

**AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH
(AAVE) AND THE AMERICAN SOCIETY IN
THE 1960'S IN *THE HELP* NOVEL
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Abstract: The aim of this research is to analyze how the African American Vernacular English is applied by the characters and to identify how American society in the 1960's was portrayed in *The Help* novel. Using the descriptive qualitative research as a method, this researcher attempts to reveal the characteristics of African American Vernacular English as a language used by the characters in their daily life and American society back in the 1960's. In identifying the data, theory from Wolfram (2004) about AAVE characteristics and Kurtz (2003) about America's society in the 1960's is used. The data were mainly collected from the dialogues of the maids as the native speaker of AAVE.

Key Words: African American Vernacular English; American society in 1960's; Novel

Introduction

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is one of the many examples of nonstandard English. Vernacular language is explained as a language that has not been standardized and does not have official status. African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is mostly used by African American people in the United States (Jokinen, 2008). The origin of AAVE is linked to the dissemination of slaves in the Southern and Northern parts of the United States. They came from many agricultural cotton farms in the South and companies in the North which needed many slaves.

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) reveals a socio-dialect among the speakers and has a function as a symbol of solidarity in certain social groups (Holmes, 2001). Sadly, the social and historical background between white and black people from prejudice and bad stigma of AAVE (Rickford, 1999). Thus, AAVE is labeled and assumed by some people as sub-standard, non-standard, or broken English. In the real-life, African American Vernacular English usage grows into everyday communication as in music, art, media, movie, and literature such as novels.

Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* novel is one among many fictions in literature exposing a story of American society which contains individuals who frequently using African American Vernacular English. *The Help* reveals the story of African American maids who are working in a white neighborhood within the early 1960's in Jackson, Mississippi. The story exposes the life of Miss Eugenia Skeeter Phelan, a daughter of a rich family who returns to her family's cotton plantation, Longleaf, to seek out the reason behind the left of her beloved African American maid and nanny, Constantine. Skeeter's has a big dream to be a writer, but her only job is writing articles about the advises of housekeeping called Miss Myrna. Skeeter knows little about housekeeping, so she turns to her maid friend's, Aibileen, an African American woman who works for a white family, the Leefolts, for answers and finds lots more.



Skeeter and Aibileen tangled in the situation that brings them closer. Skeeter keeps thinking about a copy of Jim Crow laws she found in the library and the thought of publisher in New York who informed that they are interested in Skeeter's idea of making books about the stories of domestic servants. Skeeter then comes to Aibileen to write narratives from the point of view of 12 African American maids by giving them interviews. Aibileen warily agrees, but soon finds herself interested more in the project. While the town struggled with the issues of racial problems, Aibileen and her friend Minny keep speaking their mind about the prejudices and inequity that they were experienced. Even though the work puts them in great danger, they feel it's worth it to speak up and tell the reality about all the bad and good parts of it all.

The *Help* novel made African American Vernacular English a subject discussion in America. The novel includes the importance of literature such as articles, newspaper, books, laws, and bills in creating, and changing the systems which are unfair and discriminate the people of color that exist in Jackson, Mississippi in the early 1960's. It also looks at oral and written storytelling from the three main characters' points of view which allows the reader to absorb the same story through very different characters with the variety of language they used. The novel is also succeeding in forming an excellent narrative that gives a portrait of multicultural consciousness through various stories of the characters.

Apart from the excellence of using the language variation in the novel, *The Help* also displays the segregated society and oppression along with the growth of US Civil Rights Movement and American society back in the 1960's. Albeit some variety in social class and economic problem, the novel reveals that race is the most important things that determine a person's life in Jackson, Mississippi. The American society in the novel involved the racial tensions and violence within the Civil Rights Movement back in the 1960's and the heated multicultural interactions which happened between white and African-American people.

The language variations and portrayal of American society in *The Help* novel bring the richness of African American Vernacular English and the view of American society which is depicted by the dialogues of the characters in the novel. The understanding of the characteristics and features of African American Vernacular English and American society is crucial to prepare English learners and teachers to recognize and gain a greater understanding of many language varieties and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, for language learners, the knowledge of African American Vernacular English in the novel may construct the awareness of the variety of Standard English and other language variations.

