



English 5970: Language in the African American Community
Fall 2009, Tuesdays 4:00-6:20 p.m. in 3045 Brown

Instructor: Dr. Lisa Minnick
Office: 923 Sprau
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Course Page: <http://www.retroflexive.com/5970main>

There are certain things I cannot say without recourse to my language. —Toni Morrison

Course description: African American English is often dismissed as “incorrect grammar,” “slang,” or “broken English.” It is in fact none of these things but is, rather, a rule-governed, productive, and thriving means of expression with a rich history and complex structure. This course explores the linguistic structure, generative rules, and historical development of the set of varieties known collectively as African American English (AAE), varieties that meet the communicative, cultural, expressive, and creative needs of millions of speakers and writers. We will consider AAE in public, private, literary, and media discourse as well as in educational contexts, along with the social, cultural, and political forces surrounding its use. We will also analyze popularly held beliefs, attitudes, myths, and misconceptions about AAE alongside its remarkable linguistic success into the 21st century, despite unrelenting and institutionalized stigmatization.

Objectives: Students who complete the course successfully will acquire the following:

- working knowledge of the major concepts, theories, and terminology of the discipline of linguistics.
- understanding of the rule-governed nature of language in general and of AAE in particular.
- competence in the skills and practices of language variation analysis.
- familiarity with the major scholarly and popular debates and controversies regarding AAE.
- knowledge of the major theories about the origins and development of AAE.
- understanding of the uses and functions of AAE in various arenas of discourse.

Texts:

- Green, *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge, 2002).
- Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture, & Education in African America* (Routledge, 2000).
- Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.
- Course pack.
- Supplemental readings available via the WMU library’s electronic reserve.

Assignments:

Seminar paper	25%
Midterm Exam	20%
Homework assignments	15%
Prospectus	15%
Electronic journal	15%
Attendance and participation	10%

In order to participate in online discussions and complete electronic assignments, all students will need to join our class Facebook group: English 5970, Fall 2009.

Assignment descriptions

The seminar paper (min. 10 pp. for undergraduate students; 15 for graduate students) is an inquiry into and analysis of a question or problem related to AAE, presented in journal-article format. Each student will conduct a research-based analysis, review the relevant scholarly literature, and make an original argument about how to reconsider or resolve the issue. It is intended to be the product of a semester's worth of learning, involving significant investments of work and time, and will be graded accordingly. I will provide assignment guidelines, and we will discuss this project in class as you select your topic and generate ideas. I encourage you to meet with me to discuss your ideas and drafts of your paper.

Homework assignments: Some of these assignments will be practice for you as you learn linguistic description skills, while others will be more exploratory and open-ended as we widen our scope from linguistic features to theoretical, educational, and social issues associated with AAE and its speakers.

Midterm exam: The exam is designed to assess your growing understanding of linguistic features, concepts, and terminology (general as well as specific to AAE), understanding of theoretical and methodological questions, and ability to synthesize information and articulate and support claims about issues raised in lectures, discussions, and readings.

Prospectus (5 pp.): This is the initial proposal for your seminar paper. It should include discussion of your topic, research question and rationale, and a preliminary literature review. I will provide specific guidelines for this assignment.

Electronic journal: The class will collaborate in creating a knowledge resource and archive of learning. Students will produce entries in response to readings, discussions, and other assignments to be submitted on a weekly basis. I will provide assignment specifications, including qualitative and quantitative requirements, information about deadlines, and instructions for how to submit your work.

Attendance and participation: English 5970 is designed to be an active, experiential course. Your presence, attentiveness, preparedness, and active contributions are of paramount importance to the success of the course itself and to your individual success. You'll need to complete all readings and other assignments on time in order to be ready to contribute in class. Passive attendance, not doing the reading, persistent failure to contribute to discussions, not participating in activities, and/or any other kind of slacking will not be suffered gladly and will affect participation score, which along with attendance counts for 10% of your course grade. (Please refer to attendance policy below.)

Grading scale for all assignments:

A	= 4.0 points for excellent, top-quality work.
BA	= 3.5 points
B	= 3.0 points
CB	= 2.5 points
C	= 2 points
DC	= 1.5 points
D	= 1 point
E	= 0 points for work not turned in; .5 for work that does not meet minimum standards.

Course Policies

Attendance: English 5970 has the potential to be a fun and stimulating course, but your active contribution to this goal is a must. This means you need to be present and fully prepared every day to the extent that it is humanly possible. Readings, discussions, and activities complement each other. Because this class meets only once a week, *missing more than a single class meeting may be detrimental to your grade*. Exceptions can only be made in cases of serious illness (such as those requiring hospitalization) and other documentable emergencies. If you miss more than three class meetings, there may be a substantial deduction to your grade, up to and including the possibility of a course grade of E. It is each student's responsibility to stay on top of all course material and assignments when class is missed by consulting the updates page online and getting the notes from a classmate. Lectures and discussions missed cannot be made up in office hours or at any other time. Leaving at the break will be recorded as an absence. Habitual lateness will also affect your attendance record.

