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# *African American Vernacular English and code-switching: an analysis of the films Hidden Figures and The Six Triple Eight*

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## INTRODUCTION

Language and style variation plays a central role in the construction of identity, social belonging and power relations. Among the most socially significant varieties of English, African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has a complex position, as it is both a systematic linguistic variety and a socially stigmatized form of speech. At the same time, code-switching represents a crucial communicative strategy through which speakers navigate different social environments, adjust to institutional expectations and negotiate identity. The representation of these linguistic phenomena in contemporary cinema offers an important field of inquiry, as films not only reflect social realities, but also shapes public perceptions of language, race, and legitimacy.

This dissertation focuses on the representation of AAVE and code-switching in the films *Hidden Figures* and *The Six Triple Eight*. Both films portray African American women operating within racially segregated or predominantly white institutional environments. Through their dialogue these characters provide a meaningful site for examining how linguistic variation is represented and how speech is associated with authority, professionalism, solidarity and resistance.

The study is guided by two central research questions:

- 1) What evidence of AAVE and code-switching is used in the two films?
- 2) What functions do these linguistic phenomena serve within the narrative and social contexts of the films?

In order to address these questions, the dissertation adopts a qualitative analytical approach grounded in sociolinguistic theory. Selected scenes from both films are examined in detail, with particular attention to grammatical features of AAVE, types of code-switching, shifts in register and stylistic variation. The analysis draws on established theoretical distinctions, including situational and metaphorical code-switching, inter-sentential and intra-sentential, and style-shifting. By applying this framework to cinematic dialogue, the study aims to explore how linguistic choices are distributed across

formal and informal settings and how they relate to institutional power and racialized expectations.

The dissertation is organized into three main chapters. Chapter one introduces AAVE, outlining its historical development, structural characteristics and sociolinguistic significance. Chapter two presents the theoretical framework on code-switching and style variation, discussing the main classifications and their relationships to identity and power. In the end, chapter three applies these theoretical perspectives to the selected films, providing a detailed qualitative analysis of AAVE features in *The Six Triple Eight* and code-switching in *Hidden Figures*. The final section summarizes the main arguments and reflects on the broader implications of linguistic representation in the films.

## CHAPTER 1: AAVE

This chapter introduces African American vernacular English (AAVE) as a linguistic variety and outlines its main historical, grammatical, morphological and phonological features. It presents key sociolinguistic debates concerning the status of AAVE and its relationship with Standard American English, emphasizing its systematic and rule-governed nature. The chapter also discusses the social and cultural significance of AAVE within African American communities. By establishing the theoretical background of AAVE, this chapter provides the linguistic foundation necessary for the later analysis of its representation in film dialogues.

### 1.1 WHAT IS AAVE?

African American Vernacular English, known also as AAVE, is a rule-governed and systematic variety of English coming primarily from African Americans, which finds itself in a direct juxtaposition with Standard English (SE). It is a fully developed system, with its own phonological, syntactic and pragmatic features, but it tends to be associated only with informal context or youth culture. As it was marked by many linguists (Smitherman, 1994) (Pennycook, 1998), this language emerged during the 17<sup>th</sup> century and it was based on some social conditions, and its development can not be tracked without understanding and taking each development and context into consideration. In fact, the studies highlight an even earlier presence of this language during the 16<sup>th</sup> century across the African territory that later spread out and developed from a contact between Whites and Blacks, creating the AAVE (Rickford 1998; Smitherman, 1977). However, the term AAVE was still not coined, since “the name AAVE was not then available, even though essentially the same variety is occasionally mentioned in work from this period” (Lanehart 2007 cited in *The History of English* 2017).

AAVE was firstly considered in the 1970s, when it was studied more systematically, paying attention to issues such as tense and aspect marking, phonology and syntactic patterns. These studies brought to light some systematic use of verbal markers, like the habitual “be”, the position of the negation “not”, the absence of copula in specific context,

showing how all these features are ruled by actual grammar logic and that is all part of a coherent verbal system, rather than what people call “deviations” from the standard norm, which is presumed to be the right ones because they come from SE.

Today AAVE is recognized as an essential component of African American identity and cultural expression, which was shaped by time and effort by historical experience, social identity and especially ongoing discussion about linguistic legitimacy.

## 1.2 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The historical development of African American Vernacular English is closely connected to the history of people of African descent in the United States who had a linguistic contact with the native Americans, and it was influenced by historical phenomena such as forced migration, slavery, the concept of segregation, the formation of black communities and the evolving scholarly interpretation. Therefore, I will need to divide each theory that contributed to the construction of AAVE’s history.

### 1.2.1 The development of different ideologies

The first historical emergence of African American Vernacular English must be understood omitting the background of slavery, because it was mainly a contact between diverse African languages and multiple English dialects. Over time, multiple competing explanations regarding how AAVE formed, each one reflecting linguistic evidence and ideological frameworks that shaped how African American speech was evaluated. I am going to summarize in a section below the major positions that have contributed to the historical debate.

### 1.2.2 Historical positions

The Anglicist or dialectologist position is one of the two most common perspectives, which argues that enslaved Africans acquired English primarily from British overseers and other European Americans, leading to the adoption of regional, non-standard British English forms brought to North America during the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. AAVE

developed from a natural process like a dialect learning and later divergences from these English varieties. Later Neo-Anglicist scholar (Poplack, 1999) emphasizes that these English varieties encountered by African slaves were highly variable and non-standard.

The creolist position, the second common perspective emerged in 1960s, as a response to the Anglicist view. It states that AAVE development came out of an earlier English-based creole spoken in plantation communities. So enslaved Africans may have developed a creole because they were exposed to a limited access to English and an extreme social inequality, which later underwent decreolization, gradually shifting toward English while retaining distinctive features. This process is identified in the Southeastern part of United States, since it is considered the central region of plantations and extensive forced migration through the Middle Passage.

The substratist position demonstrates the influence of African languages. It suggests that patterns found in AAVE reflect structural traits from Niger-Congo languages such as Kikongo, Mande and Kwa. These patterns come from the diverse linguistic background of enslaved Africans who brought phonological, syntactic and discourse-pattern features that interacted with English in early contact situations. Basically, African didn't just "transfer" whole languages, but guided also learning strategies, phonotactic preferences and discourse norms.

The ecological and restructuralist perspectives broaden the historical debate by emphasizing social, migratory and ecological conditions that shaped language contact. They not only focus on linguistic structure but analyze also settlement patterns of European and African populations; demographic shifts across regions; social separation and degrees of interactions and changing political and economic conditions affecting contact. Researchers argue that AAVE evolved differently across centuries because the conditions of contact changed over time. In other words, AAVE from the 18<sup>th</sup> century learned by slaves in the plantations communities is different from the one spoken in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, because it was influenced by a different background of migration and segregated urban settings. This perspective merges something from both the Anglicist

and the Creolist thinking, suggesting that the origins of AAVE aren't reducible to a single source.

The divergence/ convergence theory emerged in the 1980s, when Labov (cited in Butters, 1987) theorized that AAVE formed with a continuous shift of contacts and distances between the Black and White community, the former moving away from the vernacular side, the latter taking into consideration some aspects of Black forms. These movements are mainly caused by racism, segregation and inequality, and they create a dynamic system that respond with the creation of new speech communities with innovative forms.

The deficit position emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and it's not a linguistic theory, but more a racialized ideology. It claims that African Americans were intellectually inferior and therefore unable to learn English properly. This perspective attributed the differences between AAVE and SE as "mistakes" caused by a cognitive deficiency, rather than the legitimization of the linguistic development.

Despite being discredited by many linguists, such as Labov himself and his criticism of racist interpretations of linguistic variation (1969), this position has been remarkably persistent and influences the educational and psychological sphere, extending into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### 1.2.3 The inner circle, the outer circle and the expanding circle

Talking about the roots of AAVE, the distinction between varieties of English emerges, emphasizing the three Circles: the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle (Kachru, 1985). The Inner Circle represents the countries where the population acquired English as their first language (i.e. the UK, Canada, USA, Australia, New Zealand); the Outer Circle groups are the nations that were colonized by the Inner Circle's ones, and so speakers recognize English as an official or significant second language (e.g. India, Singapore, Nigeria, etc.) and lastly, the Expanding Circle refers to nations which weren't part of the British/American colonization and so English is considered to be a foreign language, but it is still taught at school (e.g. China, Japan, Indonesia, etc.)(Kachru, 1985; McArthur, 1987).

The early studies of African American speech confirm that there was a distinct variety long before the term AAVE was coined and place AAVE somewhere between the Inner and the Outer Circle, since it is a variety spoken in the USA also as an only language, but it comes from the American-born descendants who populated internal colonies (Peters, 2017 cited in *The History of English* 2017).

#### 1.2.4 From British English to AAVE

The first scholarly studies on AAVE were first focused on outlining the real origins of the language: at the beginning, the African American speech was grouped with the English spoken by recently arrived immigrants from non-English-speaking countries (e.g.: Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, Italian, Jews, etc. ), to underline that their English was fundamentally different from mainstream American English. Later the real matter became the understand of the real origins: the main focus was whether AAVE, firstly called “Black English Vernacular” (BEV), or just “Black English”(BE), developed primarily from English dialects spoken by enslavers or it reflected significant influence from West African languages.

In the 1970s, the term Ebonics was coined by Robert Williams, a psychologist at Washington University and was accepted by African American Scholars, who thought that BEV or BE were “loaded terms” and this new term could better emphasize the African Linguistic Variety. This new definition distanced the BE variety from the SE one, because it doesn’t follow the grammar rules of English, rather it retains a West and Niger-Congo deep structure, genetically distinct from English.

From here on, the BE variety was considered a real language, and not only a dialect of SE or a form of slang , because it is a self-standing language capable of expressing the depth and breadth of a people’s culture in such diverse forms, for example: the blues, gospel, R&B, Mototown, sounding, the dozen, Hip-Hop, theater, poetry, prose, oratory scholarship, satire, oral narrative and much more (Filmer, 2003).

Ebonics quickly became a contested and politically charged label, overstating the African cultural influence. The polarization around this term contributed significantly to public misunderstandings, with many jokes referring to the “ebonic virus” or some reference Ebola, as well as many other new terms ending in -onics to mock the idea of letting

African Americans have their own claim to a language, and so the term was abandoned (Pullum 1999, cited in *The Workings of Language* 1999).

### 1.3 LINGUISTIC FEATURES

The history of AAVE is also documented through the evolution of its grammatical descriptions. In fact, as stated before, it is considered a language since it has a rule-governed linguistic system, distinctive phonological, morphological and syntactic structures, so far from being considered as random or deficient. It shows consistent grammatical patterns that have been documented and examined in depth across decades of linguistic research, but also morphological and phonological features that have been deeply studied, so that they will not be referred merely as “mistakes”, rather as precise rules.

AAVE’s most salient traits regarding the grammar include: the absent copula, the habitual be, consonant cluster reduction and the negation patterns. The most common morphological features are the 3<sup>rd</sup>-person singular “-s” absence and the morphologic invariant verb “be”. Ultimately, the phonological features that appear the most are the Final Consonant Cluster Reduction and the Reduction of unstressed syllables.

As for grammatical features, we most common examples that we can find are the Zero Copula, the habitual “be” and the negative concord or the multiple negation.

The Zero Copula is one of the most recognizable features of AAVE, meaning that the verb *to be* can be omitted in specific grammatical contexts. It’s not a random deletion, instead it follows strict rules regarding person, tense and context.

The copula is not omitted when: it bears accent or stress for any reason, if the copula is negated, when it is in the past tense, when it is in the first-person singular, when it begins a clause, etc. When the copula is not present in one of these conditions, so it can be omitted in AAVE (see examples 1a and 2a for SE version, 1b and 2b for AAVE version), for example:

- (1) a. How are you doing?

b. How you doing?

(2) a. He's big

b. He big.

Habitual “be” is another feature of the AAVE language. This form of the verb “to be” cannot be omitted, since it is used in addition to the sentence with the form of “be” to express a habitual and repetitive action (3). Basically, when you state:

(3) My sister works all day. She be tired, so she never go out at night.

This means that she's always tired after work and doesn't have the energy to go out later at night.

But if you state:

(4) My sister works all day. She tired.

This means that she's tired now because she worked all day, but that's not how she usually feels (Filmer, 2003).

The negative concord (5), or the so-called multiple negation, is the most discussed among critics, since it is considered to be mistakenly an illogicality. The characteristics of negative concord sentence is the use of two or more negative morphemes to communicate a single negation. The critics' claim about this is that logic tells us that two negatives make a positive: in other words, if we were to represent the sentence in logical form, only one negative operator would appear (6), because usually the negative morpheme negate an entire clause, not just a smaller constituent.

(5): He ain't got no car.

(6): He doesn't have a/any car.

What the speaker wants to do, is stress or emphasize a precise part of the sentence or highlight the presence of a negative morpheme. What it must not be done is confusing the multiple negation of AAVE with the “logical” double negation found in SE, since AAVE is a self-standing language that has not the same grammar as the English one, rather this one is much more similar to the Italian one (Pullum, 1999; Martin and Wolfram, 1998).