Method

This research was conducted using Qualitative Approach to analyze the used of African American Vernacular English and the portrayal of American society in 1960 in *The Help* novel. The qualitative approach inquirer deals with data that are in the form of words, rather than numbers and statistic. The data collected are the subject's experiences and perspectives: the qualitative research attempts to arrive at a rich description of the people, objects, events, places, conversations, and so on. Qualitative researchers seek to understand a phenomenon by focusing on the total picture rather than breaking it down into variables. The goal is a holistic picture and depth of understanding rather than a numeric analysis of data (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2002).

By using descriptive – qualitative research, this research attempted to reveal the existence and relationship of African American Vernacular English as language variations and American society back in 1960 in *The Help* novel.

Results and Discussion

Results

1. Characteristics of AAVE

The characteristics of AAVE in grammar and vocabulary are found in the dialogues of the characters in *The Help* novel. Based on the Wolfram (2004) theory, from 17 AAVE characteristics in Grammar, there are 11 grammatical features that can be found in African American characters utterances in the novel. They are (1) Copula/auxiliary absence, (2) Invariant be, (3) Completive done, (4) Remote been, (5) Simple past



had + verb, (6) Irregular verbs, (7) Subject-verb agreement, (8) Multiple negation, (9) The uses of *ain't*, (10) the use of the pronoun, and (11) Subject auxiliary inversion in question formation.

2. American Society in 1960's in *The Help* Novel

According to Kurtz (2003), the 1960's in the United States is the year when Civil Rights Movement, feminism, antiwar protests, minority activism, and the arrival of a counterculture whose effects are happened in American society. The civil rights movement in the United States seeking to resolve constitutional civil rights illegalities, especially regarding general racial segregation, longstanding disfranchisement of blacks in the South by white-dominated state government, and ongoing racial discrimination in jobs, housing, and access to public places in both the North and the South.

The setting of place and time in *The Help* novel plays a significant role to the readers' understanding of main themes present in the novel. The novel took Jackson, Mississippi as the main setting of the story. In the novel, the most prominent physical setting can be easily discerned, consisting of the black and white neighborhood to build the sense of segregation between and within different social classes. Moreover, *The Help* offers a view of American society during the civil rights movement, embracing ideas of the tension between the races. The story also covers the civil rights movement, violence between races, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and the brief description of the gender inequality.

Discussions

1. Characteristics of AAVE

The first characteristics in verb phrase of AAVE is the absence of the copula/auxiliary. In *The Help* novel, the deletion of the auxiliary verbs has high tendency to occur especially in Aibileen dialogues. The deletion of copula *be* happening in *to be* marker of present tense, present progressive and past tense. Aibileen often omits the using of verb *be is* in present tense for example in monologue when she is describing Miss Leefolt appearances "she [is] not just frowning all the time, she [is] skinny" (Stockett, 2009: 1). Also, in the sentence when she is describing her late son "By the time he [is] in third grade, though, he get [s] to talking better than the President a the United States" (Stockett, 2009: 5), and when she describing the boy she used to take care "He [is] a handsome boy, tall with short hair" (Stockett, 2009:96).

The second characteristics in verb phrase of AAVE is the Invariant *be*. Invariant *be* is used to indicate a habitual event or action or an event distributed intermittently in time. Invariant *be* can be found in Aibileen monologues when she had the thought on how Miss Hilly will be reacting to Miss Leefolt if she did not serve the Eggs for them. Aibileen knew Miss Hilly habit thus, the line "Miss Hilly *be* disappointed" (Stockett, 2009: 6) reflected *be* as habitual event. The same pattern occurs in the sentences "The houses all *be* small, but every front yard's different" (Stockett, 2009: 16), "My grass *be* kind a spotty" (Stockett, 2009: 16) as the expression on how Aibileen describes the habitual situation of her house.

