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African American Vernacular English: A study of its perception by young non-native speakers

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Introduction

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) stands as a vibrant and influential linguistic variety within American English. Its origins trace back through the annals of history, rooted in the experiences of African Americans and their unique linguistic journey. This dissertation delves into the rich tapestry of AAVE, exploring its historical evolution, cultural significance, and intricate linguistic features. This dissertation further investigates by going beyond the American borders, specifically into the hearts and minds of young Italians. The study investigates the perceptions that young Italians hold regarding AAVE. To achieve this, a questionnaire, centered on awareness, experience, exposure, and perception of AAVE. This survey is conducted to gain insights into how AAVE resonates with a demographic that stands geographically and culturally distant from its origins.

In Chapter 1 the main features of AAVE are its unique phonological, morphological, and syntactic system. Its different features are a great enrichment to the varieties of English, with phenomena such as the monophthongization of certain diphthongs, consonant cluster reduction and unique intonation and stress patterns that make AAVE undistinguishable, along with its unique grammatical structure, especially regarding tense and aspect. Another important feature that will be analyzed in the dissertation is the particular social significance of this language and its origins.

In Chapter 2 the findings of the questionnaire will be discussed. The findings of this study show a lack of awareness and understanding regarding AAVE among young Italians. The dissertation discusses the implications of these findings in a perspective of cross-cultural appreciation. AAVE has a marginal role in the Italian linguistic setting, so its cultural role in a country so far gets lost in translation. Young Italians are exposed to AAVE through media and art, but they cannot identify it. They are aware that this variety holds ethnic significance, because they associate it with African American culture, but the validity of the language seems to be minimized.

The work of this dissertation not only contributes to the academic discourse on linguistics and cultural studies, but also serves as a call for broader cross-cultural engagement and awareness.

Chapter 1: An introduction to African American Vernacular English

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has been a controversial and heavily discussed topic in the linguistic society for the last forty years. This chapter aims to not only explain what this rich and growing vernacular variety is, but also to reflect on the academic discussions around it from the 60's until now. This section will also provide a brief history of African American Vernacular English and its speakers, along with a description of its linguistic features.

<div align="center">1.1 Historical development of AAVE: definition and origins</div>

AAVE is a variety of English most spoken by working class Black Americans (or African Americans) in the US, with its own distinct systematic phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and lexical patterns. Its roots were established with the beginning of the British colonization of the Americas, but it has evolved and has influenced standard American English over time.

This variety has been the center of discussion in the linguistic community countless times because of its origins; since there is a strong relationship between language and race, the discussions around it have naturally reflected the underlying issues of racial ideologies in the United States. AAVE has had several paradigmatic shifts through time; the numerous name changes this linguistic variety had over the years are enough to prove that: from the earliest Negro Dialect or Nonstandard Negro English to Black English or Black English Vernacular to again Afro-American English, African American (vernacular) English and, most commonly, Ebonics.

Walt Wolfram in *The Handbook of World Englishes* claims that "these name changes simply have been aligned with changes in naming practices related to the classification of black Americans" (2006). Because of that, I think that understanding the history of the social category speaking AAVE is essential to understand the cultural relevance that the language has. African Americans, also referred to as Black Americans or Afro-Americans, are the third largest ethnic group in the US, composed of people with American nationality and partial or total African ancestry, specifically from the black regions of West and Central Africa, since many people from these macro-areas were taken as slaves across the Atlantic in the colonial period. Based on this definition, it's easy to assume that all black

people in the States identify themselves as African American, but African immigrants, who do not identify with the history of slavery embedded in the term, prefer to identify with their respective ethnicities for the most part (according to US Census Bureau data). "African American", clearly, is more than just two words, it contains hundreds of years of oppression, a "dramatic saga of a people attempting to remake the world" (Kelley and Lewis, 2000).

This "saga" begins in the 16th century, when the newly found America was only Thirteen Colonies and the abundance of the untouched and seemingly infinite land called for working hands to be "outsourced". An affordable and accessible type of labor force was needed to build the future greatest country in the world, so European colonizers bought and enslaved people from Africa to bring them to the Americas, marking the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade. According to Kelley and Lewis (2000), the Atlantic slave trade mobilized "somewhere between ten and twenty million people", who "became part of the system of enslavement that ultimately led to the making of an African diaspora and African Americans". European settlers put the enslaved people to work on plantations (particularly in the South) and made the white color of their skin an indicator of superiority and privilege, stripping human rights away from Africans and in turn making blackness an indicator of inferiority. Enslaved people slowly began to rebel, freeing themselves through manumission or by escaping, thus beginning the eternal struggle for freedom. The same freedom that European colonists wanted, the same desire from redemption resulted in the American Revolution (1775-1783), which laid the foundation for the emancipation of African Americans, who for the first time in nearly 150 years could escape their day-to-day oppression by turning to the battlefield. A philosophical debate over slavery started around that time and African people began to claim their role in building the country and winning the war against Great Britain. Black resistance intensified and with it so did the tight grip of the Southern slave regime, particularly after the abolition of the slave trade in 1808. The tension between the slave owners of the South and the opposite faction, slaves themselves and the industrial North, escalated in the Civil War (1861-1865), which "raised the question of whether a nation founded on the deep belief in freedom could deny those same rights and privileges to others because of a difference in color and status" (Kelley and Lewis, 2000). Eventually and not without struggles, the Emancipation Proclamation was signed by Lincoln in 1863, but millions of

enslaved people remained under this system of oppression until the passage of the 13th Amendment in 1865. In the following couple of years, the 14th and 15th Amendments granted black people citizenship. The Reconstruction period began. Hopes of a bright future were high in the minds of the newly emancipated African Americans, who were already freeing other enslaved people, created a class union and started exercising their rights. Then, in 1877 when federal troops were finally withdrawn from the South, "the nadir" (Logan, 1954) began: the lowest point of African American history. The lands promised by the government to black folks were never given to them, the same Confederates who made policies during the war returned to their former positions of power, racial segregation became legal with Jim Crow laws, discrimination and violence (particularly lynchings) increased dramatically and many properties and jobs were taken away. Many black Americans, tired of the desperate conditions in the South, decided to travel to the North in the industrial cities of Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and Detroit, where they lived in the poorest areas of the city. Even after the Great Migration, African Americans found themselves fighting for freedom time and time again.

The 20th century brought about enlightenment, protests, violence, radical ideas, and change. The civil rights movement gaining momentum in the 50's and the appearance of the Black Power movement gave black people hope: the Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and natural origin, prohibited unequal application of voting rights and definitively banned racial segregation in schools and public spaces.

From the 70's onward, after decades of political and economic development, the living conditions of the black population in the US have certainly improved, however the disparity between black Americans and White Americans' welfare is still noticeable today. The racial disparity in poverty rates has narrowed since the Civil-rights era; still, poverty rate among African Americans is 18.8%, 8.8% more than the poverty rate among European Americans (Creamer, John, 2020). Average earnings of Black American men were 76 cents for every dollar of White American men in 2006 (Pubdb3.census.gov, 2006). The black underclass gets hit disproportionately by national economic hardships: job loss, underemployment and unemployment are more frequent to encounter in life for black people rather than for the general population (White, Gillian B., 2015).

Even though black people have faced hardships, there are many notable black Americans, who are nowadays remembered and honored particularly during February: Black History Month; established to bring awareness and focus on the contribution of black Americans to society in schools and other educational spaces. It is promoted by the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. The ASALH was founded by Carter G. Woodson, a scholar who in 1926 birthed the Negro History Week, predecessor of Black History Month. Activists like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., record-breaking athletes like Kobe Bryant and Simone Byles, entertainers and artists like Nina Simone and Maya Angelou and politicians like Shirley Chisholm and Barak Obama have closed the cultural gap a bit more with every step of the way, continuing that battle against oppression.

After setting the scene of the birthplace and home of African American Vernacular English, the next few paragraphs will analyze the theories that tried to answer the question: how did AAVE came to be? "There seems to be consensus among most scholars today that AAVE, […], is in fact in direct line of descent from earlier British dialects. But there is still disagreement about possible creole or African influence on the structure of AAVE", states Winford in *The Oxford Handbook of African American Language* (2015). Thus, there are two routes to choose from: the "dialectologist" or "Anglicist" hypotheses and the "creolist" hypotheses.

1.1.1 African language roots: the creolist hypothesis

In 1965 the Jamaican creolist Beryl Bailey published a paper which stated that "the Southern negro 'dialect' differs from other Southern speech because its deep structure is different, having its origin as it undoubtedly does in some Proto-Creole grammatical structure" (1965, 172). During the slave trade, black people would speak this Southern creole which then modified through contact with English in a process of decreolization. The creole was supposed to be very similar to English-based creoles found in the African diaspora (e.g. Krio in Sierra Leone) and in the Caribbean. "Negro slaves who constituted the field labor force on North American plantations up to the mid-nineteenth century, even many who were born in the New World spoke a variety of English which was in fact a true creole language – differing markedly in grammatical structure from those English dialects which were brought directly from Great Britain" affirms Stewart (1968:3). Creolists believe that the roots of the proto-creole spoken by African people in the

antebellum South can be found in Gullah, a creole spoken today in the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia; furthermore they maintain that some of the creole features can still be observed today in AAVE, for example inflectional -s absence (Winford, 1997) and consonant cluster reduction (Wolfram, Childs and Torbert, 2000).

The creolist hypothesis took the academic community by storm, sparking a lively debate that lasted for decades and is still unresolved today, resulting in works that tried to find evidence to these claims. Bailey used the speech of "Duke", the narrator from Warren Miller's *The Cool World*, as his text of source. Dillard (1972) brought examples from stage dialect or travelers' reports. These sources were not seen as fully reliable, though: Bailey's (1965) source text depicts a literary dialect, not historical, so it can't be assumed as a record for early AAVE, Dillard's (1972) reports cannot be assumed as reliable because the possibility that those travelers understood and recorded the supposed proto-creole language incorrectly is not to be underestimated.

The creolist hypothesis was highly supported when it first was introduced, according to Schneider (2015) it is because of "the cultural context of the period of heightened civil rights activism: the desire to identify African roots in African American cultural manifestation". The linguistic community's opinion was not uniform: in the 80's and 90's new evidence came out against the creolist hypothesis, marking another shift in perspective.

1.1.2   Influence of English: the Anglicist hypothesis

The Anglicist hypothesis was first proposed by dialectologists Hans Kurath (1949) and Raven McDavid (1951), even before the emergence of the creolist hypothesis. The Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada conducted extensive surveys on regional English in the mid-twentieth century. These surveys found that older black and white folks in the 1940's shared many regional features in their speech. Dialectologists concluded that AAVE and EAVE (European American Vernacular English) had the same roots: a dialect spoken in the British Isles by the British settlers, which allegedly partially replaced the ancestral African languages brought to plantations by the enslaved people.

When the creolist hypothesis emerged in the 1960's, many scholars abandoned Kurath and McDavid's proposition, on the other hand many more tried to find evidence that could

call the creolist hypothesis into question. Extensive research was conducted in the 1980s and 1990s, based on new written datasets that brought linguists to the conclusion "that earlier AAVE was not nearly as distinct from postcolonial European American English varieties as would have been predicted under the Creolist hypothesis" (Wolfram, 2006).

