

جامعة نيويورك أبوظبي



PSYCH-UH 2218: Language Science

Class 23: Language prejudice and discrimination

Prof. Jon Sprouse  
Psychology

# What is a Language?

Recall from our last lecture that we've settled on a **scientific definition** of what it means to be a human language (this might not be an exhaustive definition, but it is a good working definition for this course).

A human language will have the following properties:

1. It will have its own **phonology**.
2. It will have its own **morphology**.
3. It will have its own **syntax**.
4. It will be acquired using known **mechanisms of language learning**.

# Prejudice and Discrimination

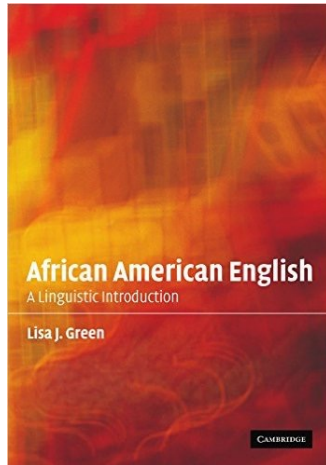
**Prejudice** is the act of pre-judging, coming to a conclusion about someone (or something) without real evidence.

**Language prejudice** is the act of pre-judging someone based on the language that they speak (accent, vocabulary, or grammar).

**Discrimination** is the act of treating someone (or something) differently based on their membership in a certain group or category, rather than their individual properties.

**Language discrimination** is an act of discrimination based on the language that somebody speaks (accent, vocabulary, grammar).

# Examples for today



## **Racism/prejudice/discrimination: African American English (AAE) / Black English (BE)**

Speakers of this language face language prejudice, and in some cases, language discrimination. Some people believe AAE is a form of broken, corrupted, or “lazy” English. Today we will use the analytic tools of linguistics to debunk those beliefs, and demonstrate that there is no scientific basis for the prejudice. **AAE is a full human language, just like any other.**



## **One-language movements: English-only**

There are many groups, and a large number of people, who believe that the US government should only operate in English. Today we will use what we know about language acquisition to demonstrate that this is language prejudice — the inability to learn English natively is a combination of an accidental fact (location of birth) and a biological limitation (the critical period).

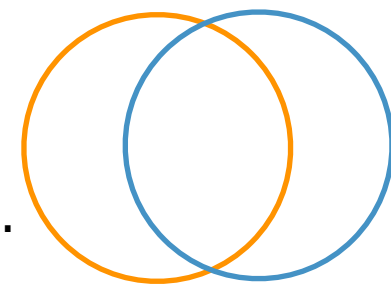
African American English (AAE) /  
Black English (BE)

# Who speaks AAE/BE?

Let's deal with this issue right away. Sometimes when people hear the name AAE/BE, they think that all individual who identify as African American or Black will speak it. Or they think that all speakers of AAE/BE will identify as African American or Black. This is false.

Not all **speakers of AAE/BE** identify as **African American or Black**.

Not all who identify as **African American or Black** will speak **AAE/BE**.



Think about other languages for a moment. Many languages are named after countries: English, Spanish, Japanese, etc.

Are all speakers of English from England? **No**.

Are all people from England speakers of English? **No**.

That said, there is a strong correlation: many speakers of AAE/BE identify as African American or Black. The bottom line is that **a child will speak AAE/BE if they grow up hearing AAE/BE spoken around them, just like any other language, regardless of their race.**

# The name of the language

Today, linguists tend to use the name **African American English** or **AAE**, with a growing number starting to use **Black English** or **BE**.

There have been other names in the past:

## **Ebonics:**

This was the first name. It was intended to convey the fact that this is a distinct language. But it was used during a political controversy in 1990s, so it started to carry political baggage.

## **Black Vernacular English:**

This was the successor to Ebonics. When the word Black fell out of use as a race term, this name fell out of use for the language.

## **African American Vernacular English:**

This was the successor to BVE when African American began to replace Black as a race term.

## **African American English:**

The word "vernacular" was dropped to make it clear that there is nothing inferior about this language compared to other languages.

## **Black English:**

The word Black is increasingly used by many speakers as a race term now, so linguists have begun to use it again as the language name.

# There is power in a name

It is important to pay attention to the names that we use for languages. They can carry prejudice without us realizing it consciously.

One common name for the English that is used in business, media, etc, is **Standard American English**.

Now compare the name **Standard American English** to the name **African American Vernacular English**. Which one sounds more important, or even more “appropriate” for business, media, etc? “Standard” sends a very different message than “vernacular”.