The third characteristics in verb phrase of AAVE is the use of the completive *done*. In AAVE, *done* occurs only in preverbal auxiliary position with past tense form whereas it occurs with bare verb stem. It functions in AAVE like a perfect, referring to an action completed in the recent past, but it can also be used to highlight the change of state or to intensify an activity. In the novel, Aibileen and minny used this feature quite often in their conversation. The following data expose the use of completive *done* in the conversation of Maids. "The birthing blues got hold of Miss Leefolt pretty hard. I *done* seen it happen plenty times" (Stockett, 2009: 1). The data expose the use of *done* by Aibileen in her monolog. In her sentence, she used the word *done* is used to emphasize her experience associated with birthing blues phenomenon.

The fourth characteristics in verb phrase of AAVE is the use of Remote *been*. In AAVE, *been* can be used as verbal marker to talk about an event that situates an activity started at some point in the remote past and continues up to the moment of utterance. This feature is used in Aibileen dialogues such as "If I say I don't want a do it anymore, then everthing I *been* writing and still have to write ain't gone get to be said" (Stockett, 2009: 191). *Been* used here indicates the activity of writing that she did in past and still continues up to this day. The other sentences that appear to have the same pattern which found in the novel are:

"less than I **been** paid in years" (Stockett, 2009: 4).

"where I **been** renting since 1942" (Stockett, 2009: 16).

"Miss Skeeter **been** coming over to Miss Leefolt's ever week this month, to ask me the Miss Myrna questions" (Stockett, 2009: 97).



“I don’t know. I **been** told I’m a pretty good writer” (Stockett, 2009: 442).

All the sentences above are the used of remote *been* in AAVE to indicates an activity that started at the past and continues up to the moment of utterance while in standard English the language pattern use *always* and *usually* to convey the meaning.

The fifth characteristics in verb phrase of AAVE is the use of Simple past had + verb which are found just one time in the novel. The features found in the Aibileen monologues “But it weren’t too long before I seen something in me **had changed**” (Stockett, 2009: 3) which indicates a simple past tense action of Aibileen. This sentence is incorrect form of standard English first, because of the use of to be *were* following subject *it*, then the absence of copula *have* before the word seen and the addition of *had* before the verb. However, this sentence is marked as one of the characteristic of AAVE. They are fall in categorization of the absences of the copula and the use of Simple past had + verb.

Another characteristic in verb phrase of AAVE that rarely used in the dialogues of African American character in the novel is the use of Irregular Verbs. This sixth marker of AAVE is just used one time in Aibileen dialogues “Her legs is so spindly, she look like she done **growed** em last week” (Stockett, 2009: 1). The sentence may be interpreted as an incorrect form with the mention of the word **growed**. However, in AAVE this sentence is correct. It falls within irregular verb category in which *growed* used as regularization of past tense grow.

The seventh characteristics in verb phrase of AAVE is the use of Subject-verb agreement. There are two aspects of Subject-verb agreement in African American Vernacular English, one relating to the attachment of the verbal suffix -s and the other relating to the conjugated forms of past and present be forms. These following data below will show the use of subject-verb non-agreement features in AAVE.

“But Miss Leefolt, **she don’t** pick up her own baby for the rest a the day” (Stockett, 2009:1).

“I reckon **she don’t** look any taller” (Stockett, 2009: 4).

“**Miss Hilly don’t** live but ten feet away” (Stockett, 2009: 4).

“I reckon **she don’t** get too

In the sentence above, the auxiliary *do* is used as the copula for the singular subject she, Miss Hilly and Minny. The Standard English does not tolerate this function in which the auxiliary *do* works in combination with the first subject, second subject and third plural subject.

Furthermore, the next characteristics of AAVE that found in the novel is the negation features which includes multiple negation and the use of *ain’t*. To form a negative sentence, the African American characters put several negation markers at once. There are several ways to form negative sentence whether by using auxiliary *don’t* or *didn’t*, negators *no* and *ain’t*, adverb *never* also indefinite nouns such as *nobody*, *nothing*, and *no one*. Below is the example of the use of multiple negation in *The Help* novel.

“Treelore **didn’t** say **nothing** till he two either” (Stockett, 2009: 5).

“cause she **don’t** eat **no** eggs” (Stockett, 2009: 6).

“Minny **don’t** like **nobody** talking bad about her white lady except herself” (Stockett, 2009: 13).