The first set of evidence was the ex-slave narratives collected under the WPA (Works Project Administration) during the 30's. These records were analyzed by Bailey, Maynor and Cukor-Avila (1991) and Schneider (1989, 1996) and included quite accurate transcriptions of the stories of African American ex-slaves. Schneider (1989) asserts that early AAVE was "predominantly determined by its descent from nonstandard British and American English of the colonial period" (Schneider 1989: 227) but certain "structures are unquestionably creole or creole-influenced in character" (Schneider 1989: 278). His claims were supported by the reoccurrence of verbal -s endings found in the texts, which contrasts the creolist view that earlier stages of AAVE were predominantly marked by suffix-less verbs, and finite auxiliary be or have plus done before the verb, which "provided a missing link with well-documented northern British sources" (Schneider, 2015).

Poplack was another important scholar in the development of Anglicist research: she examined a variety of English spoken on the peninsula of Samana' in the Dominican Republic, where a consistent group of black Americans from Pennsylvania expatriated in the 1820s, during the African diaspora. This community lived in isolation for hundreds of years, constituting a linguistically conservative speech island, meaning that their language (very similar to British colonial dialect) had maintained a lot of features found in those early stages of AAVE (Poplack and Sankoff, 1987; Poplack and Tagliamonte, 1989, 1991, 2001). Poplack asserts that that "AAVE originated as English, but as the African American community solidified, it innovated specific features" (1989), giving rise to the expanded version of the Anglicist position, the Neo-Anglicist hypothesis.

Although the presiding theory amongst linguists about the origin of AAVE is that it has always been a dialect of English, the Neo-Anglicist hypothesis was not exempt from disputes, mainly based on the circumstances of the language contact between Africans and Europeans. "Structures vulnerable to modification and loss during language contact situations, such as inflectional -s on third-person verbs, the copula, and word-final

consonant clusters, distinguished earlier African American speech from that of its regional European American counterparts.", stated Wolfram (2015). This ethnolinguistic divide, not addressed in the Anglicist hypothesis, brought part of the linguistic community to a different conclusion: the Substrate hypothesis. Wolfram and Thomas, the main promotors of this hypothesis, maintain that earlier AAVE incorporated many regional dialect features, but still the substrate (the creole-like characteristics) have distinguished it from other European American English varieties (Wolfram and Thomas, 2002).

The debate on AAVE origins has been going on for over fifty years and is still far from a point of resolution that puts every perspective in agreement, but these hybrid positions like the substrate hypothesis have been accepted by many scholars. There will always be speculation about the earlier development of AAVE, because of the struggle to find new reliable diachronic sources, but the debate now is not nearly as heated as it once was.

1.2 Linguistic Features

AAVE is "a distinct, robust, and stable socio-ethnic dialect of English that is maintaining itself and, in some cases, even intensifying. Though its origin and early development continue to be disputed, it seems apparent that AAVE has accommodated itself to host regional varieties of English while maintaining a durable, distinctive substrate that has set it apart in the past and present" (Wolfram, 2015). Present-day development of AAVE has been diverging from regional European American vernaculars (Labov, 1985), particularly in urban areas of the US, where AAVE is not only retaining its distinctive features, but also intensifying their use and creating new ones (Bailey, 2001; Cukor-Avila, 2001; Labov, 1998). The modern-day segregation of black people into ghettos and outer banks of metropolitan areas, the economic gap between the middle and the lower class, and the discrimination and violence from a part of the white population towards black folks have had the effect of creating a supra-regional norm of AAVE (Wolfram and Thomas, 2002). Urban areas are the center of African American youth culture, which takes pride in its blackness in opposition to whiteness, the mainstream culture. This identification with being black has established a growing sense of ethnic identity associated with AAVE in young black Americans. AAVE is considered an essential part of "being black", it is a marker for "blackness", therefore it is too subject of discrimination by the mainstream culture. There will be a more comprehensive discussion about the socio-cultural relevance

of AAVE in the second chapter; for what concerns this first chapter, I will now provide a list of grammatical features of modern-day, urban AAVE, which make it unique.

1.2.1   Phonology

In this section the phonology of AAVE will be explored, starting from the vowels and the consonant system, differences with Standard American pronunciation regarding diphthongs and consonant clusters, and ending with a brief analysis of its intonation patterns.

Vowel and consonant systems

One aspect that can be noticed is the reduction of some diphthongs to monophthongs.

It has been observed by Green (2002), an example of that would be the AAVE pronunciation of the word 'price': the vowel /aɪ/ is monophthongized to [aː]. Another example is the word 'choice', where the diphthong /ɔɪ/ becomes [oɪ].

Pin-pen merger

A phenomenon studied by Labov (1972), also present in other dialects, in which /ɛ/ and /ɪ/ are both pronounced [ɪ~ɪə] when found before a nasal consonant. This means that the words 'pen' and 'pin' are almost indistinguishable in AAVE.

Alveolarization of the velar nasal /ŋ/ into the alveolar nasal [n]

Green (2002) states that when a word ends with -ing and has more that two syllables, the morpheme is not pronounced / ɪŋ/, but / ɨn/, e.g. 'tripping': [ˈtɹɪpɨn] in AAVE and [ˈtɹɪpɪŋ] in Standard American English.

Consonant cluster reduction

When consonant clusters are at the end of some words, in AAVE they are reduced to the first consonant of the cluster only (Green, 2002). Some examples of that are: 'test' being pronounced [tɛs] or 'west side' being pronounced 'wes side'.

Vocalization of /l/ and /r/

These consonants are often dropped when they are not followed by a vowel, resulting in the lengthening of the preceding vowel (Green, 2002). In AAVE, 'too' and 'tool', 'door' and 'doe' are thus homophones.

R-lessness

Labov (1972) studied that /r/ disappears both in post-vocalic, pre-consonantal position (a common feature between AAVE and some European American vernaculars, like New York English) and in pre-vocalic position at the end of a word.

Schwa Pronunciation of 'the' preceding a vowel

Wolfram and Fasold (1974) observed that in AAVE 'the' is always pronounced with a schwa, contrary to the standard pronunciation of 'the', which varies according to the first letter of the following word.

Intonation and stress patterns

McWhorter (2001) argues that AAVE has a unique and distinct intonation pattern. This is validated by several studies (Graff, Labov and Harris, 1986; Shuy, Baratz 1969) whose aim was to determine a perceptual basis for identification of AAVE speech. In these studies, the researchers made interviewees listen to a set of recordings trying to identify African American speech. 80% of the time, listeners could correctly identify AAVE.

One of the most apparent features of AAVE speech is the double stress on some words, or the "misplacement" of word stress compared to Standard American English. For instance, words like 'police', 'guitar' and 'Detroit' in AAVE are pronounced with the stress on the first syllable, while maintaining a trace of the standard stress in the following syllables; therefore these words sound more like 'po-lice', 'gui-tar', and 'De-troit'.

1.2.2 Morphology

The morphological features described in this section range from creole-like inflectional and derivational processes (such as the disappearance of the inflectional -s), to more Southern American Vernacular sounding non-standard forms like "y'all", but still exploring the forms specific to AAVE.

Inflectional and derivational processes

The inflectional -s would appear normally in sentences such as "the dog's tail was wagging" or "I have fifty dollars", as a marker for possession in the former example and as a marker of plurality in the latter. In AAVE, inflectional -s disappears (Green, 2002), so the same sentences now look like "the dog tail was wagging" and "I have fifty dollar". Genitive – 's disappearing is a quite common phenomenon in many creoles throughout the Caribbean.

Verbs are also uninflected for number and person, therefore there is no third person singular -s; "she walk" instead of "she walks". Green (2002) states that in AAVE the absence of inflectional -s in verbs is a contributing factor in the use of some alternative forms of auxiliary verbs instead of the standard ones: 'don't' is used for 'doesn't'

Non-standard forms

The use of the second person plural 'y'all' is common in AAVE and some other vernacular varieties of English. There is also a type of associative plural that is most found in English creoles, 'an 'em' (Labov, 1968), but it is also common in both European American vernaculars.

Other peculiarities of AAVE are the possessive pronouns. 'They' is used as a possessive pronoun in sentences such as "It's they book". The possessive pronoun 'mine' and the reflexive 'himself' are regularized into 'mines' and 'hisself', e.g. "he washed hisself" or "the book is mines". 'them' in the objective form is also used as an attributive demonstrative, e.g. "she likes them apples".

1.2.3   Syntax

In this paragraph the topics of non-standard negatives, negative concord, and different word order in questions will be explored

Word order

Questions in AAVE lack inversion of verb and subject, so "Who is that?" becomes "Who that is?". Green (2002) notes that because of the lack of inversion these is no need for the auxiliary 'do', that's why a sentence like "Who the hell she think she is?" is not uncommon to hear.

Grammatical structures

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Particular to AAVE are negatives, which are often times formed differently from most varieties of English. 'ain't' is heavily used in AAVE and other vernaculars, but in the former variety its use is not limited to replacing 'am not', 'isn't', 'aren't', 'haven't' and 'hasn't', it also replaces 'don't', 'doesn't' and 'didn't' (Labov, 1972).

AAVE also participates in negative concord, or double negation, consisting in negatives marked both in the verb phrase and in the rest of the sentence (postverbal indefinites) (Wolfram 2015). This directly contrasts standard English, in which two negatives equal to a positive. Sentences like "I didn't go nowhere" or "I don't know nothing" are not incorrect in AAVE. Negative constructions can also present an inversion of the indefinite pronoun with the negative verbal auxiliary, such as "don't nobody like him" (Wolfram 2015).

Although AAVE shares these features with creole Englishes like African Nova Scotian English or Samanà English (Windford, 1992), recordings of ex-slaves demonstrate that they were inherited from the British colonial dialect (Howe and Walker, 2000).

1.2.4   Tense and aspect

Tense and aspect in AAVE are very different from Standard American English.. Auxiliaries in this variety of English can hold many meanings and nuances depending on the linguistic context and their use. All of this will be investigated in this section.

Copula/auxiliary absence

Sentences like "she's pretty" or "they are acting silly", in AAVE sound like "she pretty" and "they acting silly". Copula absence is quite a pervasive phenomenon, shared with Southern European Vernacular; although in this latter variety is not as frequently used (Wolfram, 1974).

Invariant be

Invariant be, or non-finite be and habitual be, is considered to be the most characteristic trait of AAVE. It refers to actions with a habitual reoccurrence and is mostly found before v-ing, e.g. "They be playing games". This feature is used more by younger speakers of AAVE than older ones (Wolfram, 1969; Cuckor-Avila, 2001) predominantly in urban areas (Wolfram and Thomas, 2002). Invariant be can also be used to convey stativity

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(Alim, 2002), such as in "Dr. Dre be the name" (an iconic phrase by rapper and producer Dr. Dre).

Done

In AAVE, 'done' is one of the most important aspectual marker and can take many forms based on what the speakers want to convey. Done can be used with the past tense of the verb in auxiliary position, resulting in the completive done, which refers to an action completed in the recent past , e.g. "They done used all the good ones". It can also be used to emphasize a change of state (Wolfram 2015).

There is also sequential be done, which marks a resultative and/or future conditional state. Dayton (1996) notes that it can refer to inevitable consequences, threats or warnings, e.g. "if you love your enemy, they be done eat you alive in this society".

Remote *béen*

'béen' (stressed) with a past tense may refer to an action that took place in the distant past and that is still relevant today (Wolfram 2015), e.g. "I béen known him" means that the speaker has known 'him' for a long time.

