

“THUG LIFE”: The Use of African American Vernacular English and Code Switching in Angie  
Thomas’ Novel *The Hate You Give*

By

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## ABSTRACT

The principal objective of this paper is to investigate Angie Thomas' use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the novel *The Hate U Give*. Grammatical, phonological, and lexical variations have always existed in African American language. Thomas uses language that has been historically discriminated against to depict the African American experience in the United States in the twenty-first century. AAVE is observed in various instances in the novel, such as when Thomas uses it for Black characters at the home, versus the language Standard American English (SAE) used at school. Thomas also uses AAVE to critique the way language shapes and influences identity and how Black people navigate modern society.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to La'Keith and Sherell Miller, my parents and my first teachers. They taught me language, and how to use it. They taught me how my language can be used to affect others, and how my voice is like no other. I also dedicate it to everyone afraid to use their language. Speak up, speak out, speak freely. Your language is important; your vernacular is valid; and no one can take that away from you. We gon' be aight.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	2
DEDICATION .....	3
<b>Chapter</b>	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	5
2. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	11
3. LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF AAVE .....	23
4. AAVE IN THE TEXT .....	27
5. CODE SWITCHING IN THE TEXT .....	32
6. CONCLUSION .....	35
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	38

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

In the novel *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, language is identified to convey societal issues that exist outside of the novel itself. Thomas uses this distinct choice of language to illustrate author's voice and what it means to be Black in the twenty-first century America. Through language, particularly African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Thomas constructs the experience and identity of Black Americans through the relationships found in Starr's story.

Angie Thomas drew on her own life experiences growing up in Jackson, Mississippi, where she was born in 1988. Thomas grew up near the home of the assassinated civil rights activist Medgar Evers, and it was in this community that provided Thomas with the setting for her first novel. Thomas was six years old when she witnessed a shootout. Thomas earned her Bachelor's in Fine Arts at Belhaven University, a small private university in Mississippi.

In college, Thomas focused on writing fantasy genre, but she worried the literature she was creating wouldn't matter. During her time in school, she knew about the shooting of Oscar Grant in 2009 and more recently the shootings of victims like Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, and Trayvon Martin. These shootings were a large influence for *The Hate U Give*. Not only were these shootings prevalent in modern society, but they also created a social justice movement focused on ending police brutality and racial injustice. More importantly to this thesis, however, is the theme of identity and place in society that exists within movements like those that are exemplified in the novel.

*The Hate U Give* is about 16-year-old Starr Carter who is drawn into social activism when she witnesses the police shooting of her childhood friend, Khalil. This novel deconstructs

the common narrative of how “lower” or working-class Black people are viewed in society. It also reinforces the societal norms of AAVE and Black vernacular through code-switching, or the use of “double consciousness,” a phrase coined by Black author W.E.B. DuBois. It is important to note, however, that this novel was written as a Young Adult fiction book, which means these intellectual themes are bundled in an easy-to-read coming-of-age story about a 16-year-old girl.

Although Thomas does not directly state many historic influences on her novel, an important movement that helped create the foundation for her work was the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, also known as “The New Negro Movement.” The Harlem Renaissance was an explosion of Black artists and authors who began writing prose and poetry using AAVE to celebrate Black culture by using it in literature. In Kalina Saraiva de Lima’s thesis titled, “Love is Lak de Sea: Figurative Language in Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God” (2002), she described the Harlem Renaissance as having a common bond that, “dealt with black life from a black perspective” (7). The Harlem Renaissance allowed for Black creatives to be recognized by White Americans through their intellectual contributions and creations.

Another important vent to lay the groundwork for the historic context of Thomas’ work with AAVE is the *MLK Jr. Elementary School Children v Ann Arbor School District* case from Michigan in 1979. According to research by Effat Braxton, et. al in 2016, this case is about Black schoolchildren that were being put in special education courses because their teachers thought they were unable to communicate. In fact, the children were just speaking AAVE and were never taught Standard American English, and the teachers never thought to teach them. Although this case was originally about the Black schoolchildren and their access to resources, it quickly became a case on AAVE and the unequal treatment of Black students that were never

given the opportunity to learn Standard American English (SAE) in the home. This case set a legal precedent for Black English as a formal language.

Lastly, another important historic contribution to the research and public conversation on AAVE came in 1996 with the Oakland Resolution. The Oakland Resolution was created by the Oakland Unified School District in Oakland, CA that sought to recognize the legitimacy of Ebonics—a colloquial term used for AAVE. The resolution created a frenzy of media coverage and sparked national debate.

*The Hate U Give* exemplifies the twenty-first century translation of the Black experience in the US, and specifically, the Black experience in the Deep South in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement. Thomas' novel debuted at number one on the *New York Times* Best Seller list within its first week of publication. The novel garnered so much attention that it was picked up by Fox 2000 for a film adaptation in 2018.