There are many more examples of these grammatical features, because AAVE is a consistent and rule-governed language, rich in tense aspect and morphology and structurally distinct from SAE, which can be studied as any other normal language, since it has a self-standing structure.

As for the morphological features, the most common are the 3<sup>rd</sup>-person singular “-s” absence and the regularization of irregular verbs regarding the past tense.

The absence of the 3<sup>rd</sup>- person singular “-s” is a morphological feature that refers mostly to the urban AAVE. In fact, to understand its development, we need to make a clear distinction: the rural AAVE is the oldest form of it and, regarding its feature, it’s the most similar form to SE; while urban AAVE is the “newest” language influenced by a contact with urban centers, media, urban communities and simply, different areas from the northern part of the USA.

Urban AAVE is mostly found among the young communities, which seem to have “no concord rule for verbal -s” (Fasold 1972: 146).

This phenomenon affects the subject-verb agreement, especially regarding the suffix -s, presenting a recurring pattern in some varieties. This feature developed more recently, as shown by some studies of Rickford (1999) and Wolfram and Thomas (2002), and contrasts with the rural forms of AAVE, which maintained the same structure as the SE version, with the concordance between the 3<sup>rd</sup>- person singular subject and the suffix -s. As a way of standardizing the rules of English, the urban AAE gets rid of the -s, transforming the verb (7):

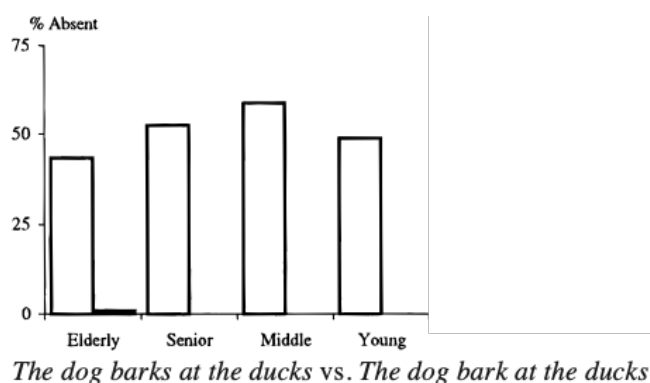
(7) She run.

In a more complex context, the following example taken from Wolfram and Thomas (8):

(8) She have money.

Simply, this phenomenon can not a precise morphological rule, but it is simply a recurrent pattern present in the new setting of urban English, regardless of the speaker’s age.

The figure 1 shows the incidence of the 3<sup>rd</sup> – person singular -s absence of four different generational groups of urban African Americans.



Group	3rd -s Abs./Total	% Absent
Elderly European American	1/104	1.0
Elderly African American	27/62	43.6
Senior African American	39/74	52.7
Middle African American	38/64	59.4
Young African American	34/89	49.4

Figure 1 (Wolfram & Thomas, 2000) the patterning of 3 p.sg. -s absence

The regularization of irregular verbs in the past tense occurs in the AAVE forms, as well as in other vernacular varieties, such as the rural Southern White varieties, so it’s not an exclusive feature of AAVE.

As explained by Wolfram (2004), there are several ways of expressing past tense in AAVE, and they do not follow the standard rules of SE: the auxiliary “had” with the past simple form of the verb (9); the past participle or simple past of the irregular verb without the auxiliary “had” (10); the usage of the bare root as past tense (11) and the regularization

of irregular verbs by adding -ed (12). The following sets of examples are taken from Wolfram (2004: 122).

(9) I had went down there.

(10) They seen it.

(11) They run there yesterday.

(12) Everybody knowed him.

Example number 10 is quite dynamic, as stated in Green (1998: 50), regarding the past morphology in AAVE.

“There’s generally no distinction between the forms used for simple past and past participle forms, and for the most part, the same form is used in both contexts, apart for the verb “was” which is used only as the past form. As a result, in some cases the chosen form is the simple past (13), in others, it is the past participle (14)”

As marked by the examples of Green (1998: 51)

(13) I ate yesterday.

(14) Bruce drunk the chocolate milk last night.

Ultimately, as for phonological features, the Final Consonant Cluster Reduction and the Reduction of unstressed syllables (initial and medial syllables) are the most common to find.

The Final Consonant Cluster Reduction is a feature based on special principles of pronunciation. At a superficial glance it might seem that they just leave consonants off the ends of words, but it is not that simple (15,16).

(15) left: lef’

(16) hand: han’

At this point, to explain better this feature, we will need a small amount of phonetic terminology. First, we need to distinguish between the voiced stop or plosives consonants

that normally represented by the letters /p/, /t/, /k/, /b/, /d/ and /g/, as they're formed by a complete stop of airflow followed by a burst of air, engaging a vocal-cord vibration and sometimes creating a doubling of consonant letters. Other examples of voiced English sounds are the ends of words such as "of", "Oz", "ridge" and "fill".

The voiceless consonants, quieter because they're pronounced with no vibration of the vocal cords, are typically represented by the sounds /p/, /t/ and /k/. Other voiceless sounds in English include the ones at the end of words like "off", "miss" and "fish", which are technically called fricatives.

With this terminology we can now describe the restrictions concerning which consonants can be left off and which have to be retained in AAVE. The basic principle is:

A stop consonant at the end of a word may be omitted (and usually is) if it is preceded by another consonant of the same voicing.

(Pullum, 1999: 51)

From this rule, here's some examples:

(17) rob

(18) \*ro'

(19) oak

(20) \*oa'

If the consonant is preceded by a vowel, no AAVE speaker would omit it, instead the consonants of words such as "rob" (17) or "oak" (18) are always pronounced. Here examples 18 and 20 show a grammar mistake (\*).

Again:

(21) dump

(22) \* dum'

(23) sink

(24) \*sin'

In words 21 and 23 the consonants are all pronounced, because the consonants /p/ and /k/ are voiceless stops, but the sounds of m and n are voiced, so nothing gets dropped.

(25) raps

(26) \* rap'

(27) rats

(28) \* rats

Similarly, the "s" sound is pronounced and retained (25, 27), because even though it is a consonant of the same voicing as the "t", it is not a stop.

Finally, the cases when the consonants drop can be:

- a. test: voiceless stop "t" dropped after voiceless "s" tes'
- b. desk: voiceless stop "k" dropped after voiceless "s" des'
- c. left: voiceless stop "t" dropped after voiceless "f" lef'
- d. respect: voiceless stop "t" dropped after voiceless "k" (spelled -c) respec'
- e. hand: voiceless stop "d" dropped after voiceless "n" han'
- f. old: voiceless stop "d" dropped after voiceless "l" ol'

The Reduction of unstressed syllables is a phenomenon quite similar to the one explained before, but it can affect the initial or medial part of a word. This can be defined as a more extreme form of reduction, since there's a complete removal of one of two unstressed syllables, place at the beginning or in the middle of a word. The phenomenon can also be defined as IUSD (Initial Unstressed Syllable Deletion) or MUSD (Medial Unstressed Syllable Deletion) or again IM-USD (Initial & Medial Unstressed-Syllable Deletion). As already mentioned, unlike the reduction, the deletion removes the entire syllable. (Rickford, 1999).

The studies conducted By Rickford (2000) show that it is a recurrent pattern typical of AAVE speech, but not exclusively related to AAVE, since some patterns can be found

also in SE. Some lexical items lose unstressed syllables either in the first or second position, but even in both of them (Rickford, 2000).

AAE	Phonological Transcription	AE	Phonological Transcription
Cause	/kɔz/	Because	/bɪkɔz/
Bout	/baʊt/	About	/əbaʊt/
Round	/raʊnd/	Around	/əraʊnd/
Tween	/twi:n/	Between	/bɪtwi:n/
Sides	/saɪdz/	Besides	/bɪsaɪdz/
Cuse	/kju:z/	Accuse	/əkju:z/
Hind	/haɪnd/	Behind	/bɪhaɪnd/
Thout	/ðaut/	Without	/wɪðaut/
Nuff	/nʌf/	Enough	/ɪnʌf/
Spect	/spekt/	Expect	/ɪkspekt/
Cross	/krɔs/	Across	/əkɔs/

Figure 2 (Rickford, 2000): reduction of unstressed syllables

Figure 2 present a table regarding some examples, with both the AAVE version and the SE one.

Some examples, regarding medial unstressed syllable deletion can be:

- (29) family → fam'ly
- (30) interesting → intresting
- (31) chocolate → choc'late

In the first lexical item “family” (29), the unstressed- medial syllable -i- is dropped; in the second “interesting” (30), the unstressed- medial syllable -e- is deleted and, finally, in the third word “chocolate” (31) the unstressed syllable that drops, is the medial -o-.

The general pattern of AAVE is to remove the unstressed- medial syllable that has a light sound, contains a schwa /ə/ and is surrounded by consonants.

## 1.4 STIGMATIZATION AND LEGITIMACY DEBATES

Despite its systematic structure, AAVE has long been stigmatized. It is often framed as “incorrect”, “slang”, “nonstandard” or “dialect” (see Pullum, 1999) but most of these perceptions are rooted in racial ideologies, rather than linguistic facts. These attitudes have shaped educational policy, employment opportunities, teaching and mainstream representations of African American speech.

Scholarly sources (Rickford, 1999; Green, 2002) show that debates about AAVE’s legitimacy have unfolded in relation to its syntactic and phonological features, contributing to misunderstanding about AAVE’s complexity. Linguistic scholarship has challenged these misconceptions by demonstrating that AAVE is rule-governed, expressive and historically grounded.

The stigmatization around AAVE is totally unfounded, since it was demonstrated that it cannot be defined as a dialect or slang, since a dialect is simply a “language with small variations” (Pullum, 1999), meaning that it has neither its own grammatical rules, nor its own structure, while on the other hand a slang is:

“By definition parasitic on some larger and more encompassing host language. It has no grammar of its own; it is a small array of words and phrases used under the aegis of some ordinary language and in accordance with its grammar. The majority of slang words and phrases are in the language already and are merely assigned new slang meanings by some subpopulation”.

(Pullum, 1999: 40).

## 1.5 SOCIAL IDENTITY AND THE CULTURAL ROLE OF AAVE

AAVE plays an important role in the construction and expression of African American social identity. It is not merely a linguistic code, but more of a cultural resource used to signal belonging, shared experience and collective memory. It functions as a vehicle for creativity and community affirmation through music, oral tradition, theater and contemporary digital spaces. The vocabulary itself and specific lexical terms, such as “brother”, show how vocabulary can encode solidarity, resistance and cultural meaning. In fact, brother goes beyond the literal definition of “a man or boy in relation to other sons and daughters of his parents”, instead it means “conflating color-caste with family

relations and power relations”. What emerges is authenticity, stylistic identity and cultural heritage, overcoming the mere linguistic system and articulating identity and cultural continuity.

All this sense of belonging is what indicates the conflict with bidialectalism and linguistic shifts, such as code switching. This can cause discomfort and a big dilemma, especially among youth, since some schools or universities require a particular knowledge of SE. In fact, students (Filmer, 2003) often debate whether to give up AAVE or to learn how to switch between a language and the other, in order to overcome the linguistic prejudice, even if it means to surrender an indispensable aspect of their identity.

Ultimately, upon considering two very closely related languages, there will be always a strong temptation, especially when one of the two has higher prestige, to take one to be the correct way to speak and the other to be the incorrect (Pullum, 1999).

This so-called ”cultural” or “ language deficit” diverted the attention away from the real defects of the educational system and onto imaginary defects of the child, leading to the extreme view that black people have no language at all, and obliging them to use systems such as code switching or style shifting, in order to adapt to every context (Labov, 1972), but the power of culture and identity leads to believe that no one would just forget everything about where they came from in order to learn the language of their oppressor at all costs, as pointed out by Rickford (2000, cited in Strang 2017).



## CHAPTER 2: CODE SWITCHING

This chapter explores the concept of code-switching and its role in multilingual and multidialectal communication. It introduces the main theoretical distinctions used in this dissertation, including situational and metaphorical code-switching, as well as inter-sentential and intra-sentential switching and style-shifting. Particular attention is given to the relationship between language choice, identity and social power. The chapter concludes by establishing the analytical framework used to examine how code-switching is shown in cinematic discourse.

### 2.1 DEFINITION, DEVELOPMENT AND FOUNDATIONAL STUDIES ON CODE-SWITCHING

Conversational code-switching, or most commonly called code-switching (CS) is the central concept regarding the study of bilingualism and multilingual interactions. It is generally defined as the alternating use of two or more languages or linguistic varieties within a single interaction or communicative event. This alternation may occur across in the form of conversational turns, between sentences or even a single utterance.

“Code-switching is the alternative use by bilinguals of two or more languages in the same conversation. ... Sometimes switching occurs between the turns of different speakers in the conversation, sometimes between utterances within a single turn, and sometimes even within a single utterance”.