In this multiple negation constructions, negation can be marked on auxiliaries *don’t/didn’t* and indefinite nouns such as *anybody* (*nobody*) and *anything* (*nothing*). In the novel, Aibileen and Minny often prefer use the word *nothing* than *anything* to stress the negative meaning of a sentence. Multiple negators such as *don’t*, *no* and *nothing* can be used in a single negative sentence. In addition, the next features of negation which used the most by the African American characters in the novel is the using of *ain’t*. The marking *ain’t* is usually used to referring to be *is not*, *am not* and *are not* or it is also used to referring *was not* and *were not* to negate a sentence in the past tense. The example of the use of *ain’t* can be seen in the example below:

“They **ain’t** rich folk, that I know” (Stockett, 2009: 3).

“I walk in the house, glad I **ain’t** got two new broken legs” (Stockett, 2009: 9).

“Kind a man I like **ain’t** the kind that stays around when he done spending all you money” (Stockett, 2009: 22).

Wolfram (2004) notes the use of *ain’t* is commonly used in AAVE that Standard English never uses this feature instead auxiliaries+not is more applicable.

The next characteristics of AAVE which used a lot by the African American characters is the use of the pronoun. The first features are the use of possessive pronoun *them* instead of *their*. The use of the word

them in AAVE is different with Standard English. The word *them* in AAVE can be used to replace the name of the subject or others related with that person and the object following *them* in the sentence. The common use of *them* in Standard English indicates that it is a pronoun with an object role to signify plurality of third person.

“I know how to get **them** babies to sleep” (Stockett, 2009: 1).

“she make me do **them** eggs anyways” (Stockett, 2009: 6).

“following **them** girls to the high monkey grass on the edge a the yard “(Stockett, 2009: 184).

All the example above is taken from Aibileen monologues. She always uses possessive pronoun *them* to replace the related person following the object in her sentence. The use of *them* above are possessive pronoun that Aibileen used to replace the white people. The use of this features might be the way to emphasize her identity and to show that she is different with the white people.

The last characteristics of AAVE based on Wolfram (2004) theory is the question formation. From the theory, it was mentioned that there are two aspects of question formation that distinguish AAVE syntax, both involving subject auxiliary inversion as found in the novel below:

“How you doing?” (Stockett, 2009: 13).

“What you feed Miss Walters at bridge club today?” (Stockett, 2009: 13).

“Who you think you talking to, Aibileen? A monkey?” (Stockett, 2009: 17).

“You cooking something?” (Stockett, 2009: 31).

“So she’ll let go, I say, “Mae Mobley, where your tail?” (Stockett, 2009:91).

The sentences show the formulation of question formation in a wh-question form in which Aibileen and Minny leaves out the use of the auxiliary.

The other example of question formation features of AAVE is occur in the wh-question begins with a wh-word but is formed with the subject-auxiliary inversion for example in the sentence “Baby Girl? Why you didn’t holler for me?” (Stockett, 2009: 4). The sentence shows that Aibileen inverted the subject *you* and the auxiliary *didn’t*. In standard English, the proper sentence become “Baby Girl? Why didn’t you holler for me?”.

The use of AAVE by the African American characters in the novel is much different English that everyone knows. Aibileen and Minny use everyday language that different with the Standard English as their identity. They often use the informal language and other features outside the characteristics mentioned by Wolfram (2004) theory. For instance, Aibileen tend to use the indefinite article *a* to several different functions such as *a* functions as *to infinitive* which can be seen in the line “She ought a be the most sought-after help in the state” (Stockett, 2009: 7). In this sentence the word *ought* is followed by *a* which in standard English rule it should be followed by *to-infinitive*. Thus, the sentence became “She ought **to** be the most sought-after help in the state”.

Furthermore, the novel also displayed the unique words or vocabularies uses in their daily conversations. Below are the examples of the vocabulary variation used by Aibileen and Minny in *The Help* Novel.