Simple past had + verb

The auxiliary has with a past perfect form indicates a simple past tense action, as in "they had went outside and then they had messed up the yard". Cukor-Avila (2001) observed that this is a quite recent feature, being adopted by preadolescents.

Specialized auxiliaries

Wolfram (2004) described many auxiliaries that play distinct semantic roles and set apart AAVE from other vernacular varieties of English. The most important ones are 'come', 'steady' and 'finna'. 'Come' as an auxiliary is used with v-ing and denotes indignation, annoyance or resentment, e.g. "he come walkin' in here like he owned the damn place". 'Steady' marks a continuative or intensifying activity, a persistent action, e.g. "You steady hopin' things don't fall down this week". 'Finna' is the equivalent to Southern European American vernacular 'fixin' to' and refers to an immediate future event while indicating the existence of a plan, e.g. "she finna break his heart!"

1.2.5 Vocabulary

The use of AAVE vocabulary alone does not imply that someone is an authentic speaker, mostly because AAVE shares most of its lexis with informal and Southern varieties of English. According to Widawski and Maciej (2019), the main methods used to create new words are combining, shifting, shortening, blending, borrowing and creating. Compounding is the most common one, with the most common types of compounding being noun-noun combinations and adjective-noun combinations.

AAVE has been contributing slang expressions also used in General American English, such as 'cool', 'hip', 'funky', 'chill' and many more. It has influenced the development of dialects like New York Latino English, Liberian Settler English and Chicano English. The people adopting AAVE speech or vocabulary are mainly part of the urban youth, associated with hip-hop culture, and ethnic minorities, but that does not mean that only people of color use AAVE. In the last few decades, many AAVE terms were adopted by mainstream white American culture through the popularity of shows like Rupaul's Drag Race and Queer Eye, and music genres like rap and hip-hop, becoming part of American slang. The theme of appropriation or misuse of AAVE by the white population is one of the most important points of the debate on AAVE today, along with its space in education and society. All of this will be discussed in the second chapter of this dissertation.

- Some examples of frequent lexical items typical of AAVE are:
- Basic = boring, bland
- Bro/bruh = friend, buddy
- Chill = relax
- Cool = dope, amazing
- Homies/squad = friends
- Lit = awesome
- Side-eye = to be skeptical, rolling your eyes at someone
- Slay = perfected, made their own, refined
- Spilling tea/spill the tea = gossip
- Swag = cool, amazing

Chapter 2: A questionnaire about African American Vernacular English

In this second chapter of this dissertation, we delve deeper into the perceptions and awareness of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) among young Italians. Building upon the groundwork laid in Chapter 1, which introduced the significance and relevance of AAVE, this chapter presents the results and analysis of a questionnaire designed to explore how AAVE is perceived and understood by a sample of young individuals in Italy. All the questions in the survey are listed in the Appendix.

2.1 Methodology

This survey is a cross-sectional study analyzing African American Vernacular English's perception among young Italians. The survey is designed as an online questionnaire in the Italian language, made using Google Forms. There are twenty-seven questions, divided in three sections: socio-demographic questions, questions about the perception of AAVE and closing questions. The type of questions used in the survey are individual socio-demographic, behavioral and attitudinal, they are mainly closed-ended, multiple-choice and Likert questions.

The selected sample is composed of 114 people aged from 18 to 35 years old, randomly sampled. The questionnaire was forwarded to WhatsApp groups frequented by university students, acquaintances, and friends. There were no other requirements for the sample size and population, as the aim of the research is to study the general perception of AAVE in young people living in Italy, with different walks of life, level of English, and exposure to English varieties. The participants were asked to answer the questions honestly, as there are no wrong answers, and were notified that the compilation of the questionnaire would take approximately five to ten minutes. The answers were collected in the time frame between the third of July, 2023 and the fourth of September, 2023.

The survey studied a large number of variables: dependent and nominal variables like perception, exposure and awareness of AAVE, demographic variables such as age, gender, sexual orientation and education, ordinal variables about opinions and attitudes towards AAVE.

2.2 Participants

79.8% of the respondents are aged eighteen to twenty-five, 14.9% are ages twenty-five to thirty, and 5.3% are ages thirty to thirty-five (see Figure 1). The impressive age gap can be explained by the fact that this survey was forwarded via WhatsApp to many university students, who start their studies at usually nineteen years old and usually do not obtain a bachelor's degree until twenty-five (AlmaLaurea, rapport 2021). Most respondents (75.4%) have a high school diploma, 14.9% have a bachelor's degree and 8.8% have a master's degree. Only one respondent has a middle school diploma.
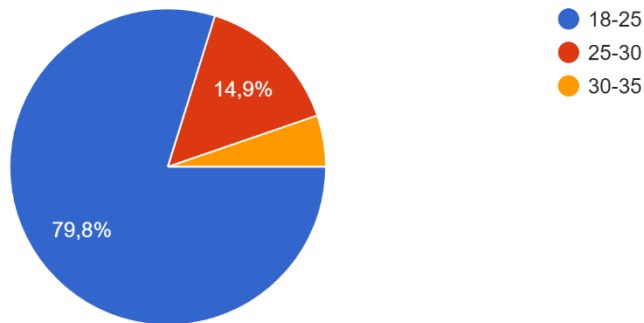
Quanti anni hai?
114 risposte

- 18-25
- 25-30
- 30-35

14,9%

79,8%

Figure 1: Age of respondents

Qual è il tuo livello di istruzione?
114 risposte

- Diploma delle medie
- Diploma delle superiori
- Laurea triennale
- Laurea magistrale
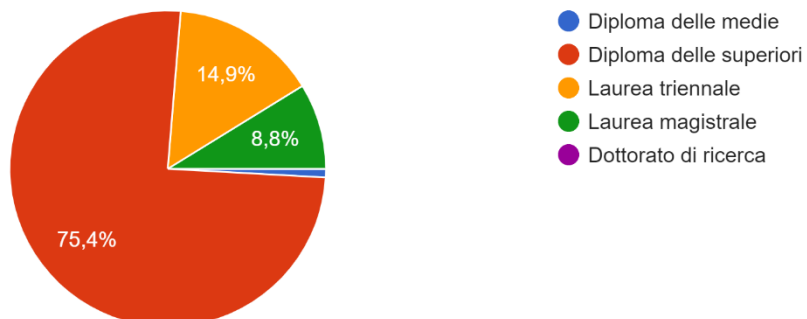- Dottorato di ricerca

14,9%

8,8%

75,4%

Figure 2: Education

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Overall, most respondents identify as women (68.4%); 28.1% identify as men, 1.8% as non-binary. There are a few inconsistencies and unreliable answers to this question, probably because the topic of gender is controversial and can elicit a negative response in some people, making them elusive or derisive. This explains answers such as "trans-igente" and "Elefante tandem psichico da guerra" to a multiple-choice question about gender with an open-ended option. This could also apply to a hybrid question about sexual orientation, in which 80.7% of responded identified as heterosexual, 3.5% identified as homosexual, 10.5% as bisexual, 0.9% as pansexual and queer and an equal number of people identified as "ornitoasessuato" and "body-pillow-sexual". Only 1.8% of people prefer not to specify their sexual orientation.

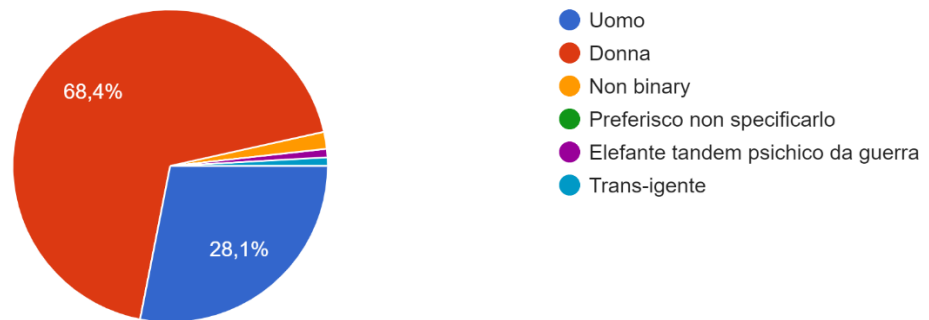**Qual è il tuo genere?**
114 risposte

- ● Uomo
- ● Donna
- ● Non binary
- ● Preferisco non specificarlo
- ● Elefante tandem psichico da guerra
- ● Trans-igente

Figure 3: Gender

Qual è il tuo orientamento sessuale?
114 risposte

- ● Eterosessuale
- ● Omosessuale
- ● Bisessuale
- ● Preferisco non specificarlo
- ● Queer
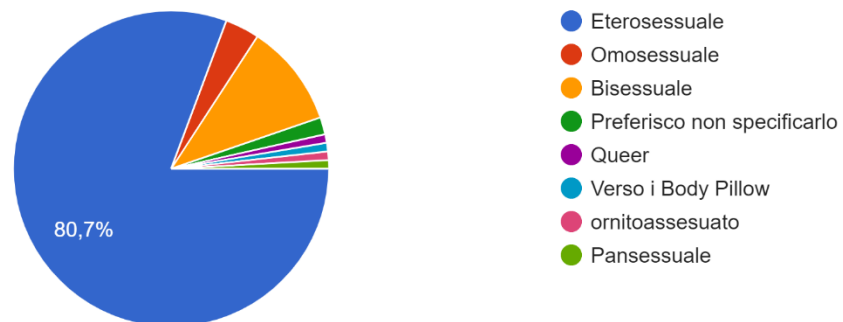- ● Verso i Body Pillow
- ● ornitoassesuato
- ● Pansessuale

Figure 4: Sexuality

Participants were also asked about their nationality: 91.2% of total respondents are Italian, 1.8% are Sammarinese, and the remaining 7% is divided equally between Albanian, Argentinian, Bulgarian, Cambodian, Chinese, Senegalese, and Swiss. Only one person identifies as Italian-American. Consistent with these responses, to the question "What is your mother tongue?", 95.5% of participants listed Italian as their native language, while the remaining 4.5% mentioned Bulgarian, Mandarin, French, English and Spanish. According to the survey, 97.4% of respondents know other languages other than their mother tongue. This number may seem particularly high, given that in Italy only 66% of working-age individuals speaks at least another language other than Italian (Euronews, 2018), but it is actually understandable, as this survey was forwarded to many language students of the University of Padua. Among the second, third, and sometimes fourth languages spoken by respondents, English is the most common (92.8% of total respondents speaks English), followed by Spanish (42.3%), French (24.3%), German (14.4%), Russian (7.2%), Arab (2.7%), and Romanian (1.8%). The least popular ones were Albanian, Japanese, Mandarin, Portuguese, Turkish, Bulgarian, Latin and Sinhala, all spoken by 0.9% of total respondents, respectively.
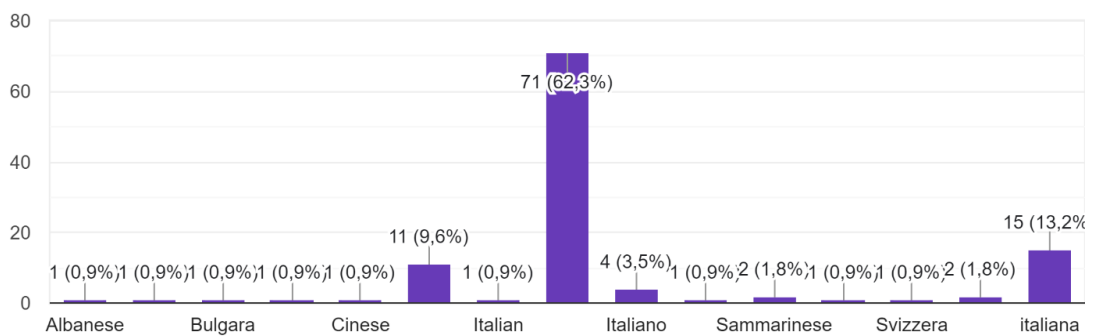
Qual è la tua nazionalità?
114 risposte