(Milroy & Muysken, 1995: 7)

Over the past several decades, from the early studies during the 1950s (Vogt, 1954) code-switching has attracted scholarly attention across many areas like sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, pragmatics and interactional studies. While early sociolinguistic research (Vogt, 1954) conceptualized code-switching as a marginal or irregular linguistic behavior, with a negative connotation tending to underline an incomplete linguistic incompetence, this view has been largely rejected in contemporary scholarship. In the late studies of the 1970s (Gumperz, 1972; Herasimchuk, 1972) researchers emphasized increasingly the systematic, rule-governed and socially meaningful nature of language alternation in bilingual speech, changing its conception into a more positive connotation (Milroy & Muysken, 1995; Auer, 1998).

From a general overview, code-switching can be described as the use of elements from different linguistic codes, defining “codes” as “clusters of co-occurrent variable” (Gumperz and Herasimchuk, 1972), or with classical terms such as languages, dialects or less diffused socially recognized varieties. Certainly, it is important to mark that switching is not a concept simply related to change language into the speech but refers to the usage of all the cognitive codes that humans must have stored in order to process speech in two forms (Alvarez, cited in Code-switching in conversation 1995). Ultimately, code-switching is shaped by linguistic constraints, social norms and interactional goals. As Milroy and Muysken (1995) argue, bilingual speakers do not operate with two entirely separate linguistic systems that are mechanically alternated; instead, they possess an extended and integrated linguistic repertoire from which they draw strategically. In this sense, code-switching reflects a high degree of linguistic competence and communicative flexibility, rather than its absence.

The development of code-switching studies is strictly linked to broader shifts in sociolinguistics toward the analysis of language in use. Early research was largely dominated by structural approaches, which focused on identifying grammatical constraints governing where and how switches could occur within sentences (Poplack, 1988). These studies played an important role in denying the deficit- based views of bilingual speech, by demonstrating that code-switching follows systematic grammatical patterns, and it wasn't just a way to replace some deficit in one of the two languages.

From the late 70s onward scholars turned their attention even more on the social meanings of code-switching. Rather than treating it just as a merely linguistic phenomenon, research began to examine how speakers use code-switching to mark group membership, to negotiate interpersonal relationships, to construct identities and to manage discourse. This shift reflects a broader movement within sociolinguistics away from formalist models and toward socially embedded analyses of language as social practice. Within this framework, code-switching is understood as a strategic resource that speakers mobilize in response to specific communicative contexts (Poplack, 1980).

A major contribution to code-switching correct conceptualization comes from Peter Auer and his interactional approaches. Auer (1998) proposes that code-switching should be analyzed as a contextualization indicator included in the sequential organization of talk. Auer emphasizes the dynamic moment-by-moment functions of switching as they emerge in interaction, rather than treating language choice as a static reflection of social classes, like ethnicity or class (Auer, 1998: 1-7). Looking from this perspective, code-switching is not simply a response to external social variable, but a conversational resource through which participants actively create meaning, mark boundaries between activities and orient to changings of frames in interactions.

Foundational studies in this area stress the importance of distinguishing between different motivations and functions of code-switching. While some instances of switching may be triggered by lexical gaps or topic-specific vocabulary, many others serve symbolic or pragmatic purposes, such as emphasizing a point, signaling solidarity or distance, or indexing shared cultural knowledge. Milroy and Muysken (1995) argue that these functions cannot be fully understood without considering the social networks of communicative contexts in which bilingual speakers operate. Taken together, these perspectives position code-switching as a multifaceted phenomenon situated at the intersection of linguistic structure, social practice, and interactional meaning.

### 2.1.1 Code-Switching vs. style-shifting

A key distinction in sociolinguistic research concerns the difference between code-switching and style-shifting. Although the two phenomena are related and may overlap in practice, they refer to distinct processes of linguistic variation and serve different analytical purposes. Clarifying this distinction is essential for an accurate understanding of bilingual speech behavior and for avoiding conceptual ambiguity in the analysis of language variation.

Style-shifting generally refers to variation within a single language of linguistic system, whereby speakers adjust their speech according to factor such as formality, audience, topic or communicative settings (Labov, 1972). This type of variation has been studied

extensively in monolingual contexts, particularly with Labovian sociolinguistics, where it is often conceptualized as an ongoing movement from informal to formal styles. Style-shifting may involve changes in pronunciation, lexical choice or syntactic complexity, but it does not entail a shift from one language to another (Milroy & Muysken, 1995).

Code-switching, by contrast, involves the alternation between two or more distinct linguistic codes, most commonly different languages or socially recognized varieties (Milroy & Muysken, 1995). So, if style-shifting operates within a shared linguistic system, code-switching presupposes access to multiple linguistic systems and the ability to switch back and forth among them. As Milroy and Muysken (1995: 6-9) point out, bilingual speakers do not simply adjust stylistic features within a language but draw on different linguistic resources that carry specific social, cultural and ideological meanings.

This distinction is particularly important when dealing with the sociolinguistic analyses of African American speech, since AAVE is often treated as a stylistic variant of the same language. However, many scholars argue that the systematic grammatical and phonological features of AAVE justify its treatment as a distinct variety (Labov, 1972; Rickford, 1999; Green, 2002). From this perspective, shifts between AAVE and SAE may be more accurately described as instances of code-switching rather than mere style-shifting, especially when such shifts carry clear social or ideological significance.

Despite this theoretical distinction, the boundary between code-switching and style-shifting is not always clear-cut. In multilingual and multidialectal communities, language choice itself may function as a stylistic resource, making it difficult to separate switching between languages, from shifting between styles. Auer (1998: 10-16) addresses this issue by arguing that analytical categories should not be imposed a priori, but rather grounded in participants' own orientations to language alternation. From this intersectional perspective, what matters is whether speakers themselves treat a change in code as meaningful within the conversational context.

Furthermore, code-switching often fulfills functions similar to those of style-shifting, such as signaling changes in footing, aligning with or distancing from interlocutors, or

simply making different phases of an interaction. However, because different languages and varieties are frequently associated with distinct social identities, histories and domains of use, code-switching tends to carry stronger symbolic weight than stylistic variation within a single language. Switching languages may indicate ethnicity, structural affiliation or institutional authority in ways that style-shifting typically does not. Recognizing this distinction allows for a more precise analysis of bilingual discourse and avoids conflating different types of linguistic behavior.

### 2.1.2 Types of Code-Switching

Research on code-switching has identified several typologies which aim at classifying different forms of language alternation. Among the most widely adopted, we can distinguish intra-sentential switching, inter-sentential switching and metaphorical switching. While these categories provide useful analytical tools, scholars emphasize that actual language use often displays gradience and overlap rigid boundaries (Milroy & Muysken, 1995; Auer, 1998).

Intra-sentential switching (1a, 1b) refers to the alteration between languages within a single sentence or clause (Milroy & Muysken, 1995: 7-9). This type of switching is often considered the most linguistically complex, as it requires a high degree of bilingual proficiency and sensitivity to grammatical constraints in both languages, in order to manage an excellent result. In intra-sentential switching elements from different languages may appear with the same syntactic structure, such as a noun phrase from one language embedded within a sentence from another. Early research (Milroy & Muysken, 1995) focused extensively on this type of switching in order to identify structural constraints and demonstrate how bilingual speakers maintain grammatical coherence across languages, without breaking grammatical rules of both. Subsequent studies have however shown that intra-sentential switching also serves important pragmatic and interactional functions beyond its structural complexity.

1a, 1b and 1c give an example of intra-sentential code-switching. 1a and 1b shows an intervention of intra-sentential codeswitching, while 1c gives the idea of the complete sentence in SAE:

(1a) I been told you about the deadline, but I will follow up with an email anyway.

(1b) I already told you about the deadline, pero I will follow up con un email anyway.

(1c) I already told you about the deadline, but I will follow up with an email anyway.

Inter-sentential switching (2a, 2b), by contrast, occurs at sentence or clause boundaries, when a speaker completes an utterance in one language and continues in another (Milroy & Muysken, 1995). This form of switching is generally considered less structurally demanding, as it does not require the integration of grammatical systems within a single sentence. Inter-sentential switching is often used to mark topic shifts, changes in addressee or transitions between different conversational activities. From an interactional perspective, such switches may signal changes in alignment or contextual framing, making them particularly relevant for discourse analysis.

2a, 2b and 2c examples:

(2a) I told him I ain't got time for that

(2b) No tengo tempo para eso. I couldn't stay.

(2c) I explained afterward that I was busy and couldn't stay

where 2a and 2b are examples of inter-sentential code switching, mixing SAE and AAVE in the, and the 2c shown the SAE version with no "contamination".

A further distinction concerns metaphorical switching, originally proposed in early sociolinguistic research and later refined by scholars, such as Auer. Metaphorical

switching refers to language alternation that occurs within a stable situational context but serves to evoke different social meanings or interpretative frames. Unlike situational switching, which is triggered by external changes (such as the presence of new participants to the conversation, the context or the setting), metaphorical switching is internally motivated and symbolically charged.

Through metaphorical switching, speakers exploit the social associations of different languages or varieties, to achieve specific communicative effects. One code may be associated with intimacy, informality or in-group solidarity, while another may index authority, formality or institutional roles. By switching between these codes, speakers can redefine the interaction without altering the external situation. Auer (1998) emphasizes that metaphorical switching is best understood as an emergent phenomenon, whose meaning is negotiated by participants during the interaction rather than predetermined by social norms alone.

Taken together, intra-sentential, inter-sentential and metaphorical switching illustrates the diversity and complexity of bilingual language practices. Rather than representing discrete or mutually exclusive categories, these types form part of a continuum of language alternation strategies available to bilingual speakers. Their analysis provides valuable insight into how linguistic resources are mobilized to construct meaning, manage interaction and express social identities within multilingual context.

## 2.2 CODE-SWITCHING IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CONTEXT: FROM AAVE TO CODE-SWITCHING

The study of code switching in the African American context must be situated within broader discussion of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a legitimate and systematic linguistic variety. Linguistic research has consistently demonstrated that AAVE is a rule-governed system with its own phonological, syntactic and pragmatic norms, comparable in complexity to any other variety of English (Labov, 1972; Rickford 1999; Green, 2000). Despite this, AAVE has historically been stigmatized within U.S. society and associated with deficit-based assumptions regarding intelligence, education and especially professionalism regarding the work site.

This stigmatization has significant consequences for African American speakers' linguistic practices, particularly in contexts where Standard American English (SAE) is positioned as the unmarked or institutionally appropriate variety. In this sociolinguistic landscape, code-switching between AAVE and SAE emerges not simply as a linguistic phenomenon, but as a practice that is socially conditioned, and it is shaped by racialized language ideologies and structural inequality. As Rickford (1997) and Smitherman (2000) argue, African American speech has long been subject to heightened scrutiny and regulation, especially with educational, professional and legal institution.

Consequently, code-switching in the African American context cannot be understood solely as a neutral or individual choice; rather it must be analyzed in relation to broader power relations that position certain linguistic forms as legitimate while marginalizing other. Scholars working in critical sociolinguistics emphasize that African American speakers often navigate conflicting expectations: on the one hand, pressure to conform to dominant linguistic norms, and on the other, the desire to maintain cultural and community-based forms of expression (Alim, 2004; Bucholtz, 2011). Code-switching operates at the intersection of linguistic competence, social identity and institutional constraints.

### 2.2.1 Why AAVE Speakers might use Code-Switching

African American speakers may engage in code-switching for a range of pragmatic, social and ideological reasons. One of the most consistently identified factors is audience composition. Empirical studies have shown that shifts between AAVE and SAE often correlate with changes in addressee, topic or communicative setting, suggesting that speakers actively adapt their linguistic choices in response to perceived audience expectations (Rickford & McNair-Knox 1994; Bell 1984).

Rickford and McNair-Knox's (1994) study on addressee- and topic-influenced style shifting demonstrates that African American speakers systematically adjust their speech depending on whether they are interacting with African American or white behavior,

particularly when shifts involve features that are strongly associated with AAVE and SAE. These patterns indicate that code-switching is not random but reflects speakers' awareness of sociolinguistic norms and their ability to navigate them strategically.

Another motivation for code-switching concerns access to institutional spaces and resources. In contexts such as schools, workplaces and legal settings SAE is often treated as the only legitimate or appropriate form of speech. As a result, African American speakers may switch to SAE in order to avoid negative evaluations, increase credibility or reduce the risk of discrimination (Lippi-Green, 1997; Bucholtz 2011). Importantly scholars caution against interpreting this practice as simple accommodation or assimilation (Alim, 2004) emphasizes that African American speakers often exercise agency in their linguistic choice strategically deploying different variety depending on context while remaining critically aware of the power dynamics involved.

Code-switching may also serve in-group functions, allowing speakers to signal solidarity, shared cultural knowledge or alignment with African American identity. In this sense, switching into AAVE can function as an affirming practice, reinforcing social bonds and resisting linguistic erasure. As Smitherman (2000) argues, African American speech practices are deeply embedded in cultural traditions of resistance and self-definition. Code-switching should therefore be understood as a flexible and multifunctional resource rather than a unidirectional movement toward standardization.