Late work is generally frowned upon in college and elsewhere, and this class is no exception. Arrangements need to be made *in advance*, and you'll need a documentable explanation. Unexplained late work (or excuses after the fact) will not be accepted and a grade of zero will be assessed.

Being late to class and leaving early should be avoided. Please make it a habit to be in class on time. Students who are not in class on time risk missing important course content. Also, when someone walks in late, it is distracting to other students and the instructor. The same goes for leaving early.

Makeups: In-class activities cannot be made up if missed because of lateness or absence. Makeups on major assignments, such as exams or papers, must be arranged with me in advance of due dates in order to avoid penalties, and students will have to make a pretty strong case in order to be granted an extension.

Classroom etiquette and controversial topics: You are encouraged to read and think critically and of course are not required to agree with everything you read or everything that is said during discussions in this class. In my experience, learning works best when an open dialogue is encouraged. Sometimes our conversations may get intense. We are dealing with topics that are controversial and often highly charged. But I believe strongly in the educational value of addressing these topics and the intellectual growth that comes from engaging with and thinking critically about them. All thoughtful contributions are welcome; I ask only that everyone be respectful to one other. The goal is for our classroom to be a safe place to flex your intellectual muscles, where everyone feels comfortable generating, expressing, and challenging ideas. Your help in reaching this goal is essential. Also, please familiarize yourself with and adhere to the WMU code of student conduct at <http://www.osc.wmich.edu/studentcode/conduct.html>. Students unwilling or unable to abide by the code and respect the rights of everyone to a safe teaching and learning environment will be asked to leave.

Other etiquette issues: Sleeping, eating, grooming, reading non-course materials, doing homework, having conversations, using any kind of electronic communications device, and other such activities are prohibited because of their disruptive and impolite nature, and also because they keep students from fully participating. Your active participation is part of your course grade, but also, nothing interesting will happen in class without your input. That is, the class will be as interesting as you make it. Showing up on time and prepared (that means completing all reading assignments and other homework and being ready to work when you get here) will help your grade as well as enhance your learning experience. **Also, no recording of any kind – audio, video, photographic, or otherwise – is permitted in this class without the informed consent of all students and the instructor.** Everyone in this class has a right not to have their voices and/or likenesses recorded without their knowledge and permission, including the instructor.

If you would like extra help with course material , please stop by during office hours or let me know you if would like to meet and we can set up a time. Email any time if you have questions or concerns. During the week, I try to respond within 24 hours; on weekends, it may be the first of the week before I am able to get back to you. If you are ever not completely clear on what is being asked of you, please check with me.

A note about workload: As an advanced-level course, the English 5970 workload is substantial, with challenging (and plentiful) reading assignments and frequent written assignments. Many of the readings will be advanced and theory-oriented, which means you will need to allow yourself sufficient time to work through them, possibly more than once for some of the more difficult articles. Skimming readings a few minutes before class starts won't provide you with enough preparation to participate adequately in the class session. It should go without saying that you will need to keep up with all readings and other deadlines as assigned because if you aren't prepared, you won't be able to participate in class discussions, which will be (1) boring for you (and all of us) and (2) seriously detrimental to your progress in the course.

University Policies

Religious Observances Policy: The University is a diverse, multicultural enterprise and, as a community, we jointly embrace both individual responsibility and dignified respect for our differences. It is WMU's general policy to permit students to fulfill obligations set aside by their faith. It is the University's intent that students who must be absent from scheduled classes to fulfill religious obligations or observe practices associated with their faith not be disadvantaged. However, it is the student's responsibility to make arrangements with his/her instructors in advance. It is in the student's best interests to approach each instructor expeditiously and with sufficient notice so that the rights and responsibilities of the instructor are not disrupted. I ask to be informed early in the semester if you must miss class for religious reasons.

Academic honesty: All work you turn in for this class must be your own, with all outside reference sources properly cited and acknowledged. Plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, any kind of falsification or forgery, computer misuse, multiple submission, complicity, and any other type of academic dishonesty on any exams or work assigned for this course, will not be tolerated in any form. You are required to read and comply fully with the policies and definitions outlined in the Western Michigan University statement on academic integrity, which is available in the undergraduate and graduate student catalogs as well as online. If there is reason to believe any student has been involved in academic dishonesty, he or she will be referred to the Office of Student Conduct. The student will be given the opportunity to review the charge(s) and have the opportunity for a hearing. Please consult with me if you are in doubt about how to cite a source in your paper, whether a source is appropriate, whether a citation is needed, if you are not sure what level of help on an assignment constitutes collusion, or with any other academic integrity questions. As I am also required to uphold the standards of academic integrity, my policy is zero tolerance for any type of deception, and I do not want for any of you to find out the hard way how seriously I take this.

Students with disabilities should contact Ms. Beth Denhartigh at the beginning of the semester at 387-2116 or by email at beth.denhartigh@wmich.edu so that any physical, learning, vision, hearing, or other disability can be documented and accommodations arranged. Please note that a disability determination must be made by Ms. Denhartigh's office before accommodations can be made.