Figure 5: Nationality

22

Conosci altre lingue oltre alla tua lingua madre?
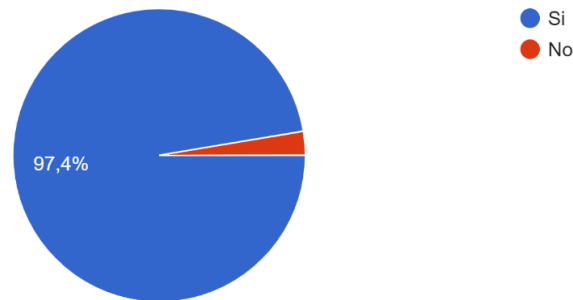114 risposte

● Si
● No

97,4%

Figure 6: Native tongue

Since the study is about the perception of African American Vernacular English, an English variety, it seems important to inquire about the level of English of the participants and their relationship with it, before diving deeper into AAVE. On a scale from one to five, where one corresponds to beginner and five to expert, participants ranked their lever of English in four language skills: listening, writing, speaking and reading. The skill which respondent feel most capable of doing is reading, which 31.6% of people ranked at number five. Reading is followed by listening (23.7% ranked number five) - which actually was not ranked at number one by a single participant – then writing and speaking. Overall, respondents of this questionnaire consider themselves quite skilled in the use of English, since the most common ranking is four.

Su una scala da 1 a 5, dove 1 = principiante e 5 = esperto, come descriveresti il tuo livello di inglese in queste categorie?
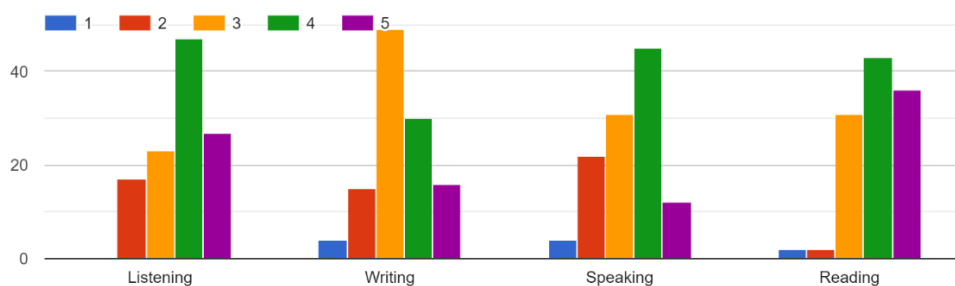

Figure 7: Level of English

When it comes to how respondents learned English and what specific tools were useful for them, participants were asked to rank from one to five – one being the less useful and five being the most useful - the usefulness of learning through: education (mandatory and voluntary), English-speaking films and tv shows, English-speaking musical artists, traveling, the family and the social context in which they grew up, online courses and online English-speaking spaces. The most useful tools for participants were English-speaking films and tv shows and traveling, which respectively 30.7% and 31% of those interviewed ranked at five. On the contrary, online courses and family and social context seem to have been less useful in the learning process of participants; as a matter of fact, 53.7% and 41.2% of informants respectively ranked these variables at number one.

Foreign music was also a relevant variable in the learning process of participants: 22.8% ranked this tool at number five, while 39.8% ranked it at number four. Participants are neutral about the usefulness of education, since the ranking three received the most votes, 31.6%. Online English-speaking spaces is the most controversial tool: 30% of respondents ranked it at number one, 14.5% at number two, 20% at number three and four and 14.5% at number five.

Quanto sono stati utili nell'apprendimento dell'inglese, su una scala da 1 a 5 dove 1 = per niente utile e 5 = molto utile: a) formazione scolastica (sia obbligatoria che facoltativa) b) visione di film/programmi televisivi in lingua originale c) ascolt... e sociale in cui sei cresciut* f) corsi online frequentati g) spazi online anglofoni
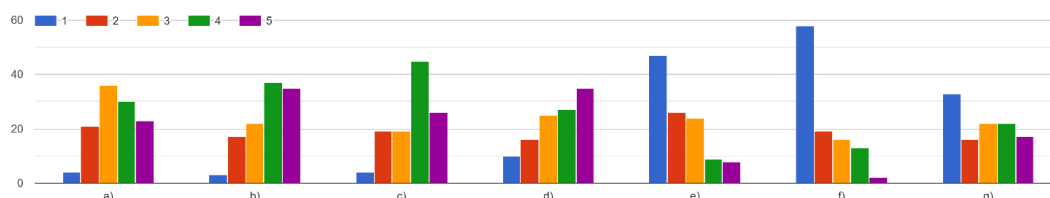

Figure 8: English learning

2.3 Findings

2.3.1 Experience

The first question that participants answered about AAVE was "Have you ever heard about African American Vernacular English?", to which 64.9% responded that they did not, while 35.1% did. AAVE seems to be an obscure topic for respondents.

Hai mai sentito parlare di African American Vernacular English (AAVE)?
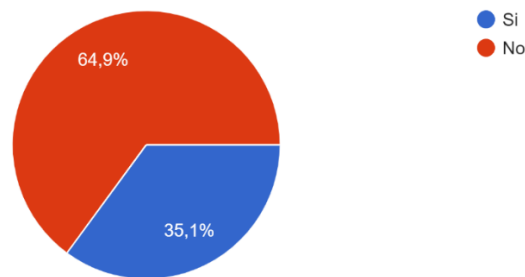114 risposte

- Si
- No

64,9%

35,1%

Figure 9: Have you ever come across AAVE?

When asked about how they came across AAVE, 42.00% of respondents found out about this variety through social media. AAVE has been a topic of discussion in some online communities, especially on Twitter, TikTok and Instagram. With the rise of the "cancel culture", defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as the practice of mass sabotaging a person of interest to express disapproval of this person's actions, it has not been uncommon to see artists, influencers, actors, politicians, generally every person of interest being torn apart by tweets, videos or comments. Stars like Ariana Grande and Taylor Swift have been heavily criticized online because of their appropriation of black culture. The negative attention received by celebrities has a worldwide appeal. It may be possible that some respondents found out about AAVE through one of the many scandals that affected many famous people around the world.

Many of these hate storms towards celebrities involved the use, or misuse, of AAVE by non-Black people. In the article by Kara McAndrew (2022) called "Why non-Black creators need to stop using AAVE on social media", there is a clear description of what many black Americans feel when they browse through social media. McAndrew describes her discomfort in seeing a language so rich and culturally significant being used by white Americans in a way which deprives a given AAVE utterance of its meaning, or often mispronouncing it. She states that many people misuse AAVE terminology to sound cool, hip, woke, to create an image of somebody who they are not. This phenomenon is looked down upon and is actually very hurtful for the Black community, but is widely accepted in mainstream white culture. As McAndrew puts it: "Social media has only exacerbated the speed and extent of cultural appropriation, especially that of Black language trends. When popular white creators use AAVE constantly, it becomes increasingly difficult to

stop the spread of seemingly harmless slang." (2022) AAVE seems to be spreading into Internet slang, and it gets appropriated so much by White American creators that it does not get recognized as its own name anymore. Respondents showed a pervasive and marginal lack of awareness, explored more in detail in the subsequent paragraphs.

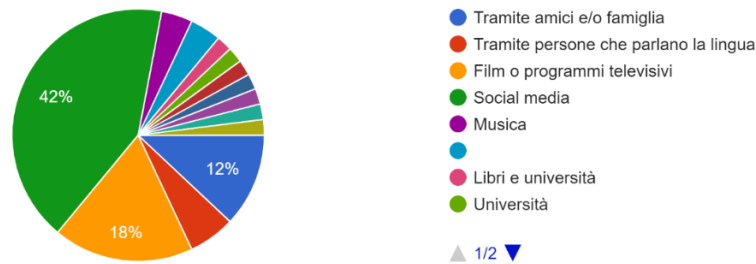Se sì, come ne sei venuto a conoscenza?
50 risposte

- Tramite amici e/o famiglia
- Tramite persone che parlano la lingua
- Film o programmi televisivi
- Social media
- Musica
- Libri e università
- Università

1/2

Figure 10: How did you come across it?

To expand on the topic of films and music, in this survey respondents were asked to list the TV series and artists that they have watched and listened to from a limited number of items. The films and musical artists in these questions share a commonality in that the lyrics and the writing typically have many AAVE words and features.

Films and TV shows were the second most popular sources of AAVE exposure for respondents. 18% of them stated to have found out about this variety through these kinds of audiovisual entertainment. When it comes to "black" tv shows, *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* was the most popular answer to the question "Which of these tv shows have you watched?" (90.7%). This tv series was extremely popular in Italy in the late 90's and early 2000's, therefore it may be possible that most respondents watched this tv show during their childhood or adolescence. It may be possible that respondents soaked up some AAVE terminology, with the premise that they watched this show in English, since typically dubbed versions of media can present some translation problems which have to be solved by adopting a strategy that can sometimes dilute the meaning of the original text.

It must be noted that the Italian adaptation that many respondents consumed as kids contains many references to black culture. Even the opening song of every episode has clear identity indicators. The last verse of the original English version of the song goes:

"I pulled up to the house about seven or eight and I yelled to the cabbie, <<Yo holmes, smell ya later>>. I looked at my kingdom, I was finally here to sit on my throne as the prince of Bel-Air". This was translated into Italian as: "Oh, che sventola di casa, mi sento già straricco, la vita di prima mi puzza di Vecchio. Guardate adesso gente in pista chi c'è: Willy il nero, superfico di Bel-Air." Translators definitely took some artistic liberty, but the choice of including the main character's ethnicity in the opening song is not unintentional, as the show often makes clear references to the black struggle.

The topic of black struggle is heavily touched by the TV show "Atlanta", a popular representation of millennial depression. Youth culture and black culture are intertwined, in this show. Even though respondents are not aware of it (only 8% watched it), it does not mean that they do not associate AAVE with youth and black culture, as talked about in the subsequent paragraphs.

The second most popular TV show among respondents is RuPaul's Drag Race (26.7%): a reality TV contest in which drag queens compete to win the final prize of 100.000$ and become "America's next drag superstar". Many contestants of this show were black queer folks, and it was common to hear some AAVE terminology, especially since much of AAVE vocabulary comes from the ballroom scene. Ballrooms were black LGBTQIA+ community hubs in the 1980s and 90's, safe spaces for people who were vulnerable members of society, where they could freely express themselves and create a strong sense of community. On RuPaul's Drag Race, the language many drag queens speak is clearly influenced by AAVE and ballroom. The same applies to Pose, an American TV series which delves into the ballroom scene of the 80's and 90's. Almost every character on the show speaks AAVE and LGBTQIA+ slang, but the series does not seem to be popular among interviewees. Only 10.7% of them have watched the show.