### 2.2.2 Code-Switching, power dynamics, linguistic insecurity and audience design

Power dynamics play a central role in shaping code-switching practices in the African American context. One of the most influential frameworks for understanding these dynamics is Bell's Audience Design Theory (1984), which proposes that speakers design their speech primarily in response to their audience, whether actual, imagined or institutional. Within racially stratified societies, audience design is often inflected by asymmetrical power relations, as dominant groups define the linguistic norms to which others are expected to conform.

For African American speakers, audience design frequently involves anticipating the expectations of white-dominated institutions, where SAE is treated as the unmarked standard. This anticipation can lead to heightened linguistic self-monitoring and, in some cases, linguistic insecurity. Lippi-Green (1997) describes linguistic insecurity as a product of standard language ideology, whereby speakers internalize negative evaluations of their own variety and perceive it as less legitimate or appropriate in formal contexts. In such environments, code-switching becomes a means of navigating institutional expectations rather than a freely chosen stylistic option.

Critical sociolinguistic research highlights that these power dynamics are not neutral but deeply racialized. Bucholtz (2011) argues that whiteness operates as an unmarked linguistic norm, rendering non-white speech forms hyper visible and subject to greater scrutiny. Similarly, Flores and Rosa (2015) demonstrate how notions of “appropriate language” function as mechanisms of social control, disproportionately affecting racialized speakers. Within this framework, code-switching may be understood as a response to institutional pressures that demand linguistic conformity while denying full legitimacy to non-dominant speech practices.

At the same time, interactional approaches caution against viewing code-switching solely as a reaction to external power structures. Auer (1998) emphasizes that speakers actively construct meaning through language choice, even with constrained contexts. Code-switching can therefore serve as site of negotiation, where speakers manage power relations while maintaining agency over their communicative practices. Recognizing this dual dimension of constraint and agency allows for a more nuanced understanding of code switching as both socially conditioned and interactionally accomplished.

### 2.2.3 Psychological and Emotional Aspects of Code-Switching

In recent years, the psychological and emotional dimensions in code-switching phenomenon have become much more important, particularly for speakers from marginalized communities. While linguistic flexibility can be empowering, research suggests that frequent code-switching in institutional contexts may entail cognitive and

emotional costs. McCluney et al. (2019), in their empirical study on the costs of code-switching, demonstrate that sustained linguistic self-monitoring is associated with increased stress, emotional exhaustion and feelings of inauthenticity among African American professionals.

These findings align with earlier quantitative work on the emotional labor required of marginalized individuals in white-dominated spaces. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) describe this process as “shifting”, a practice through which African Americans adjust their behavior, appearance and language in order to navigate dominant norms. From this perspective, code-switching is not merely a linguistic adjustment, but a part of a broader pattern of self-regulation that can produce emotional strain over time.

Cultural theorists such as Bell Hooks (Black Looks, 1992) further contextualize these emotional dynamics by emphasizing the role of surveillance and representation in shaping Black self-expression. Within racialized environments, linguistic choices are often interpreted through ideological frameworks that associate Blackness with deficiency or deviance. As a result, African American speakers may experience pressure to suppress aspects of their linguistic identity in order to be perceived as competent or professional. The emotional consequences of this suppression highlight the unequal conditions under which code-switching occurs. However, these psychological results are not inherent to bilingualism or multidialectalism itself. Rather, they arise from social structures that devalue certain linguistic forms and their speakers.

Taken together, these perspectives underscore that code-switching in the African American can't be understood solely as a linguistic practice shaped by both linguistic competence and social inequality, but it must be situated in broader social, institutional and psychological frameworks. Examining its psychological end emotions dimensions reveals the motivations behind switching, which are all strictly connected to the power relations that shape language choice, to a broader human impact on language ideologies and the emotional consequences experienced by speakers, and which all actively shape the sociolinguistic functions that code-switching performs in everyday interaction. The following section therefore moves from contextual analysis to a discussion of the broader

sociolinguistic functions of code-switching, focusing on identity performance, resistance and assimilation, and social navigation in white-dominated institutions.

### 2.3 THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC FUNCTION OF CODE-SWITCHING

Beyond its structural and contextual dimensions, code-switching fulfills a wide range of sociolinguistic functions. Rather than being a purely technical feature of bilingual speech, code-switching operates as a meaningful social practice through which speakers manage identity, negotiate power relations and navigate institutional and interpersonal expectations. From this perspective, language attention is not simply a response to external constraints, but a resource actively employed by speakers to shape social interaction (Bell, 1984).

Interactional sociolinguistic approaches have been particularly influential in highlighting the functional dimension of code-switching. Auer (1998) argues that code-switching should be understood as an interactional achievement whose meaning emerges sequentially in conversation. Speakers use language choice to signal shifts in footing, mark boundaries between activities and orient to different interpretive frames. The sociolinguistic function of code-switching therefore lies not only in what languages are used, but in how and when they are deployed within specific interactional contexts.

In the African American context, these functions are closely tied to broader social histories of racialization, linguistic stigma and institutional inequality. As discussed in the previous section, African American speakers often operate within environments where their linguistic practices are evaluated through dominant norms associated with SAE. Code-switching thus becomes a key mechanism through which speakers manage visibility, legitimacy and belonging across different social domains. The following subsections examine the central sociolinguistic functions of code-switching: identity, performance, resistance and assimilation, and social navigation within white-dominated institutions.

### 2.3.1 Identity performance

One of the most widely discussed sociolinguistic functions of code-switching is its role in identity performance. Language choice is a central means through which speakers construct, negotiate and display social identities in interaction. Rather than reflecting fixed or essential identities, code-switching allows speakers to index multiple and context-dependent positions, such as affiliation, distance, authority or solidarity.

From an interactional perspective, identity is understood as something that is *done* rather than something that is simply *possessed*. Auer (1998) emphasizes that code-switching participates in this process by functioning as a contextualization cue between linguistic varieties can therefore serve to align with a particular group, invoke shared cultural knowledge, or mark boundaries between in-group and out-group membership.

In the case of African American speakers, shifts between AAVE and SAE often carry strong identity-related meanings. AAVE has historically functioned as a marker of cultural belonging and shared experience within African American Communities (Rickford, 1998; Smitherman, 2000). Using AAVE in interaction may signal authenticity, solidarity or resistance to dominant norms, particularly in informal or intra-group settings. Conversely, the use of SAE may index professionalism, authority or institutional legitimacy, especially in formal context.

Code-switching allows speakers to move between these identity positions without abandoning either. Rather than representing a lack of linguistic loyalty, such alternation reflects speakers' ability to manage complex and layered identities. As Milroy and Muysken (1995) argue, bilingual and bidialectal speakers draw on an integrated repertoire of linguistic resources, selecting forms that best serve their communicative and social goals. Identity performance through code-switching is therefore dynamic and situational, shaped by audience, context and interactional purpose.

### 2.3.2 Resistance vs. Assimilation

Another central function of code-switching concerns the tension between resistance and assimilation. Language choice is deeply embedded in power relations and decisions about when and how to switch codes often reflect broader negotiations between conformity to dominant norms and the assertion of marginalized identities.

The pressure of who study the assimilation phenomenon is particularly present in some institutional contexts, where SAE is of course treated as the unmarked or “appropriate” mode of communication. As demonstrated by scholars, standard language ideology collocates non-standard varieties as deficient or unprofessional, reinforcing the linguistic hierarchies that on the contrary, affected racialized speakers (Lippi-Green, 1997). In this framework, code-switching toward Standard American English may function as a strategy for gaining access, credibility or social mobility.

At the same time, the use of AAVE in context where it is stigmatized or discouraged can work as an act of resistance. Smitherman (2000) underlines how African American linguistic practices have historically served as sites of cultural affirmation and opposition to linguistic domination. Choosing not to switch, or switching back to AAVE, may signal rejection of imposed norms and affirmation of group identity.

Importantly, resistance and assimilation should not be considered as mutually exclusive or static positions. Code-switching allows speakers to navigate this tension in multiple ways, adapting to situational demands while maintaining a connection to their linguistic and cultural background. From an interactional standpoint, the meaning of a switch depends on how it is interpreted by participants in a specific context (Auer, 1998). What may appear as accommodation in one setting can function as strategic self-preservation or subtle resistance in another.

This perspective complicates simple assessments of code-switching as either conformity or betrayal. Instead, code-switching stands out as a flexible resource that allows speakers

to manage competing expectations and power asymmetries without completely surrendering to language agency.

### 2.3.3 Social Navigation in White-Dominated Institution

A particular sociolinguistic function of code-switching is its role in social navigation within white-dominated institutions, such as schools, workplaces and legal bureaucratic settings. In these kind of environments, linguistic norms are often aligned with white middle-class standards, making other varieties marked or inappropriate.

For African American speakers code-switching becomes frequently a survival strategy that makes participation in institutional life easier. Shifting toward SAE may help speakers avoid negative judgments, disciplinary action or exclusion, especially in contexts where linguistic difference is interpreted as a lack of competence or professionalism (Rickford, 1999; Lippi-Green, 1997). In this sense, code-switching functions as a pragmatic tool for managing institutional expectations.

However, this form of linguistic adaptation is not neutral, since constant monitoring and adjustment of speech can carry psychological and emotional costs. While these aspects were addressed in section 2.2.3, they are also relevant here, because the need to navigate white-dominated spaces reinforces the concept unequal power relations and places the burden of accommodation on marginalized speakers.

From an interactional perspective, code-switching in institutional contexts can be used also strategically, to challenge or negotiate authority. Speakers may switch between codes to underline competence while simultaneously maintaining cultural authenticity, or to subtly resist linguistic homogenization. As Auer (1998) notes, the meaning of code-switching is not fixed, but emerges through interaction, allowing speakers to exploit ambiguity and flexibility in language choice.

More broadly, code-switching in white-dominated institutions highlights the unequal distribution of linguistic legitimacy. The need to switch codes shows the fact that not all

linguistic practices are valued equally, and that access to social and institutional power is often mediated through language. In this context, code-switching becomes both as a means of navigation and as a reflection of broader structural inequalities.

## 2.4 SUMMARY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE FILM ANALYSIS

This chapter about code-switching, together with the previous one about AAVE, provides a theoretical and sociolinguistic background necessary for the analysis of the films *Hidden Figures* and *Six Triple Eight* and the presence of these linguistic phenomena. Code-switching was conceptualized not as a random or deficient linguistic behavior, but as a systematic, meaningful and context-sensitive practice shaped by social norms, power relations and interactional goals. The exploration of psychological and emotional dimensions further demonstrate that code-switching may carry affective costs, particularly when continuous self-monitoring is required in professional or institutional contexts. These insights are crucial for understanding the lived experiences behind linguistic choices and for interpreting code-switching as part of broader patterns of social regulation and resistance. In addition, from an interactional perspective, code-switching emerged as a flexible communicative resource through which speakers actively construct meaning, negotiate belonging and manage power relations. In the African American context these functions are deeply bounded with histories of racialization and linguistic marginalization, making language choice a particularly salient site of social meaning.

Taken together, these perspectives form the framework for the film analysis conducted in chapter 3. The study of *Hidden Figures* and *Six Triple Eight* will examine how AAVE and Code-switching are represented in characters' dialogues, how linguistic choices reflect shifting social roles and institutional constraints, and how language alternation contributes to the construction of identity, authority and resistance, within the film social and historical setting.

## CHAPTER 3: AAVE AND CODE-SWITCHING IN THE FILMS

This chapter presents the qualitative analysis of linguistic representation in *The Six Triple Eight*, a 2024 film by Tyler Perry, and *Hidden Figures*, a 2017 film by Theodore Melfi. It begins with a brief historical and methodological overview before examining the presence of AAVE and code-switching in selected scenes. The analysis focuses on how linguistic features are distributed across formal and informal settings and how speakers adjust their language according to audience and institutional context. The chapter also discusses the social meaning of these linguistic choices and their implications for the representation of race, identity and professional legitimacy. The final section summarizes the main findings and connects them to the broader themes of the dissertation.

### 3.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND OF THE FILMS

Both the films *Hidden Figures* and *The Six Triple Eight* are set in mid-twentieth-century United States history, a period that is deeply characterized by racial segregation, institutional discrimination and restricted access to professional authority for African Americans, particularly women. Although the two films picture different historical institutions and professional environments, since *Hidden Figure's* women work at NASA while *The Six Triple Eight's* women are soldiers, they are both united by their representation of Black Women navigating systems structured by racial hierarchy and gender inequality. Understanding the social and historical background of these narratives is essential for interpreting how language functions in them, since linguistic behavior is closely tied to perceptions of competence, legitimacy and authority.

*Hidden Figures* is a film set in the early 1960s in Virginia, during the Cold War, and the Space Race. In fact, the United States are competing with the Soviet Union for technological supremacy. The story is centered around three African American Women, Katherine Johnson, Mary Jackson and Dorothy Vaughan, who are three brilliant mathematicians working at NASA's Langley Research Center, a prestigious federal institution dominated by white male engineers and scientists. Despite their exceptional qualifications, the Black female protagonists operate within a strictly segregated system.