Words	Meaning	Dialogues
Law	God	Law, that made me proud. (Stockett, 2009: 2) Law, it’s hot out there. (Stockett, 2009: 4) Law, not this mess again. (Stockett, 2009: 7)
Chilluns	Children	“letting somebody else raise you chilluns” (Stockett, 2009: 2) When you gone have you some chilluns (Stockett, 2009: 33)
Tee-vee	Television	“They talking about what Miss Jackie done wore on the tee-vee” (Stockett, 2009: 6)
Y’all	You all	“How y’all coming along?” I ask (Stockett, 2009: 20) “Y’all stay put. Let me find out what’s going on”(Stockett, 2009: 193).
Spec	Guess, suppose	“I spec they was gone get married” (Stockett, 2009: 2). “but I spec this is the smallest” (Stockett, 2009: 3)
Sho nuff	So enough	“Sho nuff,” I say. (Stockett, 2009: 19)

2. American society in 1960’s

The 1960’s were a time where the world was changing. Music was changing, politics were changing, and people were changing. But one problem seemed to remain in society which is racism. Although



segregation thrived through Jim Crow Laws, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X and Medgar Evers fought hard against it. *The Help* novel offers a view of American society during the civil rights movement, embracing ideas of the tension between the races.

In the novel the issue about local law called Jim Crow law is mentioned a few times. Jim Crow law is the law that exist in the real life which applied in the South between the years 1876-1965 that set of circumstances “separate but equal”. This law-enforced racial segregation in southern united states. African American people are not free to use public facilities; they always get a facility with lower quality. Schools, hospitals, public places, vehicles, and facilities for public transportation has separated sections for African American and white people.

The Jim crow law has set both white and African American people lives. They are not allowed to share water fountains, movie houses, public restrooms, ballparks, phone booths, circus shows. The African American people also cannot use the same pharmacy or buy postage stamps at the same window as white people.

Not only from the Jim crow laws, the segregate society can be seen clearly in the novel. In the novel Aibileen describes that African American and white community are lived separately:

“So Jackson's just one white neighborhood after the next and more springing up down the road. But **the colored part of town**, we one big anthill, surrounded by state land that ain't for sale. As our numbers get bigger, we can't spread out. Our part of town just gets thicker” (Stockett, 2009: 12)

“CONSTANTINE LIVED ABOUT A MILE from our house, in a small **Negro neighborhood** called Hotstack, named after the tar plant that used to operate back there” (Stockett, 2009: 60)

From those line it can be concluded that as what Aibileen describes, the African American community live in a small and packed neighborhood called Hotstack.

Moreover, in the novel, the bigger issue is actually lays in Miss Hilly idea about building the separate-colored bathroom for the maid in every house in the city. The use of separate toilet is the discrimination act that is mostly showed in the story of *The Help*. Hilly have built a big gap between white people and black people by showing this attitude reflecting on how the majority of societies are alike in treating the African American people in everyday life. The toilet for black maids in white people’s house is actually not a kind of normal bathroom like the white families have. Through the previous quotation, Abileen describes how the bathroom looks like. “It’s just a little room they built inside the carport. Inside is a toilet and a little sink attached to the wall. A pull cord for the lightbulb. Paper have to set on the floor” (Stockett, 2009: 90). The condition of the toilet is not proper. It is very small and located in the carport. Inside the bathroom there is only one single toilet, a little sink, and tissue paper without the holder. Aibileen and all the African American maids have to deal with this condition. *The Help* novel gives a main focus on the spatial and social separation of an African American community from the majority group (white community), forcing the African American community to life in inferior condition.

Furthermore, the coverage of civil rights movement mentioned a few times in the story such as at the time when Miss. Skeeter talked to Elaine Stein, the New York City book agent who inspires Skeeter to write book about the life of African American maids. At the phone, Elain Stein give a brief description about the situation which happened at that moment as written in the line below:

“A little dangerous?” She laughed. “The marches in Birmingham, Martin Luther King. Dogs attacking colored children. Darling, it’s the hottest topic in the nation. But, I’m sorry, this will never work. Not as an article, because no Southern newspaper would publish it. And certainly not as a book. A book of interviews would never sell.” (Stockett, 2009: 107)

Elaine stain describes the marches in Birmingham as the hottest topic in the nation and mentioned Martin Luther King as the figure everyone in the nation take interest to at that time. Elaine stain share her doubt about how publishing the book about interviews would not gave them good result.