Participants in this survey, therefore, do not seem to be aware of the intracultural importance of this variety, since only 1.2% of the total respondents associates AAVE with the LGBTQIA+ community, as can be seen in paragraph 2.3.2.

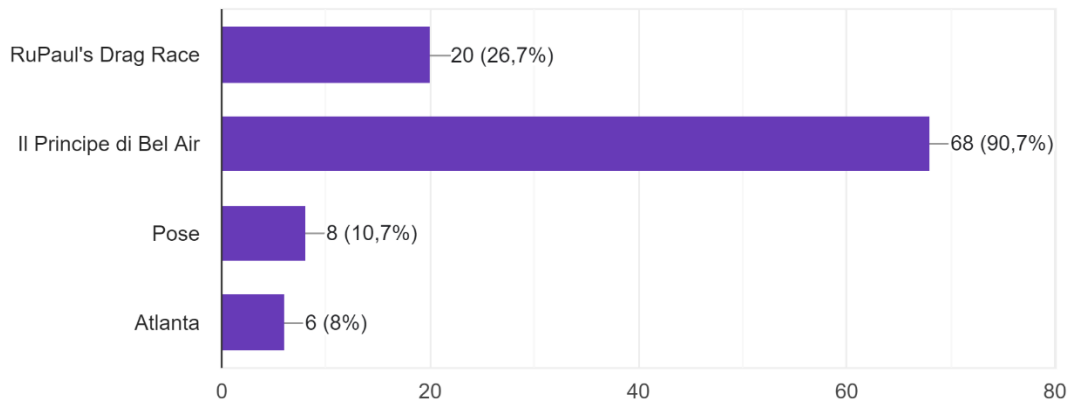## Quale/i di questi programmi televisivi hai guardato?
75 risposte

Figure 11: Films and TV shows

The question "Which of these musical artists have you listened to?" was quite popular in this survey, even though only 4% of respondents affirms to have come across AAVE through music. Rihanna and Beyoncé were the most popular artists among participants (93.1% and 87.1% respectively); overall most interviewees voted at least three of the artists listed in the survey. These artists all identify as black, most of them are rappers and use quite a lot of AAVE in their songs.

Quale/i di questi artisti musicali hai ascoltato?
101 risposte
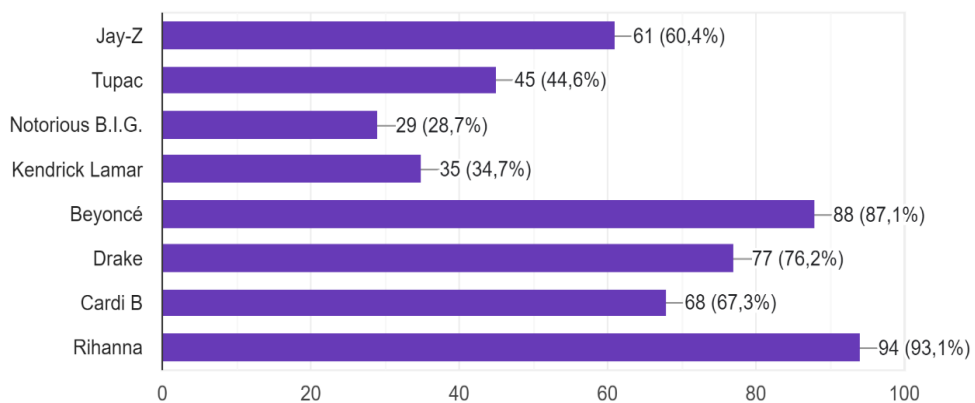
Figure 12: Musical artists

Hip-hop is one of the most influential media for AAVE. It is the language's adaptation to music, and it was born as the solution to the plague of gang violence in black communities in the late 1960's and early 70's (Price III, 2006). Hip hop gradually became one of the markers for black identity, not only in America but also in the rest of the world. It is not

28

by coincidence that 12.3% of respondents associate AAVE to hip hop, 6.2% with underground culture, which is heavily rooted in hip hop and urban style, and 8.6% with youth culture, heavily influenced by rap music.

It seems that the influence of entertainment is quite relevant in the learning process of English. According to Morning Consult (2023), "adults around the world are complimentary of US commercial products and art, illustrating the enduring global appeal of American cultural exports". This can be shown by their survey done in seventeen countries, which studies the perception of American export in the developing and developed regions of the world. The world has a general appreciation for American pop culture, which is defined by The Library of Congress as "popular written literature and broadcasting, popular music, popular dance and theater, certain decorative arts, sports and recreation, and other cultural aspects of social life distinguished by their broad-based presence across ethnic, social, and regional groupings". There is a difference between the perception of American culture in rich nations. France, for instance, although appreciative of American influence, has always been conservative when it comes to how relevant this influence can be on its own culture. Kuisel (1991) talked about the "Cocacolonisation" of post-World War II France, a period in which the National Assembly was posing the question of banning Coca-Cola, one of the most famous brands in the world even today, on French soil because of the "alleged subservience to the United States" (Kuisel, 1991).

In Italy, as Scrivano (2004) explains in his article "Domestic Dreamworlds: Notions of Home in Post-1945 Europe", the cultural influence of the United States can be seen in the post-war modernization of domestic life and economic system. Consumerism was accepted easily in post-war Italy, and transatlantic models of life were adopted by a large portion of the Italian population, favoring the economic boom of the post-war period. It can be possible, therefore, that many young Italians came across AAVE through entertainment, but are not aware enough to know.

2.3.2 Awareness

66.7% of respondents associated AAVE with the African American community, furthermore 67.1% states that speakers of AAVE are African American individuals, while

25.3% believes that speakers of AAVE are US citizens of color. Therefore, it can be said that participants recognize the ethnic significance of the language far more than they recognize its importance in other subcultures, like the LGBTQIA+ community, underground culture, and liberal social movements.

A cosa associ il fenomeno AAVE?
81 risposte

Legend:
- Alla comunità LGBTQ+
- Alla comunità afroamericana
- Alla cultura giovanile
- Alla underground culture (es. il fenomeno dei "maranza")
- A generi musicali come hip-hop, rap e trap
- A movimenti sociali liberali
- A programmi televisivi statunitensi

Figure 13: Association

Respondents are also aware of many of the most popular AAVE terminology. In the question "Have you ever heard one or more of these words being used?" most of respondents knew many of the words listed. These words are popular and can be seen on social media and in the printed media, and some such as "bro", "swag" or "cool" have become part of everyday language for the Italian youth. Even though respondents are aware that these words exist, the same cannot be said about the origin of those words. 84.8% of participants were not aware that the list in the previous question comprised only AAVE vocabulary. 92.9% of them stated that they have used at least one of these words once. It can be said that participants are aware of AAVE, but not to the full extent as to recognize what constitutes AAVE and its specific cultural impact. There seems to be a broad understanding of this English variety, but its nuances tend to fly under the radar.

When it comes to exposure, participants state that they do not often encounter AAVE, either on social media or in films and music, even though most of them listen to black artists, watch black TV shows and browse social media. They are not aware that what they encounter is AAVE.

Hai mai sentito usare una o più di queste parole? Seleziona quelle che hai già sentito.
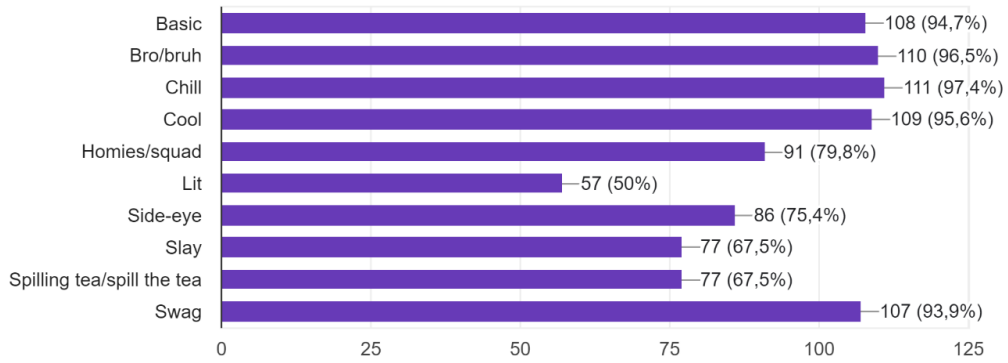114 risposte

Figure 14: Word list

Eri a conoscenza del fatto che tutte queste parole fanno parte del vocabolario dell'AAVE?
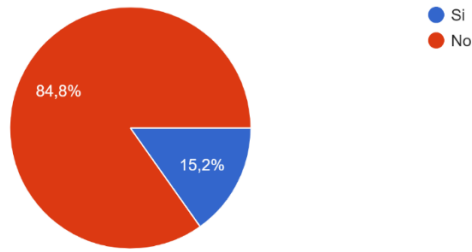112 risposte

Figure 15: Did you know that all of these words came from AAVE?

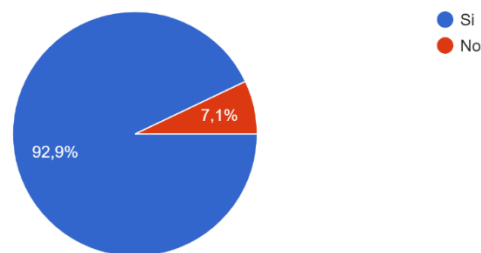Hai mai usato una di queste parole?
99 risposte

Figure 16: Have you ever used any of these words?

Quanto frequentemente hai sentito parlare AAVE in questi ambienti, su una scala da 1 a 5 dove 1 = mai e 5 = sempre: a) internet e social media b) film/programmi televisivi c) musica
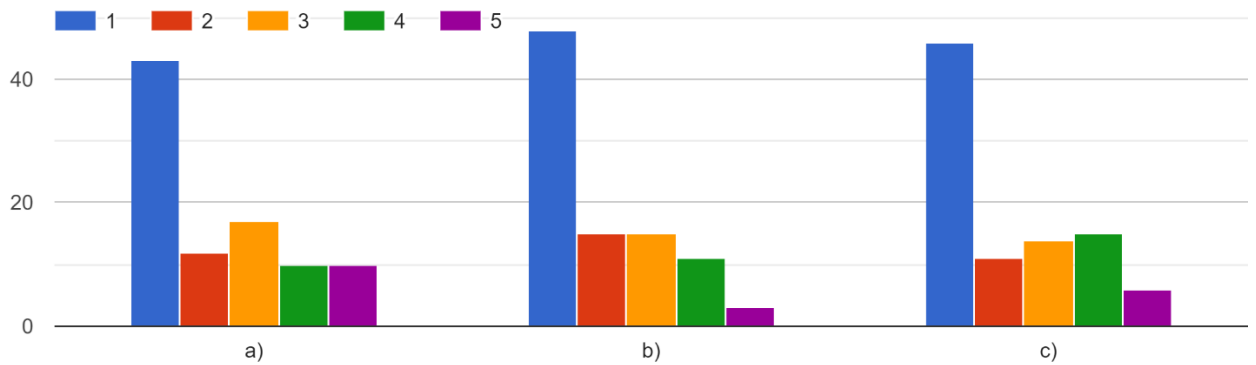

Figure 17: Frequency

2.3.3 Perception

Participants were asked to define what AAVE was to them, using a multiple-choice question. The results in Figure 19 show that 42.7% of respondents consider AAVE a slang, 32% a dialect, 28% part of underground culture and only 21.3% a language.