They are assigned to separate workspaces specific for Black people, denied equal access to resources and excluded from many informal networks of professional recognition. The institutional environment depicted in the film reflects the broader social order of the Jim Crow era and laws, in which racial segregation was enforced not only in public facilities, but also in professional opportunities. A context which shows a clear division among blacks and whites, since a different education between black and white children was imposed, with the creation of two different institutes; a separation of public spaces, such as restrooms, waiting rooms and entrances; and a clear division regarding social life, banning interracial marriages and sustaining anti-miscegenation. Within this context, African American women were required to perform constant competence and emotional restraint in order to gain even limited recognition. But in the end, their presence in the institution is marked as exceptional and their abilities, even though they were frequently questioned or underestimated by those in positions of power, were what made them essential figures in NASA's environment.

By contrast, *The Six Triple Eight* portrays the experiences of the 6888<sup>th</sup> Central Postal Directory Battalion, the only all-black female battalion deployed overseas during World War II. The women in this film serve the United States Army, another hierarchical and highly regulated institution. The main character is Lena, a black girl who's madly in love with a Jewish boy, Adam, who sadly dies during the War. Her mum and her aunt, who are really concerned for her future, have to accept her decision to join the American army, to feel closer to her beloved one. However, unlike the protagonists of *Hidden Figures*, they operate primarily in a racially segregated unit composed entirely of Black women, creating a different social dynamic. In fact, while the battalion remains under the authority of white military leadership and is subject to racial prejudice, much of the women's daily interaction occurs within intra-Black environment. Their labor is physically demanding and often undervalued, they must confront Skepticism about their discipline and capability, since everyone in the highest hierarchy want to see them fail. Nevertheless, the relative absence and obsessive control of white peer presence in their immediate workspace allow for greater emphasis on collective identity, mutual support and shared cultural experience.

Despite these contrasts, both films portray African American women as figures whose competence is continually questioned and whose achievements are minimized or overlooked. Racial segregation, whether spatially enforced as in *Hidden Figures* or organizationally structured as in *The Six Triple Eight*, functions as a mechanism that restricts access to recognition and authority. In both settings, Black women must work harder than their white counterparts to be seen as legitimate professionals. Their success depends not only on technical skill or labor, but also on their ability to navigate social expectations shaped by racialized and gendered stereotypes. This shared experience of scrutiny and exclusion creates a common sociocultural framework across the two films, even though their institutional environments differ.

These historical and social conditions are crucial for understanding how language operates in each narrative. In contexts where African American women are judged according to dominant white norms, speech becomes more than a means of communication. It becomes a marker of intelligence, professionalism and social belonging. The degree of proximity to white institutional authority in each film influences how freely characters can express vernacular identities and how often they must adapt their linguistic behavior to align with expectations of respectability. Consequently, the contrasting institutional settings of *Hidden Figures* and *The Six Triple Eight* provide an important foundation for examining the representation of African American Vernacular English and code-switching practices. Language in both films emerges as a site where identity, power and historical inequality intersect, making sociolinguistic analysis central to understanding the broader meanings of these stories.

### 3.2 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This dissertation adopts a qualitative research approach, based on a close linguistic analysis of the film's dialogues. The study was conducted through repeated viewings of *Hidden Figures* and *The Six Triple Eight*, combined with careful reading and examination of the available scripts. The analysis was supported by existing sociolinguistic literature on AAVE and code-switching, which provided the theoretical framework for identifying and interpreting linguistic phenomena. Although both films were initially examined for

occurrences of AAVE and code-switching, the analysis revealed that obvious AAVE grammatical features were significantly more visible in *The Six Triple Eight*, while *Hidden Figures* mainly showed examples of code-switching and stylistic variation. Nevertheless, both films were considered valuable for the comparative perspective of the study. A number of representative scenes were carefully selected, which appeared particularly relevant to the research aims and conducted a detailed analysis of these scenes, offering a personal but theory-informed interpretation of the linguistic choices and their social meaning within each narrative.

### 3.3 REPRESENTATION OF AAVE IN THE SIX TRIPLE EIGHT

In *The Six Triple Eight*, African American Vernacular English is represented as a natural and socially meaningful tool of communication among the women of the 688<sup>th</sup> Central Postal Directory Battalion. Unlike institutional settings in which Black speakers are isolated minorities and subject to constant linguistic surveillance, the film portrays a predominantly intra-Black social environment. In fact, the battalion is composed entirely of African American women who live and work together in a segregated military unit, while white figures appear only intermittently and usually in formal, supervisory roles. This social configuration creates conditions in which vernacular speech is not marginal but central to everyday interaction.

Sociolinguistic research has long emphasized that AAVE functions as a rule-governed linguistic system tied to identity, community, and shared experience (Labov, 1972; Rickford, 1999; Green, 2002). In contexts where speakers are surrounded by others who share similar cultural and social backgrounds, the pressure to conform to dominant linguistic norms is reduced. This dynamic is visible in *The Six Triple Eight*, where the women's daily lives unfold largely within peer-based spaces rather than under constant white institutional observation. As a result, AAVE appears as an unmarked and ordinary variety rather than as a stigmatized deviation from Standard American English.

The film's historical setting also contributes to the prominence of vernacular speech. These women are far from home, serving in a foreign and hostile environment during

wartime, with little no help and are held together by shared racial identity and collective responsibility. In such circumstances, language becomes a key resource for maintaining solidarity and emotional support. Smitherman (2000) notes that African American speech practices often function as expressions of cultural continuity and communal belonging, particularly in contexts of displacement or hardship. In the film, AAVE helps to construct a sense of familiarity and mutual recognition within a setting that is otherwise defined by institutional hierarchy and racial inequality.

At the same time, the presence of AAVE does not imply an absence of discipline or professionalism. Rather, the film distinguished between spaces of peer interaction and moments of direct engagement with the white authority. When interacting among themselves, the woman speak in ways that reflect shared norms and experiences, while when addressing superior officers, their speech often becomes more formal and carefully monitored. This contrast highlights how linguistic behavior is shaped by audience and power relations, reinforcing the idea that AAVE is not a sign of incompetence but part of a flexible and context-sensitive communicative repertoire.

Overall, the representation of AAVE in *The Six Triple Eight* reflects both the social cohesion of the battalion and the broader historical realities of racial segregation. Vernacular speech emerges as a marker of in-group belonging, emotional resilience and cultural continuity, while its regulation in interactions with white authority underscores the unequal valuation of linguistic varieties within institutional structures. This first overview provides a framework for a more detailed analysis of AAVE features in the following sections.

### 3.3.1 AAVE in informal and domestic settings

Although the women of the battalion are physically removed from their families and homes, they manage to construct alternative spaces of intimacy that function sociolinguistically like domestic environments. An old church was transformed into barracks and shared sleeping quarters, but part of the old establishment was turned into off-duty interaction sites, such as hair salons and chapels, where women recreate forms

of everyday social life. In these spaces. They joke, tell stories, argue, share personal memories and offer one another emotional support. Linguistically, these scenes resemble the informal and domestic contexts in which AAVE is most commonly used as a primary variety (Rickford, 1999).

The sense of “being at home” that develops among the women is closely tied to language. Through familiar speech patterns, shared expressions and culturally recurrent ways of speaking, they build a temporary community that compensates for the physical distance from their actual homes. AAVE in these scenes functions as a symbolic link to family, neighborhood and collective history. It helps to create a feeling of safety and belonging within a broader environment marked by war, displacement and racial discrimination.

In such informal settings, speakers show lower levels of self-monitoring and greater emotional expressiveness, conditions that favor the use of vernacular grammar and phonological features. Labov (1972) observed that casual speech styles often reveal underlying linguistic systems more clearly than formal contexts, because speakers are less constrained by external evaluation. This principle is reflected in the film, since when the women interact privately, their speech patterns align more closely with AAVE norms, whereas moments of institutional formality encourage a shift toward more standardized forms.

Importantly, these domestic-like spaces also allow for the performance of care, humor and shared struggle. Language becomes a resource for maintaining morale and reinforcing group cohesion. In this sense, AAVE serves not only as a linguistic system, but also as a social practice that sustains emotional resilience. Its presence in these scenes underscores that vernacular speech is associated with authenticity and interpersonal connection rather than with a lack of education or discipline.

### 3.3.2 AAVE linguistic features in character dialogues

This section analyzes the main grammatical features of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) represented in *The Six Triple Eight* through three selected scenes. These

scenes were chosen because they present informal, in-group interactions among the women of the battalion and their families, where vernacular speech emerges most naturally, in contrast with the dialogues with white officers. The linguistic forms used by the characters reflect rule-governed patterns described in sociolinguistic research on AAVE, rather than random deviations from the so-called “Standard English”.

Scene A – informal black-community house interaction between Lena, her mom and her aunt (8:11)

In the first selected scene, the women find themselves in a relaxed, communal setting inside their shared living quarters. The conversation revolves around personal experiences, humor and emotional bonding, especially dealing with Lena’s love life and her interests for this young Jewish boy, called Abram and who is soon supposed to leave to fight against Hitler, and her study interests, since her mom and her aunt were worried that they couldn’t be able to pay for her school. This creates a context of low formality and strong in-group solidarity. Within this environment, several AAVE grammatical features become audible.

The first feature that emerges in this scene, but also throughout the whole film, is the zero copula, where forms of the verb *to be* are omitted in present-tense context. This can be observed in many lines (1; 2), where the SE version would require “is” or “are”. The absence of the copula follows systematic grammatical rules and typically occurs in unstressed positions, confirming that this is not random omission, but a structured feature of AAVE.

(1) “she just having fun”

(2) “you talking schooling”

The same scene includes examples of multiple negation (negative concord), where more than one negative element expresses a single semantic negation (3). Rather than just being illogical, this structure intensifies the negative meaning and aligns with patterns found in many world languages. Its use in this scene reflects emotional emphasis and familiarity among speakers.

(3) “we ain’t got no money to send her to that school”

Additionally, the morphological features of the -3<sup>rd</sup> person singular “-s” absence is used in this scene (4). This feature is most typical of the rural AAVE, modifying the verbs, and so symbolizing that her mum and her aunt belong to a different part of society, less educated and still using an “old” AAVE.

(3) “Well, she need to have fun with a Negro boy”

Scene B – on the train to Georgia the separation between the black and white recruits (20:04)

The second selected scene pictures the juxtaposition between the formal dialogue with a white-male officer and a black woman recruit, who still wants to show him attitude by defining herself as a negro woman, even though her skin was not colored. As soon as he goes away, the tone and the way of speaking changes. The first lines appear to be formal and rule-governed, strictly following SE grammatical rules. As soon as the officer goes away, the tone becomes friendly and softer again, with recruits knowing each other better.

Apart from the different register, applied in two sequential moments of the conversation and changing because of the interlocutor, what emerges here is the use of the final consonant cluster reduction. Since the final consonant is preceded by another consonant of the same voicing, it is omitted (5).

(3) “you ain’t said nothin’ since we been on this train”

Expect for other recurring features, such as the double negation of the auxiliary, here totally wrong, this scene is quite captivating since it uses word typical of the AAVE’s slang (6).

(3) “segregation is just in them crackers’ blood”

The lexical choice “crackers” functions as a culturally loaded term indexing racial tension and in-group commentary, further reinforcing the solidarity of the speakers within the segregated context, adding the fact that it is preceded by “them” instead of “those”, attested as a demonstrative determiner before a plural noun in AAVE.

Scene C – in the theater, a discussion with a male white officer (47:52)

This scene takes place during a tense confrontation between a member of the battalion, captain Charity Adams and a male white officer. The exchange occurs in a semi-formal military context, where the emotional intensity and the felling escalation triggers a spontaneous and less controlled response, both between the white male officer and captain Charity Adams, and between the recruit and the captain herself. The recruit reacts defiantly and then attempts to justify her behavior, producing a line that contains several salient AAVE features.

One of the first elements is reproduced through the combination of multiple elements, creating the negative concord, where multiple negative elements, in this case “ain’t” e “never” contribute to a single semantic negation (7). Rather than cancelling each other out, as prescriptive grammar would suggest, these negatives reinforce the emphatic refusal expressed by the speaker. What stuns the most, is that this response came from the white male officer.

(7) “that ain’t never gonna happen”

The most linguistically significant AAVE’s example in this scene appears with the construction of the habitual be, that is considered to be one of the most distinctive grammatical features. In this context, “be” does not indicate the present progressive actions, instead a rather habitual or repeated behavior (8). The sentence implies that this reaction occurs regularly whenever similar situations arise. Standard English would typically require a different structure, but the habitual be encodes aspectual meaning that distinguishes between ongoing and recurring actions.

(8) “it’s just when them crackers be coming at me, I just see red”

The line also contains recurrent features that I have already listed before, like the use of “them” as a demonstrative pronoun or the term “crackers”. Similarly, in another line there’s a phonological informality quite typical of AAVE, where a rapid pronunciation transforms a normal going in the term “gonna” (7). However, it’s important to mark that it can appear across many varieties of English, but in this specific situation it contributes to the overall informal and emotionally driven tone.