There is already a **power asymmetry** between the two languages, and the names themselves reinforce that asymmetry.

In order to reinforce the idea that every language is equal to every other, we try to create names that do not encode prejudices:

**General American English:** The language that has been created by business and the media as a uniform language for the US.

**African American English/  
Black English:** The language we are studying in class today.



# AAE/BE is a full human language

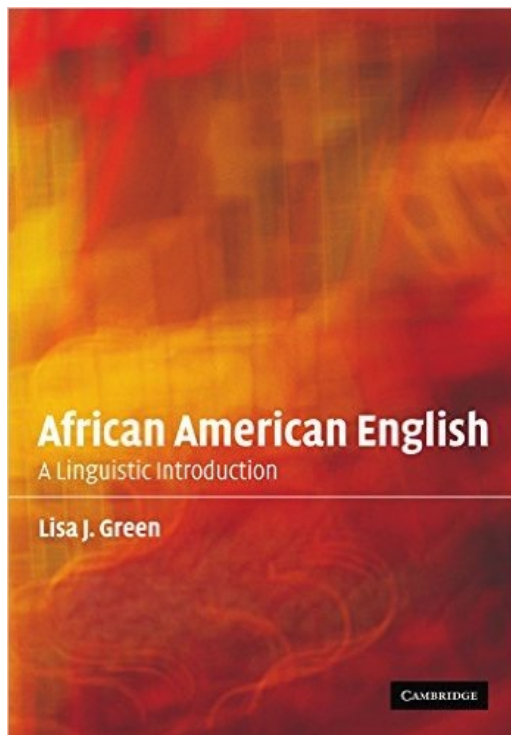
Over the next few slides, we will use the tools we've learned in this class to analyze the phonology, morphology, and syntax of AAE.

Remember that we have said that human languages will have the following properties:

1. It will have its own **phonology**.
2. It will have its own **morphology**.
3. It will have its own **syntax**.
4. It will be acquired using known **mechanisms of language learning**.

By this definition, **AAE is a full human language, just like any other.**

# AAE/BE is a full human language



**Prof. Lisa Green** at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst

The scientific examples and analyses that we will see today are taken primarily from the work of Prof. Green, collected in this book. Please check it out for more examples and analyses!

# AAE/BE Phonemes

AAE/BE doesn't have "th" sounds (in IPA:  $\theta$ ,  $\delta$ ). In fact, 93% of the world's languages don't have these sounds (e.g. German).

Because AAE/BE doesn't have these sounds, it must use different sounds in words that would have those sounds in GAE. Typically they are replaced with t, d, f, or v:

## GAE phonemes

birthday

with

bath

## AAE/BE phonemes

birfday

wit

baf

This is not a "corruption" of GAE. It is a **completely regular difference** in phoneme inventory.

We would never criticize the German language for not having "th" in it. **Why do some people criticize AAE/BE for not having the "th" phoneme?**

# AAE/BE Phonology - Syllables

Another property speakers of GAE might notice is that some AAE/BE words appear to have fewer sounds at the end of the word or syllable:

## GAE syllables

list

hand

## AAE/BE syllables

lis

han

This is because different languages have different rules about what is a possible syllable:

<b>GAE:</b>	to	beer	post	<b>Can have CV, CVC, CVCC.</b>
<b>AAE/BE:</b>	to	beer	pos	<b>Can have CV and CVC.</b>
<b>Japanese:</b>	to	biru	posuto	<b>Can only have CV.</b>

We would never criticize Japanese for only using CV syllables. **Why do some people criticize AAE/BE for only using CVC and CV syllables?**

# AAE/BE Morphology - Aspect

Recall that **aspect** is the property of verbs that tells us how events extend through time:

I **was** eating when the doorbell rang.

The "eating" event was **ongoing**.

I **had** eaten when the doorbell rang,

The "eating" event was **completed**.

One interesting form of aspect is called **habitual aspect**. It indicates that an event happens regularly:

Lisa **used to** work at the factory.

This is a past tense form. It says that Lisa **regularly worked in the past**.

GAE does not have a habitual aspect marker in the present tense. Present tense sentences are ambiguous: they could be habitual or not habitual.

Lisa **is** working.  
(Just for today, as a temp.)

Lisa is currently at work, but it may not be her regular job.

Lisa **is** working.  
(She is at her regular job.)

Lisa is at her regular job.