Slang can be defined as words that become part of spoken language, even though they are not included in traditional dictionaries. Respondents feel a sense of informality with AAVE. This is coherent with the way in which AAVE is treated in the USA. As previously explained, this English variety is considered rude, is associated with poverty and violence, and is stigmatized by being considered "broken English". Since respondents defined this language as a slang, it makes sense that 57.9% deemed AAVE too informal for a conversation with a stranger and in schools or university, 67.1% deemed it too informal in the workplace, while 86.9% consider AAVE to be appropriate when speaking to a friend.

Slang and dialects in Italy have been subject to prejudice since the unification in 1861, because there was a need for a national language (Coluzzi 2008). Dialects were not prohibited, but standard Italian has always had an élitarian status, which made dialects appear informal, rude, inappropriate, especially during the Fascist time. Fascist Italy had an anti-dialectal policy in schools, at work, and in day-to-day life. Dialects, local speech,

neologisms and slang became so stigmatized that, with various exceptions of course, Italians feel like they are losing their dialectal tradition.

While dialect represents a local, rural tradition, slang, on the other hand, is associated more with the language of youth, new language, something that goes against tradition. Transposing this concept to this study, it makes sense that many young Italian respondents consider AAVE to be a slang rather than a dialect, having only heard of it and never having explored the richness of this variety, never having understood the actual centenary tradition that this ethnic dialect has (see Figure 19).

Valuta quanto adeguato può essere parlare AAVE in questi contesti: a) conversazione tra amici b) conversazione con un estraneo c) nel tuo luogo d'istruzione d) sul posto di lavoro
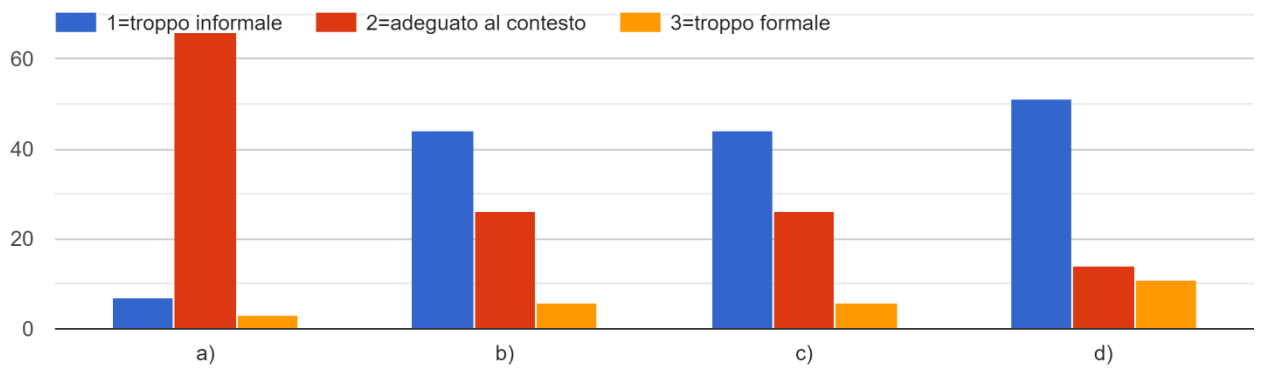

Figure 18: Formality

Come definiresti l'AAVE?
75 risposte
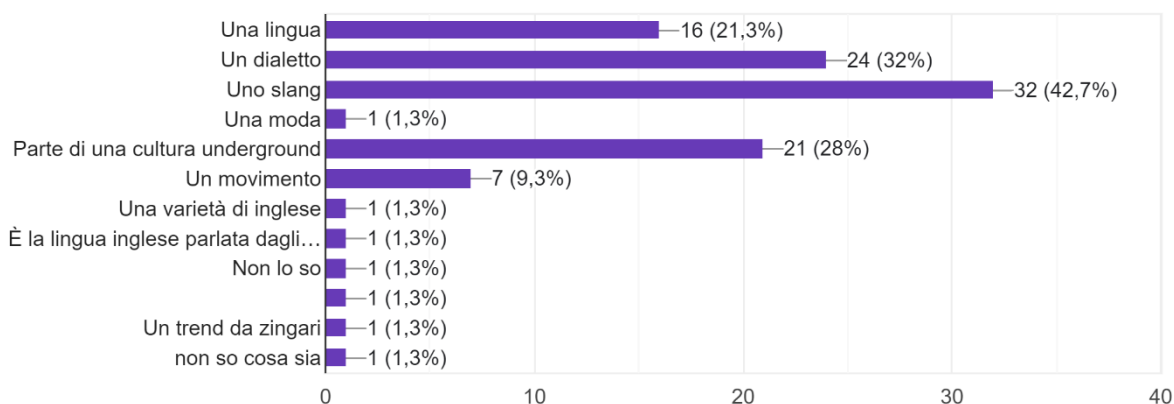
Figure 19: How would you define AAVE?

An important variable is the direct perception of AAVE through experience. Participants were asked to list the various purposes, or communicative functions of AAVE in the media. 48.6% stated that AAVE is mainly used to make communication more straightforward, in line with their perception of the language as a slang. 47.1% have seen it used to play on a stereotype, 34.3% to make the speaker appear more rude or aggressive, 18.6% to have a comedic effect and 15.7% to imitate some public persona (see Figure 20).

The role of entertainment seems to be relevant again. The fact that comedy, imitation, stereotypes, and a negative communicative purpose are among the most common answers suggests that AAVE is not taken seriously as a language. This variety serves as a mocking of a stereotype. The image of the black "gangsta" is funny in the minds of participants, and the character of the aggressive, inappropriate, ridiculous black individual is an overused trope in mainstream media. On Writers Anon[1], a popular blog about writing, there is a list of popular black character stereotypes: black individuals in media are

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[1] ChellaWrites 2006, 9 Black Character Stereotypes to Avoid in Your Writing https://writersanontaunton.wordpress.com/2016/04/13/9-black-character-stereotypes-to-avoid-in-your-writing/ (accessed 26/09/2023)

typically depicted as either subservient, angry, or comical. There seems to be a correlation between entertainment and the perception of AAVE among young Italians.

Per quali motivi reputi sia usato l'AAVE nel media
70 risposte

Per ottenere un effetto comico	13 (18,6%)
Per far sembrare il parlante più…	2 (2,9%)
Per far sembrare il parlante più…	24 (34,3%)
Per imitare un certo personaggi…	11 (15,7%)
Per scopi educativi	4 (5,7%)
Per giocare su uno stereotipo	33 (47,1%)
Per rendere la comunicazione…	34 (48,6%)
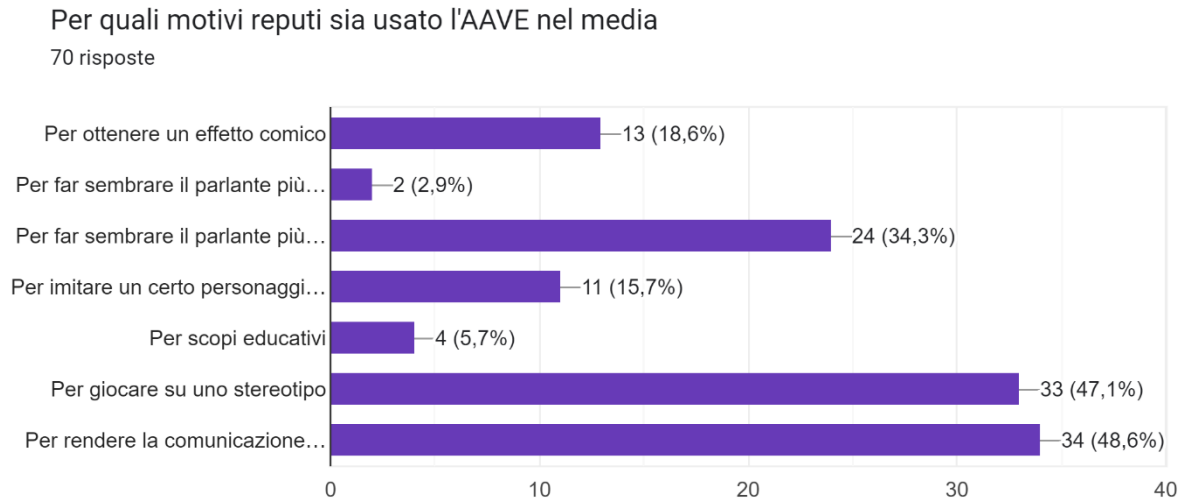
Figure 20: Communicative purpose

The factor of race is prevalent in the minds of respondents, when talking about AAVE. It almost seems that AAVE is a kind of marker of blackness for respondents. They associate immediately with the black community, they are aware of the stereotype and the depreciative connotations linked to AAVE, and most of them agree on the fact that it is not a language like others. Many of them (27.3%) are also aware of the stigmatization of AAVE (see Figure 21).

Indica quanto sei d'accordo con queste affermazioni, su una scala da 1 a 5 dove 1 = per niente d'accordo e 5 = totalmente d'accordo: a) penso ch... in scuole con una grande comunità afroamericana

Figure 21: Opinions

When it comes to the appropriation of black language, 46.2% of respondents believe that AAVE is not exclusive to the African American community. They are more neutral and less "politically correct" than their American counterparts, who, as explained, are more prone to taking issues of appropriation at heart. This does not mean that all young people in Italy do not care about cultural appropriation. Indeed, 78% of respondents st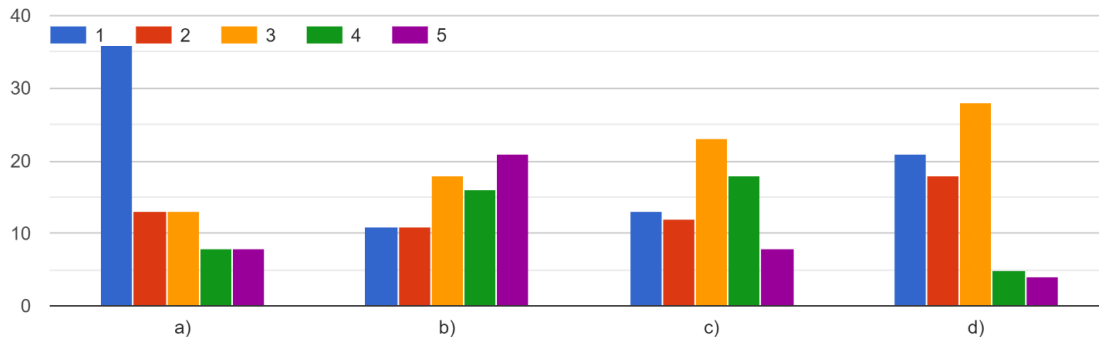ated that they knew about the subject (see Figure 22), one participant also stated, in an open and voluntary answer, that "For respect, I don't like it when people who are not part of the African American community try to imitate their way of speaking". However, cultural appropriation is a controversial topic in Italy, especially on social media, where many times the conversation becomes polarized. Many young Italians believe that cultural appropriation is simply the act of sharing another culture, so issues of cultural sensibility are usually dismissed as an exaggeration of political correctness. In the US, cultural appropriation has a specific nuance of power. When a culture gets appropriated, it means that the mainstream, dominant culture uses the more subservient one without giving it the respect it deserves. In Italy, a melting pot of different regional traditions, cultural appropriation is not an issue for the public.