Overall, what we can deduct from this brief but dense analysis is that most of the time the scenes that are rich of AAVE are the ones among family, peers or highly emotional moments, in which the nature of the AAVE variety is systematically reinforced, trying to express emotions such as frustration or excitement within a hierarchical military environment. The vernacular structures serve not only grammatical functions, but also index intensity, solidarity and shared experience.

### 3.3.3 Social meaning of AAVE in the film *The Six Triple Eight*

The social meaning of AAVE in *The Six Triple Eight* is closely connected to the battalion’s marginal position within the military structure. Historically, the 688<sup>th</sup> battalion was assigned the task of clearing an enormous blocking of undelivered mail, a job that many white officers believed that the women would fail to accomplish. The mission was framed as both a test and a containment strategy: if the unit proved unsuccessful, this could be used to justify existing racist assumptions about Black women’s capabilities. This context of low expectations and institutional doubt shapes the social significance of language in the film.

Within this framework, the use of AAVE among the women can be understood as an expression of collective identity and quiet resistance. Their vernacular speech affirms shared cultural background and mutual recognition in an environment where their competence is questioned and their labor is undervalued. As scholars argue, minority language practices often function as forms of identity affirmation in the face of marginalization (Smitherman, 2000). In the film, AAVE becomes a means of asserting

presence and dignity, even when the women are assigned a role intended to expose them to failure.

At the same time, the film makes clear that this linguistic freedom is not equally available in all contexts. When white officers enter the scene, speech becomes more restrained and aligned with institutional expectations. This shift reflects broader language ideologies that associate standard forms with authority and intelligence while stigmatizing vernacular varieties (Lippi-Green, 1997). The contrast between intra-group vernacular use and cross-racial linguistic regulation highlights how power shapes the social value of different ways of speaking.

Thus, AAVE in *The Six Triple Eight* varies layered social meaning. It symbolizes solidarity, resilience and cultural continuity within black female community, while also revealing the constraints imposed by a racially stratified institution, rather than portraying AAVE as incompatible with discipline or competence, the film presents it as a legitimate and meaningful linguistic system whose visibility is shaped by historical inequality. This representation lays important groundwork for the comparison with *Hidden Figures*, where the proximity to white institutional authority leads to a much more limited and regulated presence of vernacular speech.

### 3.4 CODE-SWITCHING IN HIDDEN FIGURES

This section explores the role of code-switching in *Hidden Figures*, applying the theoretical foundations established in Chapters 1 and 2. As discussed previously, code-switching refers to the alternation between linguistic varieties, styles or registers in response to social context, audience and communicative goals. In African American communities, code-switching is often linked to the negotiation between AAVE and SAE, particularly in environments characterized by racial inequality and institutional power.

In *Hidden Figures*, code-switching does not appear primarily as a systematic alternation between distinct grammatical systems, but rather as a shift in register, formality and communicative style. This aligns with sociolinguistic approaches that emphasize the

pragmatic and social dimension of code-switching, especially in professional context. The film presents African American women navigating a racially segregated and male-dominated institution, where language functions as a crucial resource for achieving recognition, authority and professional legitimacy.

The analysis of code-switching in the film must therefore be understood in relation to the historical and social constraints imposed on the characters. As shown in Chapter 1, AAVE carries strong social meaning and has historically been stigmatized in formal domains. Chapter 2 further demonstrates that code-switching often emerges as a response to such stigmatization, allowing speakers to adapt their linguistic behavior to different audiences and power structures. Within *Hidden Figures*, code-switching operates at the intersection of race, gender and institutional hierarchy, shaping how characters present themselves and how they are perceived by others.

#### 3.4.1 Code-switching in professional and institutional settings

Sociolinguistic research has consistently shown that professional and institutional environments exercise strong pressure on speakers to adapt to the so-called “dominant linguistic norms”. In white-dominated institutions, Standard American English is typically associated with positive features, such as competence, authority, and credibility; while generally other non-standard varieties, such as AAVE, are often perceived as inappropriate or unprofessional. For African American speakers, this dynamic frequently results in the need to adjust or modify speech styles, so that they can (almost) easily access institutional legitimacy, since the language often isn’t the only “burden”.

Studies on workplace communication highlight that code-switching in professional contexts often functions as a survival strategy rather than a voluntary stylistic choice (Smitherman, 2000). Speakers may suppress all the vernacular features, increase formality and adopt technical or specific language to align with institutional expectations; creating a process defined by Myers-Scotton (1998) as markedness model, according to which speakers choose linguistic forms that minimize social risk and maximize acceptance within a given interactional setting.

Specifically in *Hidden Figures*, NASA represents a highly regulated institutional space, in which the linguistic behavior is closely tied to power and authority. Every meeting, every briefing and every professional interaction is governed by rigid norms of formality, technical precision and emotional restraint, since there's no room for mistakes. Within this environment, African American characters, in this case women, must adopt highly controlled speech styles, particularly when interacting with male supervisors or colleagues, since they seem to have a double burden to overcome. These moments illustrate a clear form of situational code-switching, as language use changes according to setting and audience.

At the same time, the film contrasts these institutional interactions with more informal contexts, such as conversations among Black female colleagues during the lunch break, in an obviously separated area, or scenes set outside the workplace, like gatherings of the black community. In these specific moments, the speech becomes less formal, the intonation shifts and black emotional expressiveness increases. While grammatical AAVE features remain limited, these stylistic shifts nonetheless reflect a movement away from institutional language norms. This contrast reinforces the idea that code-switching in the film operates primarily through register and style rather than through overt grammatical alternation.

The institutional constraints pictured in *Hidden Figures* mirror historical realities faced by African American professionals in the 1960s. As discussed in studies of racism and discourse in the film, discriminatory structures are maintained not only through segregation policies, but also through everyday communicative practices (Zahra & Rasiah, 2023). Language thus becomes a key site where racial hierarchies are reproduced and contested. Code-switching, in this sense, reflects the characters' awareness of linguistic surveillance and the need to navigate institutional power carefully.

### 3.4.2 Types of code-switching represented

This section analyzes four selected scenes from *Hidden Figures* that most clearly illustrates moments of code-switching and stylistic variation. Unlike *The Six Triple Eight*, where AAVE grammatical features are structurally salient, *Hidden Figures* represents linguistic variation primarily through shifts in register, tone, phonological control and interactional alignment. These shifts occur in response to changes in audience, institutional hierarchy and social expectations, reflecting the sociolinguistic distinctions outlined in chapter 2. The selected scenes demonstrate different types of code-switching, including situational switching triggered by the presence of white authority figures, metaphorical switching reflecting change in stance or emotional intensity and both inter-sentential and intra-sentential alternations within conversations. In many instances, these shifts also function as style-shifting along a continuum of formality, rather than as a clear alternation between two discrete grammatical systems. Attention will therefore be given not only to lexical and syntactic variation, but also to prosody, tone, pacing and phonological control, as these features contribute significantly to the social meaning of the switch.

#### Scene D –Roadside encounter with the Police Officer (3:42)

This scene begins with an informal and humorous exchange among Katherine, Dorothy and Mary, as their car breaks down on the way to work. The interaction initially takes place between the three main characters, in an intra-group setting, characterized by teasing, irony and relaxed conversational rhythm. Once the conversation becomes more serious, with the police officer encounter, it becomes much more formal, adding some AAVE features, like Mary states herself (9).

(9) “The starter’s startin’ to make us late”

As seen in several lines, the women speak freely and playfully, however, the arrival of a white police officer immediately alters the communicative environment (10, 11). The

presence of institutional authority triggers a noticeable shift in speech style, tone and interactional stance, providing a clear example of situational code-switching (12).

(10) “No crime being Negro either”

(11) “Button it up, Mary. No one wants to go to jail behind you mouth”

(12) “No, sir”

The shift occurs when the white officer begins directly addressing them. Mary’s immediate response changed from playful assertiveness to formal compliance. When asked if she is being disrespectful, she instantly replies without causing any trouble. The addition of the honorific “sir”, along with a more controlled tone, reflects a movement toward a deferential register. This represents situational switching, as the change is triggered by the presence of authority rather than by topic.

Katherine’s answer (13) further illustrates this shift, with a syntactically complete, carefully structured and precise statement. The following statement regarding NASA (14), reinforces the alignment with institutional legitimacy. This shift reflects heightened self-monitoring and strategic accommodation to institutional expectations.

(13) “We sure do. We’re just on our way to work. At Langley”

(14) “NASA, sir”

Dorothy also similarly adopts a more formal register, with a standard grammatical structure and an elevated lexicon, which contrast earlier informal phrasing (15). This illustrates inter-sentential switching, as the speakers move from casual peer discourse to formal institutional speech across sentence boundaries.

(15) “There are quite a few women working in the Space Program, sir”

The scene therefore demonstrates how code-switching in *Hidden Figures* operates primarily as a movement along a continuum of formality rather than as a stark alternation between two grammatical systems. The women strategically adjust tone, vocabulary,

syntactic structure and prosody in response to racialized institutional authority. Language here functions as a protective mechanism and as a tool for negotiating safety and legitimacy within a potentially hostile environment.

Scene E – Vivian Mitchell confrontation with the Black female Space Task Group and Vivian (11:09)

This scene unfolds in two phases: first, an informal moment within the West Computing Group, when Mary and others receive exciting news about new work assignments, and second a more formal interaction between Dorothy and the white supervisor, Vivian Mitchell. The contrast between these two segments provides a clear example of situational code-switching, as shifts in speech style are directly triggered by changes in audience and institutional hierarchy.

The initial exchange occurs among Black female colleagues, in a supportive and celebratory atmosphere. When Dorothy announces Mary’s permanent assignment, her reaction is very spontaneous and she lets her emotions take over the scene, with repetitions, exclamations and a religious invocation, quite common among the Black community and culture (16, 17). The tone is animated and informal, followed by Dorothy’s reminder to moderate public display, but still the interaction remains relaxed and intra-group (18).

(16) “Are you serious?”

(17) “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you, Jesus!”

(18) “Keep it inside, hon. The other girls ...”

This segment illustrates a low-surveillance communicative space where expressive style is permissible.

The arrival of Vivian Mitchell immediately alters the linguistic environment, and the Group comes swiftly to attention. Dorothy is the first one who refers directly to the lady, with a formal and polite tone (19, 20). The use of honorific and respectful tone suggests the movement toward a more deferential register. This shift constitutes a situational code-

switching, as it is prompted by the presence of white institutional authority. Dorothy speech becomes syntactically precise and strategically measured, even during her request for supervisory consideration (21). This demonstrates a careful lexical selection and grammatical completeness, totally different compared to the earlier celebratory exchange. The repetition of the word “ma’am” itself reinforces deference and alignment with hierarchical expectations.

(19) “Mrs. Mitchell”

(20) “Yes ma’am”

(21) “My application for supervisor, ma’am. Was wondering if they’re still considering me for that position”

Vivian’s responses, by contrast, contain informal and regional markers (22, 23). She shows signs of informality, because she knows she’s in a higher hierarchical position. Despite her attitude, Dorothy does not mirror these forms, instead she maintains standardized syntax and controlled intonation. This asymmetry highlights the unequal distribution of linguistic flexibility: while the authority can shift casually between registers, Dorothy remains constrained by expectations of professionalism.

(22) “They’re not assignin’ a permanent supervisor to the Colored Group”

(23) “Things are workin’ just fine as is, Dorothy”

Anyway, the most revealing moment occurs when Dorothy points out her amazing work in the Group (24). Although grammatically standard, the concept’s repetition functions rhetorically, signaling controlled resistance. The shift here is not toward informality, but toward assertiveness in a formal framework. This can be interpreted as metaphorical code-switching, as Dorothy subtly adjusts her position, without abandoning the formal register.

(24) “I do the work of a Supervisor. I’m in charge of the Group, like a Supervisor”

The transition from intra-group celebration to institutional negotiation demonstrates how linguistic behavior is shaped by audience and power relations. There's an obvious and strategic adaptation in a racially stratified workplace, where maintaining professionalism becomes essential for legitimacy and advancement.

#### Scene F- Katherine's confrontation with her supervisor in the Space Task Group

This scene takes place inside the Space Task Group, after Katherine returns late from using the restroom located in the segregated West campus. The interaction begins as a disciplinary exchange, making this scene a clear example of metaphorical code-switching and style-shifting.

At the beginning of the interaction, Katherine's speech is highly restrained and deferential. When questioned about her absence, she replies quietly the reason why (25, 26). The use of the term "sir", together with a subdued tone, reflects the formal register aligned with institutional expectations. Her speech at this moment is quite submissive, characterized by reduced volume, limited elaboration and careful syntactic simplicity. This controlled style mirrors the professional self-monitoring and reflects situational accommodation to authority.

(25) "The bathroom, sir"

(26) "Yes, sir. The bathroom"

The shift occurs when Katherine is repeatedly challenged and interrupted (27). As her frustration surfaces her speech becomes longer, rhetorical and emotionally expressive (28). In the extended monologue that follows, Katherine's language shifts, but just in tone, keeping the precise grammatical system. Her sentences increase both in length and intensity, with a louder and forceful tone. This shift represents metaphorical code-switching, as the change in linguistic style signals a transformation in stance, from compliance to open confrontation, without a change in setting.