# AAE/BE Morphology - Aspect

AAE/BE has a **more complex aspect system** than GAE. AAE/BE has a present tense form for habitual aspect that disambiguates habitual and non-habitual actions:

Lisa working.  
(Just for today, as a temp.)

Lisa is currently at work, but it may not be her regular job.

Lisa **be** working.  
(She is at her regular job.)

Lisa is at her regular job.

In a very real sense, AAE/BE has **more expressive power than GAE** in terms of aspect. So why is it that some people criticize AAE for the use of habitual "be"?

The answer, of course, is **language prejudice**. It is exacerbated by the "logic" that people can use to rationalize their prejudice. The non-habitual form in AAE/BE looks like it is "missing" a word from the perspective of GAE (there is no "is"). And the habitual form in AAE/BE looks like an "incorrect" form of the word "is" in GAE - "be" looks unconjugated. But both of these are false linguistically. The two forms are **rule-governed parts of the AAE/BE grammar!** It is simply that **be** is the habitual aspect marker.

# AAE/BE Syntax - the copula "is"

The **copula** is the name given to the word **be/am/is/are** when it is used to "link" a property to the subject of a sentence:

She **is** my sister.

She **is** wise.

She **is** at the office.

Notice that the copula is very different in function from the aspect markers we saw on the previous slide. Though the word looks the same (be/is/are), the function is very different (we call aspect markers "auxiliary verbs" to distinguish this).

In GAE, the word "is" can be contracted to save a little effort in speech:

She **is** my sister.



She'**s** my sister.

She **is** wise.



She'**s** wise.

She **is** at the office.



She'**s** at the office.

GAE has a rule that allows speakers to contract "is".

# Contraction is rule governed

Contraction can't just happen anywhere in GAE. It is rule-governed. Here is a funny post from the internet demonstrating this rule. (I am re-typing it to make it fit on the slide):

**OP:** Contractions function almost identically to the full two-word phrase, but are only appropriate in some places in a sentence. It's one of the weird quirks of the language we've.

**reply:** This post needs some kind of warning sign.

**reply:** I did not see that coming

**reply:** Some people say the English language is confusing. To which I say... It's.

**reply:** That's the kind of linguist I'm.

The rule in GAE is that you can't have contraction before "gaps" - places we've deleted something:  
(It is probably about stress!)

Mary isn't my sister, but Sarah **is** ~~my~~ sister.

\*Mary isn't my sister, but Sarah's **s** ~~my~~ sister.



# AAE/BE Syntax - the copula "is"

AAE/BE takes contraction one step further. Instead of contracting "is" to the previous word, it simply deletes "is" completely:

She **is** my sister.

She my sister.

We say that **the copula** is optional in AAE syntax.

Just like in GAE, this is possible because "is" is completely predictable here. There is no chance that hearers will mistake this sentence for something else.

Furthermore, AAE/BE deletion is rule governed by the same rule as contraction in GAE. You can't delete **is** when it appears before a "gap".

Mary ain't my sister, but Sarah **is**.

\*Mary ain't my sister, but Sarah.

Nobody criticizes GAE for contraction. And nobody criticizes other languages, like Mandarin, for having a similar copula deletion rule. So why do some people criticize AAE/BE for omitting "is" from sentences? They serve the same function (saving articulatory effort), and are governed by the same syntactic rule!

# Why is it important to understand that AAE/BE is a full human language?

GAE and AAE/BE appear very similar to each other. This leads speakers of GAE to assume that AAE/BE is intended to be identical, such that deviations are “mistakes”. This has consequences for all sorts of aspects of society:

Speakers of AAE/BE are discriminated against in job interviews.

Speakers of AAE/BE are discriminated against in the housing market.

Children who speak AAE/BE are discriminated against in school.

Imagine that you spoke a different language from all of your classmates in school.

All of the lessons were in a language that you didn't speak. All of the assignments and tests were in a language that you didn't speak.

Furthermore, your teacher didn't recognize your language as different. Instead, they thought you were just bad at school.

**How well do you think you would do? Do you think you would enjoy going to school?**



# Being aware of AAE/BE in the classroom

When we are aware that AAE/BE is a full human language, we can work toward ending this sort of discrimination.

In some classrooms, teachers are aware of the differences between AAE/BE and GAE, and they work to teach these differences to children:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h31qVYi7OHE&ab\\_channel=lingteacher](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h31qVYi7OHE&ab_channel=lingteacher)

This helps the children understand the GAE educational materials that are used in school, and it helps them use GAE (if they need to) in order to avoid language discrimination (e.g., job interviews).