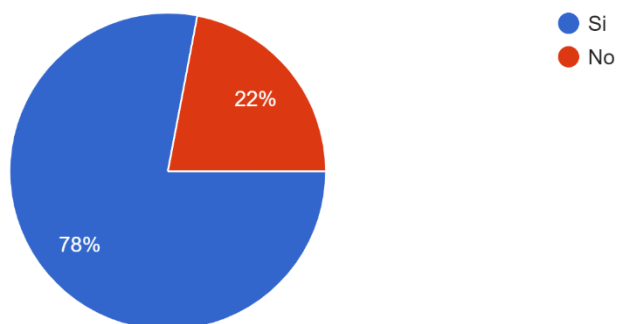Hai mai sentito parlare di appropriazione culturale?

100 risposte

Figure 22: Cultural appropriation

Discussion and conclusions

This undergraduate dissertation has explored African American Vernacular English (AAVE) with a focus on its significance, studies of the phenomenon, historical origins, linguistic characteristics, and perception. The study highlighted the importance of researching AAVE due to its rich linguistic and cultural heritage, its role in understanding language variation, and its potential to challenge language bias and prejudice.

The first chapter provides a comprehensive overview of African American Vernacular English, emphasizing its distinct linguistic characteristics, historical roots, and sociocultural significance. It highlights how AAVE's development is intrinsically linked to the complex history of African Americans in the United States.

In the first chapter, AAVE is described as a unique variety of English, with its own phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and lexical features. It is primarily spoken by working-class black Americans and it has evolved over time. Its historical origins can be traced back to the transatlantic slave trade, where African linguistic influences, Creole and pidgin languages, and dialect contact with Southern English played significant roles in its development, although its origins have been up for debate since the 1950s. No consensus was reached among scholars. The challenge lies in finding reliable diachronic sources to shed light on its early development. This is why research on AAVE is important. Finding out the origins of this rich and significant language can tell a lot about how African Americans adapted to slavery and oppression, bringing closure to a community which, to this day, faces challenges and discrimination.

AAVE is not only retaining its distinctive linguistic features but also intensifying their use and even creating new ones: key phonological and prosodic features that distinguish African American Vernacular English from Standard American English: the vowel and consonant system and pronunciation, stress patterns and intonation, inflectional and derivational processes, negatives and word order, and tense and aspect and, finally, vocabulary.

The second chapter of this dissertation has provided an overview of a cross-sectional survey-based study conducted to analyze the perception of African American Vernacular English among young Italians.

The study found that AAVE is relatively obscure among the participants, with a large majority of respondents indicating that they had not heard of it. Among those who were aware, 42% mentioned social media platforms as the means through which they encountered AAVE. Cancel culture and online criticism have brought their attention to AAVE, especially regarding its use by non-black individuals. The popularity of certain TV shows and artists has also contributed to the exposure and acquisition of AAVE. AAVE is closely linked to hip-hop, and its influence and role in shaping the black identity was noted, with 12.3% of respondents associating AAVE with hip-hop.

Despite AAVE's deep roots in the LGBTQIA+ community, only 1.2% of respondents associated AAVE with this community, indicating a lack of awareness regarding its cultural significance. However, a significant majority of respondents associate AAVE with the African American community, indicating recognition of the ethnic significance of the language specifically. Most respondents believe that speakers of AAVE are African American individuals, while only a minority consider AAVE speakers to be US citizens of color, highlighting once again a connection between AAVE and racial identity.

Respondents demonstrate awareness of popular AAVE terminology, but despite that, a significant percentage of participants were not aware that the list of words provided in the survey was exclusively comprised of AAVE vocabular. This suggests that while they are familiar with these terms, they may not fully understand their origin or cultural significance. The study also revealed a limited exposure to AAVE, both on social media and in films and music, despite consuming content from black artists and TV shows. This lack of awareness indicates that they may encounter AAVE without recognizing it as such.

Participants were asked to define what AAVE represents to them. The results show that many considered AAVE as a form of slang, and fewer viewed it as a dialect or regarded it as a part of underground culture. These perceptions reveal that a substantial portion of respondents see AAVE as informal, which aligns with its treatment in the US. They were also asked about the communicative functions of AAVE in the media, and the results revealed the multifaceted ways in which AAVE is portrayed and utilized in media, often with varying intentions and effects.

A closer look into the opinions expressed by respondents show that the stigmatization of AAVE is recognized also by the Italian youth. A significant portion of respondents

believed that AAVE is not exclusive to the African American community, however a substantial majority indicated awareness of the subject of cultural appropriation, with some expressing concerns about non-African American individuals imitating AAVE speech.

Overall, these findings provide insight into how Italian young people perceive AAVE, its informality, its portrayal in media, the nuanced aspect of cultural appropriation, the gap of understanding of AAVE's cultural context and significance and the role of media and entertainment in shaping the awareness and exposure of young Italians to AAVE. This dissertation has therefore contributed to the ongoing dialogue on AAVE by emphasizing its importance, historical context, linguistic features, and perception. Further research on this area can continue to explore the intersections of language, culture, and identity while working towards a more inclusive linguistic landscape.

To conclude, this section will discuss some limitations of the study. To start with, the sample was obtained primarily through university WhatsApp groups, acquaintances, and friends. This convenience sampling method may introduce bias since participants may share common characteristics of interest that do not represent the broader population accurately. Also, the study relies on self-reported data, which may be subject to response bias. Participants may provide socially desirable or inaccurate responses, affecting the validity of the findings. The sample consists of young Italians aged 18 to 35, which limits the generalizability of the results to this specific demographic. Findings may not be applicable to older age groups or individuals from different cultural backgrounds. The data collection for this questionnaire took place over a relatively short period of time, which might not capture potential changes of perception of AAVE over time.

The questionnaire does not explore in-depth qualitative insights or cultural factors that may influence these perceptions, limiting the depth of understanding. The questionnaire also does not assess the full extent of participants' exposure to AAVE or their experiences with it, which could provide more valuable context for their perceptions.

Appendix

Questionario riguardante l'African American Vernacular English (Questionnaire on African American Vernacular English)

Versione italiana: Introduzione

Il questionario riportato andrà a indagare la percezione che i giovani adulti in Italia hanno dell'African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Non esistono risposte giuste o sbagliate, rispondi sinceramente secondo la tua personale opinione. I risultati di questa ricerca saranno utilizzati per la scrittura di una tesi triennale.

Il tempo richiesto per la compilazione è di 5-10 minuti.

Ti auguro una buona lettura e grazie per il tuo tempo

Domanda 1: Quanti anni hai?

- 18-25
- 25-30
- 30-35

Domanda 2: Qual è la tua nazionalità?

Domanda 3: Qual è il tuo genere?

- Uomo
- Donna
- Non binary
- Preferisco non specificarlo
- Altro…

Domanda 4: Qual è il tuo orientamento sessuale?

- Eterosessuale
- Omosessuale
- Bisessuale
- Preferisco non specificarlo
- Altro…

Domanda 5: Qual è il tuo livello di istruzione?

- Diploma delle medie
- Diploma delle superiori

- Laurea triennale
- Laurea magistrale
- Dottorato di ricerca

Domanda 6: Qual è la tua lingua madre?

Domanda 7 : Conosci altre lingue oltre alla tua lingua madre?

- Si
- No

Domanda 8: Se sì, quali?

Domanda 9: Su una scala da 1 a 5, dove 1 = principiante e 5 = esperto, come descriveresti il tuo livello di inglese in queste categorie?

Listening	1	2	3	4	5
Writing	1	2	3	4	5
Speaking	1	2	3	4	5
Reading	1	2	3	4	5

Domanda 10: Quanto sono stati utili nell'apprendimento dell'inglese, su una scala da 1 a 5 dove 1 = per niente utile e 5 = molto utile:

Formazione scolastica (sia obbligatoria che facoltativa)	1	2	3	4	5
Visione di film/programmi televisivi in lingua originale	1	2	3	4	5
Ascolto di brani di artisti musicali stranieri	1	2	3	4	5
Viaggiare	1	2	3	4	5
Il contest familiare e sociale in cui sei cresciut*	1	2	3	4	5
Corsi online frequentati	1	2	3	4	5
Spazi online anglofoni	1	2	3	4	5

Domanda 11: Hai mai sentito parlare di African American Vernacular English (AAVE)?

- Si
- No

Domanda 12: Se sì, come ne sei venuto a conoscenza?

- Tramite amici e/o famiglia
- Tramite persone che parlano la lingua
- Film o programmi televisivi
- Social media

- Musica
- Altro…

Domanda 13: Come definiresti l'AAVE?

- Una lingua
- Un dialetto
- Uno slang
- Una moda
- Parte di una cultura underground
- Un movimento
- Altro…

Domanda 14: Chi credi che siano i parlanti di AAVE?

- Persone di colore di qualsiasi luogo
- Afroamericani
- Cittadini statunitensi di colore
- Cittadini statunitensi provenienti dal Sud degli USA

Domanda 15: A cosa associ il fenomeno AAVE?

- Alla comunità LGBTQ+
- Alla comunità afroamericana
- Alla cultura giovanile
- Alla underground culture (es. il fenomeno dei "maranza")
- A generi musicali come hip-hop, rap e trap
- A movimenti sociali liberali
- A programmi televisivi statunitensi

Domanda 16: Quanto frequentemente hai sentito parlare AAVE in questi ambienti, su una scala da 1 a 5 dove 1 = mai e 5 = sempre

Internet e social media	1	2	3	4	5
Film/programmi televisivi	1	2	3	4	5
Musica	1	2	3	4	5

Domanda 17: Valuta quanto adeguato può essere parlare AAVE in questi contesti

Conversazione tra amici 1 = troppo informale 2 = adeguato al contesto 3 = troppo formale

Conversazione con un estraneo 1 = troppo informale 2 = adeguato al contesto 3 = troppo formale

Nel tuo luogo d'istruzione 1 = troppo informale 2 = adeguato al contesto 3 = troppo formale

Sul posto di lavoro 1 = troppo informale 2 = adeguato al contesto 3 = troppo formale

Domanda 18: Per quali motivi reputi sia usato l'AAVE nei media

- Per ottenere un effetto comico
- Per far sembrare il parlante più intelligente o maturo
- Per far sembrare il parlante più grezzo, duro o aggressivo
- Per imitare un certo personaggio pubblico
- Per scopi educativi
- Per giocare su uno stereotipo
- Per rendere la comunicazione più diretta

Domanda 19: Hai mai sentito parlare di appropriazione culturale?

- Si
- No

Domanda 20: Indica quanto sei d'accordo con queste affermazioni, su una scala da 1 a 5 dove 1 = per niente d'accordo e 5 = totalmente d'accordo

Penso che l'AAVE debba essere usato solo dalla comunità afroamericana

    1   2   3   4   5

Penso che l'AAVE sia oggetto di stigmatizzazioni e discriminazioni

    1   2   3   4   5

Penso che sia accettabile che l'AAVE venga usato da persone non afroamericane, se appartenenti a una sottocultura

    1   2   3   4   5

Penso che l'AAVE debba essere insegnato in scuole con una grande comunità afroamericana

    1   2   3   4   5

Domanda 21: Quale/i di questi programmi televisivi hai guardato?

- RuPaul's Drag Race
- Il Principe di Bel-Air
- Pose

- Atlanta

Domanda 22: Quale/i di questi artisti musicali hai ascoltato?