(27) "There are no colored bathrooms in this building or any building outside the West Campus. Which is half a mile away! Did you know that?"

(28) “picture that, with my uniform: skirt below the knees and my heels, and don’t get me started about the simple per necklace I can’t afford”

In this section the contrast is striking. These changes amplify the emotional weight of the message and foreground Katherine’s frustration. Despite the heightened emotion, her grammar remains aligned with Standard American English, underscoring that the switch operates through register and tone rather than through AAVE grammatical features.

Overall, this scene demonstrates that code-switching in *Hidden Figures* is not limited to alternation between informal and formal settings, but it also includes shifts in tone and communicative stance within the same environment. Katherine’s transition highlights the emotional and psychological difficulties of sustained linguistic self-monitoring and the role of language as a resource for resistance within institutional power structures.

Scene G- Mary Jackson’s courtroom appeal (1:10:46)

This scene specifically takes place in a very formal courtroom setting, where Mary Jackson petitions a white judge for permission to attend classes at an all-white high school in order to qualify as an engineer. Unlike the earlier scenes, the entire interaction unfolds within an institutional environment governed by rigid legal and racial hierarchies. However, in this stable setting, Mary’s speech demonstrated a subtle but significant shift in rhetorical stance, illustrating metaphorical code-switching and strategic style-shifting, rather than situational alternation between informal and formal registers.

Mary adopts a highly deferential and institutionally appropriate register, addressing the judge with a formal and honorific tone (29, 30). The syntax is grammatically standard, her sentences are complete, her tone is calm and measured. When she requests to speak further, her phrasing is cautious and respectful, aligning with courtroom conventions. This reflects a form of situational alignment, as her speech conforms fully to institutional expectations (31).

(29) “Good morning, your Honor”

(30) “Yes, your Honor”

(31) “Your Honor, if I may, I believe there are special circumstances to be considered”

The actual shift occurs when Mary begins reframing the argument. Rather than focusing solely on legal justification, she strategically personalizes her appeal (32). The register remains formally standard, but the rhetorical stance changes. She transforms into a persuasive speaker, invoking the judge’s personal history and legacy, marking a clear instance of metaphorical code-switching, as the change is not triggered by setting, but by a deliberate shift in communicative strategy. The syntax remains formal and grammatically standard throughout her whole speech, underscoring that the switch operates with tone, emphasis and argumentative framing rather than through vernacular grammar.

(32) “Your Honor, you of all people should understand the importance of being first”

Mary does not employ obvious AAVE grammatical features, instead her effectiveness depends on mastery of Standard English discourse, combined with subtle shifts in stance and persuasive intensity. Here the recurrent pattern in *Hidden Figures* occurs: code-switching is often represented as a movement along a continuum of formality and rhetorical positioning, rather than as alteration between distinct grammatical systems, with a constant linguistic adaptation and modulation, to negotiate access within racially exclusionary institutions.

This scene illustrates how code-switching operates not only as a reactive adjustment to authority, but also as an active rhetorical strategy, making the language itself a resource for institutional navigation and social advancement.

Overall, the selected scenes show that code-switching in *Hidden Figures* is primarily realized through shifts in register, tone and rhetorical stance. These adjustments, shaped by audience and institutional power, illustrate different types of code-switching and highlight a strategic resource for negotiating authority and professional legitimacy.

### 3.4.3 Motivations and psychological dimensions of Code-switching

Beyond its structural and contextual aspects, code-switching in *Hidden Figures* also carries significant psychological and emotional dimensions. Sociolinguistic research emphasizes that code-switching is often motivated by speakers' desires to manage identity, reduce social risk and cope with linguistic insecurity (Almelhi, 2020). For marginalized speakers, particularly African Americans in white-dominated spaces, code-switching can be both empowering and emotionally demanding.

Katherine Johnson's character provides a clear example of how code-switching functions as a strategy for professional survival. As a mathematician working directly with white male engineers, Katherine consistently adopts a highly formal and precise speech style. Her linguistic behavior reflects an acute awareness of audience and institutional expectations. In moments where she asserts her expertise, such as when explaining complex calculation or correcting errors, her controlled use of language serves to reinforce her intellectual authority. Code-switching here functions as a protective mechanism, allowing Katherine to challenge power structures without violating the linguistic norms that govern professional legitimacy.

At the same time, the emotional cost of this constant linguistic self-monitoring becomes evident in scenes of heightened stress or frustration. In such moments, Katherine's speech becomes more emotionally charged, signaling the psychological strain associated with sustained linguistic control. These shifts align with sociolinguistic findings that emotional involvement often reduces speakers' ability or willingness to maintain strict linguistic regulation (Labov, 1972). Code-switching thus reflects not only strategic adaptation but also emotional response.

Dorothy Vaughan's experience highlights a different motivation for code-switching, closely tied to leadership and collective responsibility. As a supervisor within the segregated computing unit, Dorothy must navigate both institutional authority and solidarity with her colleagues. Her linguistic behavior shifts depending on whether she is addressing white supervisors or black female coworkers. In professional interactions with

authority figures, she adopts a restrained and formal register, while in intra-group contexts her speech becomes more supportive and inclusive. Code-switching allows Dorothy to balance institutional compliance with community-oriented leadership, illustrating its role in managing multiple social identities simultaneously.

Mary Jackson's character foregrounds the connection between code-switching and resistance. Her pursuit of an engineering career requires her to confront institutional barriers directly, including educational segregation and legal obstacles. When interacting with authority figures, Mary's speech oscillates between conformity and assertiveness. While she generally respects the institutional language norms, during moments of emotional intensity she shifts in tone and style, signaling feelings like frustration or determination. These moments suggest that code-switching can also function as a means of expressing agency within restrictive systems.

Across all three characters, code-switching operates as a response to psychological pressure, linguistic insecurity and the constant need to justify one's presence within a discriminatory institution. As discussed in chapter 2, code-switching is often shaped by audience design and power dynamics, rather than by purely linguistic preference. In *Hidden Figures*, the motivations behind code-switching are combined with the characters' awareness of racialized judgment and the high stakes of professional failure.

Ultimately, the film presents code-switching as a necessary but heavy practice, reflecting the emotional labor required of African American women in historically exclusionary spaces. Rather than depicting code-switching as a neutral communicative tool, *Hidden Figures* highlights its psychological complexity, showing how language becomes a means of survival, self-protection and identity negotiation within a system marked by racial and gender inequality.

### 3.5 FORMAL AND INFORMAL SPEECH REGISTERS: CORRELATION BETWEEN AAVE AND CS

A comparative discourse-based analysis of speech registers between *The Six Triple Eight* and *Hidden Figures* shows a consistent path between speech register and the distribution of AAVE and code-switching practices. In both films, linguistic behavior varies according to social setting, audience and the presence or absence of institutional authority. Informal, in-group environments tend to favor the use of vernacular speech, while formal and professionally regulated spaces encourage greater linguistic self-monitoring and shifts toward standardized or institutional norms.

In *The Six Triple Eight*, AAVE is most visible in informal interactions among the women of the battalion. These moments often occur in shared living quarters, off-duty settings or collaborative workspaces where the characters interact primarily with one another. In such contexts, speech is characterized by greater spontaneity, emotional expressiveness and a relaxed conversational tone. For instance, during a domestic scene in which two soldiers speak privately, one character says “Been quiet as a mouse this whole time, and now she want to start screamin’?”. In another moment of casual interaction while working together, a character remarks “I ain’t jealous of her skinny tail. She ain’t worried about him no way”. These instances occur in settings where hierarchical pressure is reduced and speakers address one another as peers rather than subordinates.

When the interactional context shifts and white officers of military superiors enter the scene, speech becomes noticeably more formal. Tone, vocabulary and sentence structure align closely with institutional expectations. This contrast can be observed when a soldier addresses a superior officer, stating “It does, sir. I have graduated a hundred of women. We are ready to be called to duty, sir”. The difference between these formal exchanges and the earlier peer- based informal dialogues illustrates how register changes correlate with social hierarchy and audience.

A similar pattern of register variation is present in *Hidden Figures*, although it manifests primarily through code-switching and stylistic shifts rather than through frequent obvious AAVE grammatical features. In professional settings at NASA, characters frequently use highly formal and technical language. During a meeting of briefing, a character may state “That is the math we don’t have yet and we are working on it, gentleman” reflecting the expectations of a white-dominated scientific institution. In another institutional interaction, a character responds to a supervisor with “Yes, ma’am. Katherine is the girl for that”. These examples represent moments in which speakers orient strongly toward institutional authority and professional norms.

In contrast, when the same characters appear in informal or community-based context, their speech becomes less formal and more emotionally complex and expressive. In these scenes, a character might say “keep it inside, hon”. Similarly, in conversation with close acquaintances, another character may use a warmer and less technical style, as in “Have some respect and get you damn feet of my dashboard. This isn’t your livin’ room.” But still, marking the work background, there are some scenes in which, for example, the character of Mary Jackson replies to the judge with the statement “No Negro woman in the State of Virginia have never attended an all-white school” or Katherine Johnson confronts her supervisor by saying “Lord knows you don’t pay the colored enough for that. And I work like a dog day and night, livin’ on coffee from a coffee pot half you don’t want me to touch!”. All very formal statement, since they are expected to maintain language standards in order to adapt to the white-dominated institution, but still they let us see their real nature and their feeling of racism towards the white characters. Although the film limits the presence of strong grammatical AAVE features, these examples represent moments of shift both in style and register, but also in tone, to indicate movement away from the linguistic norms required in professional environments.

Across both films, these patterns show that speech register plays a key role in shaping how language varieties are represented. Informal settings associated with solidarity and familiarity allow greater space for vernacular expression in *The Six Triple Eight*, while formal institutional environments in *Hidden Figures* prompt speakers to adopt more controlled and standardized forms of speech. The contrast between these context

highlights the influence of power, audience and social expectations on linguistic behavior, demonstrating that the use of AAVE and code-switching is closely linked to the social meaning of different interactional settings.

### 3.6 IMPLICATIONS OF REPRESENTATION

The representation of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and code-switching in *The Six Triple Eight* and *Hidden Figures* carries broader sociolinguistic and cultural implications, which extend beyond the narratives themselves. These films do not merely picture historical events, they also contribute to contemporary understandings of black speech, professionalism and linguistic legitimacy. By presenting different patterns, of vernacular use and linguistic adaptation, the films participate in shaping public perceptions of which forms of language are considered appropriate, authoritative or respectable.

One important implication concerns the visibility and legitimacy of AAVE. In *The Six Triple Eight*, AAVE appears primarily in informal, intra-group settings, where it is associated with solidarity, emotional support and shared cultural identity. This representation underlines the idea that vernacular speech functions as a marker of community and authenticity. However, because AAVE is largely confined to private or peer-based spaces, its use remains separated from domains of institutional authority. In contrast, moments of formal interaction with white military leadership tend to suppress vernacular features in favor of more standardized forms. This pattern reflects a broader language ideology in which AAVE is socially meaningful but institutionally marginalized. The film implicitly acknowledges AAVE as legitimate within the Black community, while simultaneously depicting its limited acceptance in official contexts.

A related issue emerges in *Hidden Figures*, where obvious AAVE grammatical features are comparatively less present, and linguistic difference is expressed more through code-switching and register shifts. Here, African American women operate in an elite scientific institution with white-dominated staff, which demands linguistic conformity to white middle-class norms. Their professional success is closely tied to their ability to adopt

highly formal, technical and carefully controlled speech styles. This representation aligns with long-standing ideologies, that equate Standard American English with intelligence, competence and authority (Lippi-Green,1997). As a result, the film risks reinforcing the concept that linguistic legitimacy in professional spaces requires the minimization or suppression of vernacular identity.

At the same time, the film's portrayal of code-switching also highlights the skill, awareness and adaptability of the characters. Rather than linguistic adjustment as a sign of deficiency, the narrative frames it as strategic and necessary practice for navigating racialized institutional barriers. This perspective resonates with sociolinguistic research showing that code-switching often reflects communicative competence and social intelligence, rather than linguistic insecurity (Rickford, 1994). Nevertheless, the emotional and psychological dimensions of constant linguistic self-monitoring, particularly under conditions of racial surveillance, remain an underlying theme. The contrast between relaxed speech in Black community spaces and controlled speech in white professional environments underscores the unequal burden placed on marginalized speakers.

Taken together, the two films present a division between spaces where AAVE can be visible and valued, and spaces where linguistic conformity is required for recognition and advancement. This division mirrors real-world sociolinguistic hierarchies, in which minority varieties are often celebrated as cultural expression but excluded from institutional authority. By situating vernacular speech primarily in informal contexts and standardized speech in professional ones, the films risk reproducing the idea that certain ways of speaking belong to private life while others are necessary for public success.