Obviously it would be much better for us all to eliminate language prejudice/discrimination and create a world where AAE/BE speakers can speak their native language in school and work. We could also create educational materials in AAE/BE, just like we create educational materials in other languages (e.g. Spanish). But we aren't there yet, so the next best step is to teach children about these differences.

# Language discrimination is real

True Crime

**The suspect told police ‘give me a lawyer dog.’ The court says he wasn’t asking for a lawyer.**

---

By **Tom Jackman** November 2 

The Louisiana Supreme court literally ruled that his request was about a “dog”. I am not making this up. You can read the (two paragraph) decision here: <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/la-supreme-court/1878711.html>

lawyer” is not an unambiguous request for a lawyer). In my view, the defendant's ambiguous and equivocal reference to a “lawyer dog” does not constitute an invocation of counsel that warrants termination of the interview and does not violate *Edwards v. Arizona*, 451 U.S. 477, 101 S.Ct. 1880, 68 L.Ed.2d 378 (1981).

# Language discrimination is real

## LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS ON TRIAL: HEARING RACHEL JEANTEL (AND OTHER VERNACULAR SPEAKERS) IN THE COURTROOM AND BEYOND

JOHN R. RICKFORD

*Stanford University*

SHARESE KING

*Stanford University*

Rachel Jeantel was the leading prosecution witness when George Zimmerman was tried for killing Trayvon Martin, but she spoke in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and her crucial testimony was dismissed as incomprehensible and not credible. The disregard for her speech in court and the media is familiar to vernacular speakers and puts Linguistics itself on trial: following Saussure, how do we dispel such ‘prejudices’ and ‘fictions’? We show that Jeantel speaks a highly systematic AAVE, with possible Caribbean influence. We also discuss voice quality and other factors that bedeviled her testimony, including dialect unfamiliarity and institutionalized racism. Finally, we suggest strategies for linguists to help vernacular speakers be better heard in courtrooms and beyond.\*

This is a paper from 2016 investigating why it is that the jurors at the trial of George Zimmerman for the murder of 17 year old high school student Trayvon Martin reported that they **did not consider the testimony** of his classmate Rachel Jeantel, who was **literally on the phone with Trayvon as Zimmerman was stalking him in the minutes leading up to the murder.**

# Language discrimination is real

They show (quantitatively) that Rachel speaks a version of AAE/BE with some influences of Caribbean Creole English, which leads to some dramatic differences in morphosyntax from GAE (particularly around -s morphemes: plural, possessive, and copula).

They also analyze a number of other dimensions of her phonology and phonation (accent, voice quality) that could have impacted the jurors perceptions of her.

(10) Excerpt from Courtroom Testimony of Rachel Jeantel (RJ), day 1 (Prosecutor Bernie de la Rionda (BR) questioning), as recorded by the court reporter (CR) and annotated by us [ $\emptyset$  = zero *is/are* copula, or zero plural, possessive, or third singular present tense -s]

RJ: He said he  $\emptyset$  from—he—I asked him where he  $\emptyset$  at. An he told me he  $\emptyset$  at the back of his daddy $\emptyset$  fiancée $\emptyset$  house, like in the area where his daddy fiancée—BY his daddy $\emptyset$  fiancée $\emptyset$  house. Like—I said, ‘Oh, you better keep running.’ *He said, naw, he lost him.*

BR: Okay. Let me stop you a second. This—this lady [the Court Reporter] has got to take everything down, so you make sure you’re—Okay. So after he said he lost him, what happened then?

RJ: And he say he—he  $\emptyset$  by—um—the area that his daddy $\emptyset$  house **is**, his daddy $\emptyset$  fiancée $\emptyset$  house **is**, and I told him ‘Keep running.’ *He—and he said, ‘Naw,’ he’ll just walk faster.* I’m like, ‘Oh oh.’ And I—I ain’t complain, ’cause he was breathing hard, so I understand why. Soo

BR: What—what happened after that?

RJ: And then, second $\emptyset$  later—ah—Trayvon come and say, ‘Oh, shit!’

CR: [Unintelligible—requesting clarification] ‘Second later?’

RJ: A couple second $\emptyset$  later, Trayvon come and say, ‘Oh, shit!’

BR: Okay. Let me interrupt you a second. When you say, the words, ‘Oh, shit,’ pardon my language, who said that?

RJ: Trayvon.



