. "'. . . As Soon as She Opened Her Mouth!' Issues of Language, Literacy, and Power." Chap. 8 in *The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom*, eds. L.D. Delpit & J.K. Dowdy, 107–20. New York: The New Press.

Rickford, J.R. 1999. *African American Vernacular English: Features, Evolution, Educational Implications*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Smitherman, G. [1977] 1986. *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press.

Smitherman, G. 2006. *Word From the Mother: Language and African Americans*. New York: Routledge.

Smitherman, G., & A.H. Dyson. 2009. "The Right (Write) Start: African American Language and the Discourse of Sounding Right." *Teachers College Record* 111 (4): 973–98.

Souto-Manning, M. 2009. "Acting out and Talking Back: Negotiating Discourses in American Early Educational Settings." *Early Child Development and Care* 179 (8): 1083–94.

Stockett, K. 2009. *The Help*. New York: Penguin Group.

Volk, D., & S. Long, 2005. "Challenging Myths of the Deficit Perspective: Honoring Children's Literacy Resources." *Young Children* 60 (6): 12–19.

Wheeler, R.S., & R.S. Swords. 2006. *Code-Switching: Teaching Standard English in Urban Classrooms*. Theory and Research Into Practice series. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Wheeler, R.S., & R.S. Swords. 2010. *Code-Switching Lessons: Grammar Strategies for Linguistically Diverse Writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Firsthand/Heinemann.