The other situation that makes 1960’s America eventful which mention in the novel is the death of the John F Kennedy. The assassination of the president took the society by surprised as mentioned by Skeeter monologue:

“President Kennedy’s assassination, less than two weeks ago, has struck the world dumb. It’s like no one wants to be the first to break the silence. Nothing seems important enough” (Stockett, 2009: 342)

“THE DATE IS FRIDAY, JANUARY 18, 1964. I have on a black A-line dress. My fingernails are all bitten off. I will remember every detail of this day, I think, the way people are saying they’ll never forget what kind of sandwich they were eating, or the song on the radio, when they found out Kennedy was shot” (Stockett, 2009: 385).

The line above describes the situation when the news broke about the assassination of the America’s president. The society seems to be in grieving and will not forget about that day.

In the real life, the 1960’s America is in the deep cultural changes in term of the role of women in American society. In the story, Skeeter mentioned about the gender inequality where she found out that man has more advantage in finding job just like the quotation below:

“Kennington’s Dept. Str. seeks salesgirl’s w/poise, manners & a smile! Trim, young secretary wanted. Typing not nec. Call Mr. Sanders. Jesus, if he doesn’t want her to type, what does he want her to do? Jr. Stenographer wanted, Percy & Gray, LP, \$1.25/hr. This is new. I draw a circle around it” (Stockett, 2009: 58).

The job vacancy advertises so little about job for a woman. There are one about the need of sales girls with good manner and smile without consider their skill and just focused on their appearance. Moreover, Skeeter found many job wanter for male based on the line below:

“My eyes drift down to HELP WANTED: MALE. There are at least four columns filled with bank managers, accountants, loan officers, cotton collate operators. On this side of the page, Percy & Gray, LP, is offering Jr. Stenographers fifty cents more an hour” (Stockett, 2009: 59).

This line became evidence on how the 1960’s society is still prioritizing men more than women in a workplace and there is very limited opportunity for women to be independence for themselves.

Conclusions

After conducting the analysis of African American Vernacular English and American Society in 1960’s, it can be concluded that:

1. The Help novel used African American Vernacular English in the dialogues of African American character mainly Aibileen and Minny. The novel used African American dialect in the written text to reveal the character’s regional or social status and at the same time by providing an exact picture of the original speech of each character and the situation of the society in the 1960’s. Based on the Wolfram (2004) theory, from 17 AAVE characteristics in Grammar, there are 11 grammatical features that can be found in African American characters utterances in the novel. They are (1) Copula/auxiliary absence, (2) Invariant be, (3) Completive done, (4) Remote been, (5) Simple past had + verb, (6) Irregular verbs, (7) Subject-verb agreement, (8) Multiple negation, (9) The uses of ain’t, (10) the use of the pronoun, and (11) Subject auxiliary inversion in question formation. Moreover, from the study it also revealed that besides the characteristics from Wolfram (2004) theory, the African American characters also frequently applied the multiple use of a, the use of gone as going to and often mentioned unique words and vocabulary variation from their daily conversation. Misconceptions about AAVE are, and have long been, common, and have stigmatized its use. One myth is that AAVE is grammatically “simple” or “sloppy”. However, like all dialects, AAVE shows consistent internal logic and grammatical complexity, and is used naturally by a group of people or community to express thoughts and ideas.

2. The Help offers a portrayal of 1960’s American society during the civil rights movement, embracing ideas of the tension between the races. The story also covers the civil rights movement, violence between races, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and the brief description of the gender inequality as a reflection on what happened in the real life. The setting of place and time in The Help novel plays a significant role to the readers’ understanding of main themes present in the novel. The oppression as seen in the novel is clearly considered as the reflection of the real society in Southern United States, especially in Jackson, Mississippi around 1960’s. This kind of separation becomes the usual condition there. Every single thing is separated between black people and white people, for example; hospital, transportation, school, library,



etc. It shows how both races did not have coexisted life. Jim Crow Law has set both white and black people's lives. However, the one that experience the worse condition is African-American people as the minority group.

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