# Language discrimination is real

Rachel was on the witness stand for over 6 hours. Here are some of the comments surrounding her testimony that the authors found on the internet.

press. Here are only six of the thousands of similarly deprecating—even virulent—critiques of her testimony that surfaced online.

- (11) ‘She is a dullard, an idiot, an individual who can barely speak in coherent sentences’—Jim Heron, Appalachian State<sup>21</sup>
- (12) ‘Sorry, but this is the blather of an idiot’—Thomas Stratford<sup>22</sup>
- (13) ‘This lady is a perfect example of uneducated urban ignorance ... When she spoke everyone hear, “mumble mumble duhhhh” im a miami girl, duhhhhh.’—Sheena Scott<sup>23</sup>
- (14) ‘[RJ] cannot even speak English ... she speaks Haitian hood rat ... ’—edteach, quoted by Nic Subtirelu in *Linguistic Pulse*
- (15) ‘This inarticulate, fat drughead is unemployable and another welfare parasite sucking on the government teat.’—Tom Robinson, LSU<sup>24</sup>
- (16) ‘Everyone, regardless of race, should learn to speak correct English, or at least UNDERSTANDABLE English ... . I couldn’t understand 75% of what she was saying ... that is just ridiculous [sic]!’—Emma, comment on MEDIAite<sup>25</sup>

Prejudice/Discrimination can target a  
single linguistic feature



# Vocal Fry and Uptalk

**Vocal fry** (or creaky voice) is what happens to all human voices when they go down into their lowest frequency range. The vocal folds contract. The voice quality that results is “creaky”.

Around 2010-2015, people started criticizing women (particularly young women) for using vocal fry during speech. But crucially, men use vocal fry too!

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMtbWt0wRyM&ab\\_channel=WallStreetJournal](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMtbWt0wRyM&ab_channel=WallStreetJournal)

**Uptalk** (or upspeak) is the use of a rising pitch at the end of a declarative sentence. Because rising pitches are also used at the end of interrogative sentences, people sometimes say this makes the declaratives sound like questions.

Uptalk has been around since the 1980s (at least). Here is a clip from 1994 discussing it. But, again, in the 2010s, it resurfaced as a criticism of women (particularly young women).

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z756L\\_CkakU&ab\\_channel=KevinNoonan](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z756L_CkakU&ab_channel=KevinNoonan)

It is very common for older speakers to criticize linguistic innovation. And because innovation tends to originate in less powerful groups, it tends to involve a powerful group criticizing a less powerful group.

# One-language movements

(We will use English-Only movements in the US as an example)

# National-language versus one-language

The first thing we need to do in talking about this is distinguish two possible positions. These are often conflated when people talk about this issue.

## **National language**

This would mean defining an **official national language** for a country.

All government meetings and documents would be required to be in the language.

**Documents could be translated** into other languages when helpful. Translators could be provided when helpful. Public education could be bilingual when helpful.

## **One-language**

This would mean defining a **single language** for a country

All government meetings and documents would be required to be in the language.

**No documents would be translated** into other languages. No translators would be provided for non-native speakers. No public education would be bilingual.

# Is there a scientific problem with National-languages? **No.**

## **English as national language**

This would mean defining an official national language for the US.

All government meetings and documents would be required to be in English.

Documents could be translated into other languages when helpful.  
Translators could be provided when helpful. Public education could be bilingual when helpful.

This is a social/political question, not a linguistic question.

At best, linguistics can just point out why it might not be necessary to designate an official language:

80% of the US is **monolingual** in English (only speaks English).

Only 1.5% of the population doesn't speak English at all.

Because of this, English is the *de facto* official language of the US - all government meetings and documents are already in English.

Linguistics can't say much about social/political issues. Sociologists probably can — they may study to what extent national languages privilege one group over another, and the effects that has on society.

# Is there a scientific problem with one-language? **YES.**

## **English only**

This would mean defining a single language for the US government.

All government meetings and documents would be required to be in English.

No documents would be translated into other languages. No translators would be provided for non-native speakers. No public education would be bilingual.

English-only movements **deny** non-native speakers of English access to government information and services in their native language.

This means that they are forced to use their **second-language understanding** of English to interact with the government.