Schedule of Reading and Major Writing Assignments

Everyone is encouraged to refer frequently to our Facebook Group page and our class updates page at <http://www.retroflexive.com/5970updates> for news, schedule changes, and announcements. These things happen.

Week 1: Introduction to course.

Sept 08

Discussion topics:

- Introduction to course and requirements.
- What do we mean by 'African American English'?
- Orientation to theories and methods of linguistic analysis.

Week 2: Approaches to the study of African American English and learning the language of linguistics.

Sept 15

For class, read:

1. Green, introduction to *African American English*.
2. Smitherman, preface and introduction to *Talkin That Talk*.
3. Smitherman, chapter 1 of *Talkin That Talk*.

Discussion topics:

- Linguistic theory and terminology.
- Studying language variation and change.
- Approaches to the study of AAE.
- The art of linguistic description.

Week 3: AAE in academic inquiry and lexical features of AAE.

Sept 22

For class, read:

1. Smitherman, chapter 4.
2. Green, chapter 1.
3. Baugh, "Changing Terms of Self-Reference" (course pack; hereafter 'cp').
4. Smitherman, "Words and Expressions" (online reserve; hereafter 'res').

Discussion topics:

- Academic inquiry into AAE.
- The lexicon of AAE.
- Naming and self-definition in AAE.

Week 4: AAE origin theories: linguistic features and sociohistorical evidence.

Sept 29

For class, read:

1. Rickford and Rickford, "History" (res).
2. Mufwene, "Some Sociohistorical Inferences about the Development of AAE" (res).

Discussion topics:

- Origins and development of AAE.
- Creolist and anglicist hypotheses.
- Internal and external evidence.

Week 5: Grammatical features of AAE: syntactic properties and verbal markers.

Oct 06

For class, read Green, chapter 2.

Discussion topics:

- Verb paradigms and rules.
- Aspect markers and auxiliaries.
- Marking verbs in AAE and SAE.

Week 6: Grammatical features of AAE: syntactic and morphosyntactic patterns.

Oct 13

For class, read Green, chapter 3.

Discussion topics:

1. Negation properties.
2. Tense and aspect marking.
3. Question formation.

Week 7: Phonology of AAE: sound patterns.

Oct 20

For class, read Green, chapter 4.

Discussion topics:

- Consonant sounds and alternations.
- Prosody and intonation.
- Understanding constraints.

Week 8: Midterm exam. Language attitudes and AAE.

Oct 27

First hour of class on Monday, October 27: Midterm exam.

For class, read:

1. Lippi-Green, "The Standard Language Myth" (cp).
2. Lippi-Green, "Language Ideology and the Language Subordination Model" (cp).
3. Siegel, "Language Ideologies and the Education of Speakers of Marginalized Varieties" (res).

Discussion topics:

- Language attitudes institutionalized.
- Standardness, prestige, and language authority.

Week 9: Educational implications: AAE in the classroom.

Nov 03

For class, read:

1. Smitherman, chapters 7-9.
2. Sclafani, "The Intertextual Origins of Public Opinion" (res).
3. Alim, "Critical Hip-Hop Language Pedagogies" (res).

Discussion topics:

- Language attitudes and educational implications.
- The Ann Arbor case and the Oakland resolution.
- Language ideology and the language arts.

Monday, November 9: Last day to withdraw from course (not that you'd want to).

Week 10: Language in context: Interactional rules and cultural aspects of AAE.

Nov 10

For class, read:

1. Green, chapter 5.
2. Smitherman, chapters 12-13.

Discussion topics:

- Pragmatic norms and interactional rules.
- Ritual and performance in AAE.

Prospectus papers due by midnight on Wednesday, November 11.

Week 11: More interactional AAE: private and public discourse.

Nov 17

For class, read:

1. Morgan, "When Women Speak: How and Why We Enter" (cp).
2. Richardson, "'She was workin like foreaf': Critical Literacy and Discourse Practices" (res).
3. Brown, "Performing 'Truth': Black Speech Acts" (cp).
4. Foster, "Are You with Me? Power & Solidarity in the Discourse of African Amer. Women" (res).

Discussion topics:

- Discourse and verbal style.
- Using language to construct, perform, and negotiate identity.
- Gender and AAE.

Week 12: Representing AAE: media, literature, and public discourse.

Nov 24

For class, read:

1. Green, chapters 6-7.
2. Krasner, "Parody & Double Consciousness in Language of Early Black Musical Theater" (cp).
3. Queen, "'Du Hast Jar Keene Ahnung': African American English Dubbed into German" (res).

Discussion topics:

- AAE in public discourse.
- Representations of AAE in electronic media.
- Literary AAE.

Week 13: AAE as literary language.

Dec 01

For class, read:

1. Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.
2. Minnick, "Community in Conflict: Saying and Doing in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" (res).
3. Jones, "Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Authentic Black Voice" (res).

Discussion topics:

- Language ideologies and literary representations of speech.
- Features- and discourse-level analysis of literary data.

Week 14: Last meeting! 10-minute presentations.

Dec 08

Seminar papers due by midnight on Friday, December 11.