- Jay-Z
- Tupac
- Notorious B.I.G.
- Kendrick Lamar
- Beyoncé
- Drake
- Cardi B
- Rihanna

Domanda 23: Hai mai sentito usare una o più di queste parole? Seleziona quelle che hai già sentito.

- Basic
- Bro/bruh
- Chill
- Cool
- Homies/squad
- Lit
- Side-eye
- Slay
- Spilling tea/spill the tea
- Swag

Domanda 24: Eri a conoscenza del fatto che tutte queste parole fanno parte del vocabolario AAVE?

- Si
- No

Domanda 25: Hai mai usato una di queste parole?

- Si
- No

Domanda 26: Sei interessat* a scoprire di più sull'AAVE?

- Si
- No

Domanda 27: Hai qualche commento o osservazione da fare riguardo alla varietà AAVE e al suo utilizzo?

English version : Introduction

The questionnaire provided will investigate the perception that young adults in Italy have of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). There are no right or wrong answers; please respond honestly based on your personal opinion. The results of this research will be used for the writing of a Bachelor's thesis.

The estimated time required for completion is 5-10 minutes.

I wish you a good reading, and thank you for your time

Question 1: How old are you?

- 18-25
- 25-30
- 30-35

Question 2: What is your nationality?

Question 3: What is your gender?

- Man
- Woman
- Non binary
- I prefer not to specify
- Other…

Question 4: What is your sexual orientation?

- Heterosexual
- Homosexual
- Bisexual
- I prefer not to specify
- Other…

Question 5: What is your level of education?

- Middle school diploma
- High school diploma
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- PhD

Question 6: What is your native tongue?

Question 7 : Do you know any other languages other than your native tongue?

- Yes
- No

Question 8: If so, which ones?

Question 9: On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = beginner and 5 = expert, how would you describe your level of English in these categories?

Listening   1   2   3   4   5

Writing   1   2   3   4   5

Speaking   1   2   3   4   5

Reading   1   2   3   4   5

Question 10: In your English learning experience, on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 = not useful at all and 5 = very useful, how useful were these tools for you?

	1	2	3	4	5
Education (compulsory and voluntary)	1	2	3	4	5
Watchinf films/tv shows in English	1	2	3	4	5
Listening to foreign musical artists	1	2	3	4	5
Traveling	1	2	3	4	5
The familiar and social context in which you grew up	1	2	3	4	5
Online courses	1	2	3	4	5
English-speaking online spaces	1	2	3	4	5

Question 11: Have you ever come across African American Vernacular English (AAVE)?

- Yes
- No

Question 12: If so, how did you come across AAVE?

- Through friends and family
- Through speakers of the language
- Films or tv shows
- Social media
- Music
- Other…

Question 13: How would you define AAVE?

- A language
- A dialect
- A slang
- A trend
- A part of an underground culture
- A movement
- Other…

Question 14: Who do you think are the speakers of AAVE?

- People of color from every place
- African Americans
- US citizens of color
- Us citizens from the South of the US

Question 15: What do you associate with AAVE?

- LGBTQ+ community
- African American community
- Youth culture
- underground culture (es "maranza")
- Musical genres such as hip-hop, rap and trap
- Liberal social movements
- US tv shows

Question 16: How often have your heard someone speaking AAVE in these environments, on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 = never and 5 = always

Internet and social media	1	2	3	4	5
Film/tv shows	1	2	3	4	5
Music	1	2	3	4	5

Question 17: Rank how appropriate it would be to speak AAVE in these environments

Talking with a friend 1 = too informal 2 = adequate 3 = too formal

Talking with a stranger 1 = too informal 2 = adequate 3 = too formal In your

educational institution 1 = too informal 2 = adequate 3 = too formal

At work 1 = too informal 2 = adequate 3 = too formal

Question 18: Why do you think AAVE is used in media?

- To elicit a comic response
- To make the speaker seem more smart or mature
- To make the speaker seem more rude, hard or aggressive
- To imitate a certain public figure
- For an educational purpose
- To play on a stereotype
- To make communication more direct

Question 19: Have you ever heard about cultural appropriation?

- Yes
- No

Question 20: Rank how much you agree with these statements, on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 = completely do not agree and 5 = completely agree

I think AAVE should be used only by the African American community

    1   2   3   4   5

I think AAVE is subject to stigma and discrimination

    1   2   3   4   5

I think it is acceptable that AAVE is used by non-African American people, if they belong to a subculture

    1   2   3   4   5

I think AAVE shoul be taught in schools with a big African American community

    1   2   3   4   5

Question 21: Which of these tv shows have you watched?

- RuPaul's Drag Race
- The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air
- Pose
- Atlanta

Question 22: Which of these musical artists have you listened to?

- Jay-Z
- Tupac
- Notorious B.I.G.
- Kendrick Lamar
- Beyoncé

- Drake
- Cardi B
- Rihanna

Question 23: Have you ever heard one or more of these words being used? List the ones you already heard.

- Basic
- Bro/bruh
- Chill
- Cool
- Homies/squad
- Lit
- Side-eye
- Slay
- Spilling tea/spill the tea
- Swag

Question 24: Did you know that every single one of these words are part of AAVE vocabulary?

- Yes
- No

Question 25: Have you ever used one of these words?

- Yes
- No

Question 26: Are you interested in learning more about AAVE?

- Yes
- No

Question 27: Do you have any comment or observation about AAVE and its use?

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Riassunto in italiano

Questa tesi di laurea offre un'approfondita esplorazione dell'Inglese Vernacolare Afroamericano (AAVE) attraverso un'analisi dettagliata delle sue origini storiche, delle caratteristiche linguistiche, della rilevanza culturale e delle percezioni detenute dai giovani italiani. Lo studio sottolinea la rilevanza della ricerca sull'AAVE a causa della sua profonda eredità linguistica e culturale, della sua capacità di migliorare la nostra comprensione della variazione linguistica e del suo potenziale nel sfidare pregiudizi e stereotipi linguistici. In questo sommario esteso, approfondiamo le tematiche chiave di ciascun capitolo e le relative scoperte.

Il primo capitolo ci immerge nella trama storica dell'AAVE, enfatizzando le sue uniche caratteristiche linguistiche e la sua connessione intrinseca alla complessa storia degli afroamericani negli Stati Uniti. L'AAVE viene presentato come una variante distintiva dell'inglese caratterizzata dalle sue peculiarità fonologiche, morfologiche, sintattiche, semantiche e lessicali. Il capitolo illustra come l'evoluzione dell'AAVE sia profondamente intrecciata con il complesso percorso degli afroamericani, con la sua genesi storica che risale al commercio transatlantico degli schiavi.

Questo capitolo affronta anche la profonda correlazione tra l'AAVE e le ideologie razziali in America. La nomenclatura in continua evoluzione associata all'AAVE riflette cambiamenti nell'identificazione e riconoscimento degli afroamericani nel corso della storia. La narrazione storica si estende dall'arrivo degli afroamericani come individui schiavi nel XVI secolo attraverso il loro contributo in momenti cruciali come la Rivoluzione Americana, la Guerra Civile e il Movimento per i Diritti Civili del XX secolo. Nonostante si riconoscano progressi significativi, il capitolo sottolinea persistente disparità e il ruolo duraturo dell'AAVE come indicatore dell'identità nera.

Inoltre, questo capitolo fornisce una dettagliata panoramica delle diverse teorie riguardanti le origini dell'AAVE. Queste teorie, tra cui l'ipotesi creolista, l'ipotesi anglicista, l'ipotesi neo-anglicista e l'ipotesi del substrato, gettano luce sulla complessa natura del contatto e dell'evoluzione linguistica nel tempo, rivelando l'assenza di un consenso tra gli studiosi.

Il capitolo 2 si immerge nell'esplorazione delle peculiari caratteristiche linguistiche dell'AAVE in confronto all'inglese americano standard. Queste caratteristiche includono fenomeni fonologici come la monottongazione dei dittonghi, la fusione di suoni simili, l'alveolarizzazione di alcune terminazioni verbali, la riduzione delle consonanti, la vocalizzazione delle /l/ e /r/, l'assenza dell'articolo determinativo, intonazione e schemi di accento unici, processi di inflessione e derivazione specifici, forme non standard, diversi ordini delle parole, strutture grammaticali peculiari, variazioni di tempo e aspetto, e un vocabolario caratterizzato dalla creazione di nuove parole attraverso processi come la composizione, la trasposizione, la contrazione, la fusione, l'adattamento e l'invenzione.

Il secondo capitolo offre un'analisi approfondita di uno studio trasversale condotto per esaminare le percezioni dell'AAVE tra i giovani italiani. Questa ricerca utilizza un questionario attentamente progettato che valuta la consapevolezza, l'esperienza, l'esposizione e le percezioni dell'AAVE. Tuttavia, lo studio riconosce alcune limitazioni, tra cui l'uso di un campionamento per convenienza, il ricorso a dati auto-dichiarati, una gamma demografica limitata e l'assenza di approfondimenti qualitativi.

La discussione e le conclusioni rivelano che l'AAVE rimane relativamente oscuro tra i partecipanti, con una significativa proporzione che indica di non averlo mai incontrato precedentemente. Coloro che erano consapevoli dell'AAVE spesso menzionavano piattaforme di social media e programmi TV o artisti popolari come fonti di esposizione. Mentre alcuni associavano l'AAVE alla cultura hip-hop, una minoranza riconosceva i suoi legami con la comunità LGBTQIA+. La maggior parte dei partecipanti associava l'AAVE alla comunità afroamericana, con la maggioranza che riteneva che i suoi principali parlanti fossero individui afroamericani.

Il questionario ha anche rivelato che i partecipanti erano familiari con la terminologia popolare dell'AAVE ma potrebbero non comprenderne completamente l'origine o la rilevanza culturale. Nonostante la familiarità con questi termini, una considerevole parte dei partecipanti non era consapevole che l'elenco fornito comprendesse esclusivamente il vocabolario dell'AAVE, indicando una mancanza di comprensione del suo contesto culturale e della sua rilevanza.

Lo studio ha anche rivelato una limitata esposizione all'AAVE attraverso i social media, i film e la musica, anche tra coloro che consumano contenuti di artisti neri e programmi

TV. Queste conclusioni suggeriscono che i partecipanti potrebbero incontrare l'AAVE senza riconoscerla come tale.

In conclusione, questa tesi sottolinea l'importanza della ricerca sull'AAVE, enfatizzando il suo contesto storico, le sue caratteristiche linguistiche e le percezioni detenute dai giovani italiani. Lo studio evidenzia una notevole mancanza di consapevolezza e comprensione dell'AAVE tra questo gruppo demografico, nonostante la sua diffusione nella cultura popolare. Queste conclusioni sottolineano la necessità di aumentare l'interazione e la consapevolezza interculturale, nonché il ruolo cruciale dei media e dell'intrattenimento nel plasmare le percezioni dell'AAVE.

Questa tesi, attraverso la sua esplorazione completa dell'AAVE, contribuisce al dibattito in corso sulla lingua, la cultura e l'identità. Essa serve come fondamento per ulteriori ricerche in questo campo, consentendo una comprensione più approfondita dell'interazione intricata tra lingua e società e sostenendo un panorama linguistico più inclusivo. In definitiva, questa tesi fornisce un'esaminazione ricca e sfaccettata dell'AAVE, gettando luce sulla sua significatività storica, la sua ricchezza linguistica e il suo potenziale per promuovere la comprensione e l'apprezzamento culturali tra comunità e lingue diverse.