However, these representations also offer opportunities for critical reflection- by foregrounding the linguistic labor required of African American women in historically segregated institutions, the films make visible the connection between language, race and power. They show that speech is not simply a neutral medium of communication, but a resource that must be carefully managed in environments structured by inequality. In this sense, the portrayal of AAVE and code-switching invites viewers to consider how

linguistic norms are socially constructed and how they function to include or exclude different speakers.

Ultimately, the representation of language in *The Six Triple Eight* and *Hidden Figures* highlights the persistent tension between cultural authenticity and institutional legitimacy. AAVE emerges as a symbol of solidarity and identity, while code-switching appears as a tool for navigating systems that do not fully recognize that identity as professionally acceptable. These portrayals reflect broader sociolinguistic realities and encourage a critical awareness of how media narratives shape public understandings of language, race and authority.

### 3.7 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the representation of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and code-switching (CS) in *The Six Triple Eight* and *Hidden Figures*, showing how linguistic variation in both films is closely tied to social setting, institutional power and identity. Building in the theoretical framework outlined earlier in the dissertation, the analysis has demonstrated that language functions as a key site where professionalism, belonging and authority are negotiated.

In *The Six Triple Eight*, AAVE appears most frequently in informal, peer-based contexts among the women of the battalion. In these intra-group spaces, vernacular speech operates as a marker of solidarity, emotional support and shared cultural identity. Its reduced presence in interactions with white military authority highlights the constraints placed on linguistic expression within hierarchical and racially stratified institutions.

In contrast, *Hidden Figures* foregrounds code-switching and stylistic shifts rather than obvious AAVE grammatical features. The protagonists operate in a highly professional, white-dominated scientific environment where speech is closely linked to perceptions of intelligence and competence. Formal, carefully monitored language characterizes institutional settings, while more relaxed and expressive speech appears in informal or community-based interactions. Code-switching therefore emerges as a strategic practice

that enables characters to navigate institutional expectations while managing social identity.

The comparison between the two films reveals a consistent correlation between speech register and linguistic representation. Informal environments allow greater visibility of vernacular speech, whereas formal institutional contexts encourage linguistic standardization and self-monitoring. Across both narratives, language becomes a resource for negotiating power, belonging and professional legitimacy, reflecting the broader social pressures faced by African American women in historically segregated institutions.

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation has examined the representation of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and code-switching in *Hidden Figures* and *The Six Triple Eight*, with the aim of understanding how linguistic variation is portrayed in relation to race, gender and institutional power. By combining sociolinguistic theory with qualitative film analysis, the study has explored both the structural features of AAVE and the communicative functions of code-switching within historically segregated environments.

The analysis has demonstrated that the two films present linguistic variation in distinct but complementary ways. In *The Six Triple Eight*, AAVE appears most visibly in informal, intra-group interactions among the women of the battalion or at home. Grammatical features such as zero copula, multiple negation, absence of third-person singular -s, habitual construction and phonological reductions occur primarily in peer-based and emotionally intimate settings. In these contexts, vernacular speech functions as a marker of solidarity, shared identity and cultural continuity. It reinforces the sense of collective belonging among the women, especially within a segregated military structure that questions their competence and legitimacy. At the same time, the film shows how linguistic behavior shifts when characters interact with white authority figures, suggesting that speech is shaped by awareness of institutional expectations.

In contrast, *Hidden Figures* foregrounds code-switching and stylistic adjustment rather than obvious grammatical AAVE features. The protagonists operate in a predominantly white, highly formal scientific institution, where professional credibility is closely tied to linguistic conformity. In this context, code-switching becomes a strategic resource. Shifts on register, tone, lexical choice and rhetorical style occur particularly in moments of institutional confrontation or negotiation. These switches reflect situational and metaphorical adjustments, as well as elements of style-shifting, demonstrating how speakers adapt their language to align with expectations of authority and professionalism. Rather than presenting code-switching as a deficiency, the film portrays it as a sign of linguistic competence and social awareness.

Taken together, these findings show that evidence of AAVE and code-switching is clearly present in both films, although distributed differently according to social setting and narrative focus. The representation of these linguistic practices is not random, instead it reflects the broader institutional and racialized environments in which the characters operate. Informal spaces allow greater visibility of vernacular forms, while formal or white-dominated contexts encourage linguistic monitoring and adaptation. In this way, the films illustrate how language operates as a flexible resource shaped by audience, power relations and social expectations.

More broadly, this dissertation has highlighted that the portrayal of AAVE and code-switching in these films is closely linked to structures of authority and racialized norms. By depicting how characters adjust their linguistic behavior across different contexts, *The Six Triple Eight* and *Hidden Figures* show that speech becomes a space where identity, professionalism and power intersect. Language in these narratives is not neutral or incidental, instead it is shaped by histories of segregation and inequality and by ongoing negotiations of legitimacy and belonging. The need to adapt one's speech in institutional contexts reflects the unequal valuation of linguistic varieties, while the preservation of vernacular forms in peer settings underscores their role in maintaining cultural identity and emotional resilience.

Ultimately the comparison between the two films has revealed that cinematic representations of language contribute to broader public understanding of linguistic legitimacy. By associating Standard English with institutional authority and confining AAVE primarily to informal or intra-group contexts, the films reflect dominant language ideologies while also challenging simplistic deficit perspectives. Through their depiction of highly competent African American women navigating restrictive systems, both narratives suggest that linguistic flexibility is not a sign of inadequacy, but of strength and strategic agency.

In conclusion, the study has demonstrated that AAVE and code-switching function as meaningful sociolinguistic resources within the films' narratives. Their representation has revealed how language participates in the construction of identity and in the negotiation

of power within racially stratified institutions. By examining these portrayals through a qualitative and theory-informed approach, this dissertation has contributed to a deeper understanding of how media narratives shape perceptions of language, race and professional legitimacy.



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## RIASSUNTO

La variazione linguistica rappresenta un elemento centrale nello studio delle dinamiche sociali e culturali che caratterizzano le comunità linguistiche. Le diverse varietà di una lingua non costituiscono soltanto modalità alternative di espressione, ma riflettono spesso relazioni. Di potere, apparenza sociale ed identità culturale. In questo contesto si colloca l'African American Vernacular English (AAVE), una varietà linguistica storicamente associata alla comunità afroamericana negli Stati Uniti. Nonostante possieda una struttura grammaticale coerente e ben documentata dagli studi linguistici, l'AAVE è stato spesso oggetto di stigmatizzazione sociale e di pregiudizi culturali e razziali, vedendo talvolta considerato erroneamente come una forma di inglese "non corretta". Parallelamente, il fenomeno del code-switching costituisce un importante oggetto di studio nell'ambito della sociolinguistica. Con questo termine si indica l'alternanza tra due o più varietà linguistiche all'interno della stessa conversazione o in contesti comunicativi differenti. Tale pratica non avviene in modo casuale, ma risponde a precise strategie comunicative e sociali, attraverso le quali i parlanti negoziano la propria identità e si adattano alle aspettative del contesto in cui si trovano. Nel caso delle comunità afroamericane, il code-switching può implicare il passaggio tra l'AAVE e l'inglese standard, a seconda della situazione comunicativa e degli interlocutori coinvolti.

La presente tesi si propone di analizzare la rappresentazione dell'African American Vernacular English e del fenomeno del code-switching nel cinema contemporaneo, con particolare riferimento ai film *Hidden Figures* e *The Six Triple Eight*. Entrambe le opere cinematografiche raccontano storie di donne afroamericane che operano in contesti professionali caratterizzati da forti disuguaglianze razziali e di genere. In questo senso, i dialoghi dei personaggi offrono un contesto particolarmente significativo per osservare come la variazione linguistica venga utilizzata per esprimere identità culturale, solidarietà comunitaria e adattamento alle norme linguistiche dominanti.

L'indagine si articola intorno ad un duplice obiettivo: in primo luogo, la ricerca mira ad individuare la presenza di tratti linguistici riconducibili all'AAVE nei dialoghi dei due film analizzati; in secondo luogo, si propone di esaminare le modalità attraverso cui il

code-switching viene utilizzato dai personaggi nei diversi contesti comunicativi, con particolare attenzione alle funzioni sociolinguistiche che tale fenomeno assume all'interno della narrazione. A tal fine, lo studio adotta un approccio qualitativo basato sull'analisi di scene selezionate, osservando le caratteristiche linguistiche dei dialoghi, i cambiamenti di registro e le dinamiche interazionali tra i personaggi.

Il primo capitolo della tesi è dedicato all'analisi dell'essenza dell'African American Vernacular English. In questa sezione viene innanzitutto definita la natura linguistica dell'AAVE, evidenziando come esso rappresenti una varietà dell'inglese dotata di proprie regole grammaticali e fonologiche. La ricerca sociolinguistica ha infatti dimostrato che l'AAVE presenta caratteristiche strutturali specifiche, tra cui particolari fenomeni sintattici, morfosintattici e fonologici che lo distinguono dall'inglese standard. Tra questi si possono citare, ad esempio, l'omissione del verbo "to be" in determinati contesti, l'uso dell'aspetto abituale espresso attraverso la forma "be" ed alcune specifiche caratteristiche fonologiche.

Il capitolo prende inoltre in esame le principali teorie relative alle origini storiche dell'AAVE. Alcuni studiosi hanno sostenuto che questa varietà deriva principalmente da varietà dell'inglese britannico adattate nel contesto americano, mentre altre interpretazioni sottolineano il possibile ruolo delle lingue africane e dei creoli sviluppatisi durante il periodo della servitù. Sebbene il dibattito sulle origini dell'AAVE rimanga ancora aperto, la maggior parte degli studi concorda nel riconoscere che tale varietà si è sviluppata all'interno di specifiche condizioni storiche e sociali che hanno caratterizzato la formazione delle comunità afroamericane negli Stati Uniti.

Un ulteriore aspetto di questo capitolo riguarda la stigmatizzazione sociale dell'AAVE. Nonostante la sua struttura linguistica sistematica, questa varietà è spesso percepita negativamente nei contesti istituzionali, educativi e professionali. Tali percezioni non derivano da caratteristiche intrinsecamente linguistiche, ma piuttosto da fattori sociali ed ideologici legati alle relazioni di potere presenti nella società. In questo senso, la stigmatizzazione dell'AAVE riflette più ampie dinamiche di marginalizzazione culturale e razziale. Allo stesso tempo però, per molti parlanti afroamericani rappresenta un

importante elemento di identità culturale e di appartenenza comunitaria, contribuendo a rafforzare legami sociali e forme di solidarietà all'interno della comunità.

Il secondo capitolo è dedicato al fenomeno del code-switching. In questa sezione vengono presentate le principali definizioni e classificazioni elaborate dagli studi sociolinguistici. Il code-switching può manifestarsi attraverso diverse modalità, come l'alternanza tra frasi diverse o all'interno della stessa frase, e rappresenta una strategia comunicativa attraverso cui i parlanti adattano il proprio linguaggio ai diversi contesti sociali.

Dal punto di vista sociolinguistico, il code-switching può svolgere diverse funzioni: può facilitare l'adattamento alle aspettative linguistiche di un determinato ambiente, segnalare l'appartenenza ad un gruppo sociale oppure marcare il passaggio tra diversi ruoli comunicativi. Nel contesto afroamericano, l'alternanza tra AAVE ed inglese standard consente ai parlanti di muoversi tra contesti differenti, come l'ambiente professionale, quello educativo e quello informale.

Il terzo capitolo applica il quadro teorico all'analisi dei due film oggetto dello studio. Le scene selezionate vengono esaminate per individuare la presenza di tratti linguistici riconducibili all'AAVE e per osservare i momenti in cui i personaggi ricorrono al code-switching.

Nel film *The Six Triple Eight*, l'AAVE emerge soprattutto nei dialoghi informali tra i personaggi afroamericani. In questi contesti, l'uso della varietà vernacolare contribuisce a rafforzare il senso di solidarietà e di appartenenza comunitaria. Nel caso di *Hidden Figures*, invece, l'analisi evidenzia un uso significativo del code-switching. Le protagoniste lavorano in un ambiente professionale dominato dalla norma linguistica standard e tendono quindi ad adottare uno stile più formale nelle interazioni lavorative, mentre utilizzano forme più vicine all'AAVE nelle conversazioni informali.

Questa alternanza linguistica mostra come il code-switching possa funzionare come una strategia di adattamento sociale. Attraverso il cambiamento di registro linguistico, i

personaggi dimostrano le capacità di muoversi tra contesti sociali diversi mantenendo al tempo stesso un legame con la propria identità culturale.

In conclusione, la ricerca evidenzia come l'African American Vernacular English ed il fenomeno del code-switching svolgano un ruolo rilevante della rappresentazione cinematografica delle esperienze afroamericane. L'analisi del film *Hidden Figures* e *The Six Triple Eight* mostra come la variazione linguistica possa riflettere dinamiche di identità, appartenenza e potere all'interno della società statunitense. In questo senso, lo studio contribuisce a sottolineare l'importanza di considerare la lingua non soltanto come un sistema di regole grammaticali, ma anche come un fenomeno sociale strettamente connesso alla storia, alla cultura ed alle relazioni di potere.