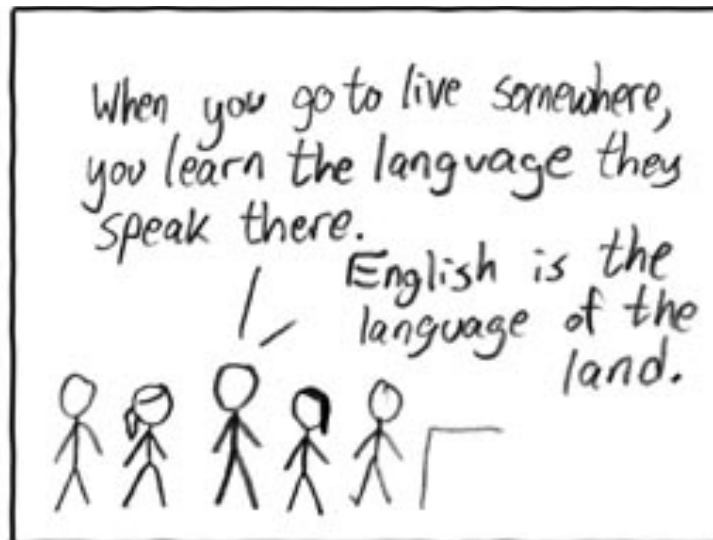
Because of the biologically-driven **critical period**, immigrants who come to the US after puberty will **never be as good at English as they are their native language.**

The **native language that you speak is an accident** of your birth. The fact that you **can't learn a new language natively after puberty is a biological fact.**

English-only **privileges some people based on an accident**, and **punishes other people based on a biological limitation.** That is **discrimination.**

# Why do some people argue in favor of English-only?

A common argument is that there is an **inherent principle** that states that **you should learn the language of the land that you live in.**



I am just going to let xkcd deal with this argument for us.

<http://xkcd.com/84/>

# Many “national language” movements are actually “one-language”



The screenshot shows the website for ProEnglish, which is described as "THE NATION'S LEADING ENGLISH LANGUAGE ADVOCATES". The navigation menu includes Home, About Us, Official English, Our Projects, Media, Research, Events, Contact, Blog, and Donate. A search bar is visible in the top right corner.

On the left sidebar, there are social media links: "FOLLOW US ON TWITTER" with a link to @proenglishUSA, and "LIKE US ON FACEBOOK!" with the Facebook logo.

The main content area features the following text:

## Official English

### What *is* Official English?

It's NOT "English Only"

Having English as our official language simply means that for the government to act officially, or legally, it must communicate in English. It means the language of record is the English language, and that no one has a right to demand government services in any other language.

Many “national language” movements are actually “one-language”



The image shows a screenshot of the U.S. English website. At the top left is a map of the United States with the text "U.S. ENGLISH" overlaid in large, bold, black letters. To the right of the map, the text "MAKING ENGLISH" is partially visible. Below the map is a navigation menu with five buttons: "Join Us", "Official English", "Legislation", "Media", and "About U.S. English". The "Official English" button is highlighted. Below the navigation menu is a section titled "Official English" in a blue header. Underneath this header is a section titled "Not 'English Only'" in bold blue text. Below this title is a paragraph of text explaining that "English-Only" is an inaccurate term and that U.S. English, Inc. never advocates for legislation that bans other languages.

**U.S. ENGLISH**

MAKING ENGLISH

Join Us   Official English   Legislation   Media   About U.S. English

## Official English

### Not "English Only"

"English-Only" is an inaccurate term for any piece of official English legislation. U.S. English, Inc. has never and will never advocate for any piece of legislation that bans the use of languages other than English within the United States. Please ensure that all references to U.S. English legislation and legislative efforts accurately reflect efforts to pass official English, not "English-Only."

But on a different page:

Declaring English the official language means that official government business at all levels must be conducted solely in English. This includes all public documents, records, legislation and regulations, as well as hearings, official ceremonies and public meetings.



The sociological issue

# Language prejudice is a stand-in for other types of prejudice

Language prejudice has no basis in language science:

AAE/BE has the same complexity of phonology, morphology, and syntax that other languages have (in some cases, it has more options than GAE).

Children who speak AAE/BE do so because they grew up hearing AAE/BE spoken around them, just like children who speak any other language.

Immigrants who come to the US after the critical period face a biological impediment to learning English as well as people who were (accidentally) born here.

But it does have a basis in sociological/power/identity issues:

The roots of prejudice are beyond my field. But many sociologists have observed that the groups that face language prejudice (AAE/BE speakers, immigrants) are also the groups that face other forms of prejudice (race, nationality). The other types of prejudice are typically illegal and socially unacceptable. So sometimes, language prejudice can become a socially or legally acceptable way to target those groups. That is something we can stop by pointing to the science behind language.