This thesis will analyze how the use of AAVE in the novel *The Hate U Give* is both influenced by the Black experience and how it critiques elements of prejudice, historic oppression and focuses on identity that exists with the language itself. African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has had many titles: Negro-NonSAE (NNE), African American English (AAE), African American Language (AAL), Black English (BE), Black English Vernacular (BEV), and its colloquial title “Ebonics.” Linguists Wolfram and Schilling (1998) define the distinct features and systems of AAVE as, “‘fundamentally regular’ and that characterizations of socially disfavored varieties as ‘slang, mutant, defective ungrammatical, or broken English are incorrect and demeaning’” (6). This is important because up until this point, linguists had routinely compared AAVE to SAE and assumed AAVE was an inferior dialect of the Standard variety, rather than a separate variety in itself. These terms used to describe and

interpret AAVE all have a singular commonality— AAVE is a separate language entirely from SAE or White English (WE), as some linguists describe. In more recent research, AAVE has been found to be different from SAE, which contradicts early research of AAVE focused around the language’s substandard grammatical system in comparison to SAE. As contemporary research has stated, AAVE should not be studied as an “uneducated” or subcategory of Standard American English, but as a vernacular that has its own grammatical rules. For example, */you think you all that/* is copula deletion of the verb *be* found in the novel (Thomas, Hate. 4). Another example of AAVE slang would be the use of words like */Ay/*, */Nah/*, */’bout/*, and more that allow the reader to understand the dialectical choices Thomas is making through her use of specific AAVE slang terms.

Code switching from AAVE to SAE is another feature of the author’s voice that is present in Thomas’ novel. According to Koch et. al in the article titled “Attitudes Towards Code Switching,” code switching is the “use of two or more linguistic varieties” that occur within the same conversation or time period (30). Code switching is used by Starr throughout the novel— whether she is talking to her classmates, the police, or in any “professional” setting in which she wouldn’t find AAVE acceptable. The code switching also occurs within Starr’s own consciousness, as Thomas has deliberately written AAVE into dialogue alone. Through code switching in instances with her classmates, the police, and even in Starr’s own mind, Thomas’ novel creates the bigger picture of the Black experience in twenty-first century America.

However, code switching is more than a switch in language varieties. It is a conscious change in identity from one form of communication to another that is considerably more “acceptable” by the audience speaking it. In Starr’s case, she code-switches when she isn’t in the presence of other Black people because she thinks changing to a more standard dialect is

somehow more desirable or acceptable. Although AAVE in *The Hate U Give* is meant to create a sense of solidarity and community for the Black characters, there is an underlying inferiority of the language that is found when Starr actively sensors herself from speaking in a way that might come off as nonstandard or, in her words, “ghetto.”

Through the use of AAVE and code switching in Thomas’s novel, she critiques the importance of identity and place for Starr and other Black characters and the legitimacy of their own unique Black experiences. Starr’s conversation with Khalil shortly before he gets killed about staying quiet and being respectful to police, and the chaos that ensues, is an example of the way in which identity changes through the language she was taught by her parents and how that same language could’ve saved Khalil’s life. In the novel, Thomas not only uses Khalil’s death as a major plot point but also connects his death with the real deaths of other Black people that exist outside of *The Hate U Give*. Thomas uses the language in Khalil’s death, Starr’s conversation with Chris as prom, and the falling out between Starr and Hayley as scenarios that show the importance of identity and how identity can consciously or unconsciously change, depending on who Starr is around, what is being said, and how comfortable she is with her own language and her place in society and as a witness to a horrendous crime. Hailey and Starr’s argument in Maya’s bedroom about police brutality shows the stark contrast of the black and white experiences in America and the distinct identities that both Hailey and Starr possess that aren’t compatible, especially by the end of the novel. Thomas seeks to portray identity in the most simplistic way—through a high-school squabble between two girls. Although this execution might seem elementary, Thomas threads the topic of social unrest and distrust into the white understanding of taking responsibility for one’s actions whilst disregarding the unfairness of a situation like Khalil’s.

Thomas' language techniques deserve careful study and analysis because these dialogue and language usages through this novel can help guide and inform future readers and scholars in discovering the underlying aspects of Starr's understanding of her own identity. From a broader scope, the study of Thomas' novel *The Hate U Give* explores the understanding of an entire culture's identity. By using AAVE, Thomas was able to show the experiences of twenty-first century Black Americans and their existence to the reader. A few major questions will be used to guide this thesis: What is Thomas' purpose when she uses different forms of language and dialogue in her novel *The Hate U Give*? What affect does it bring to the novel and to society, as a whole? How does language affect identity?

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Early research on African American Vernacular English (AAVE) began with American linguist William Labov. His influential research on English dialects in Harlem, then called Negro Non-SAE, allowed John Rickford (2016) to analyze Labov's research, findings, and conclusions in his article titled "*Labov's Contributions to the Study of African American Vernacular English: Pursuing Linguistics and Social Equity.*"

Rickford outlines Labov's research into four separate parts:

- 1) Synchronic analysis of AAVE's structural features and its relation to SE and other American dialects
- 2) AAVE "speech events" and the verbal artistry of AAVE speakers
- 3) The diachronic issues of whether AAVE originated in Creole or English dialects and whether it has been diverging from White vernaculars in recent decades
- 4) Applications including interventions to improve the teaching of reading and writing to AAVE and Latino English-speaking students, and advocacy for AAVE and regional dialect speakers in court and on issues of public controversy. (562)

In (1), Rickford highlights Labov's research of inner-city youth and their use of AAVE or SAE (563). Labov also finds "functional differences" in how the youth use these different dialects to communicate. Rickford labels these two features as *structural* and *functional* differences and writes that Labov et al. believed the structural differences to be of more importance than the functional differences in the failure of students in the classroom setting

(563). This could be because of an instructor's' inclination to divest time from learning the language of a student rather than trying to understand the difficulties the AAVE-speaking student might have in a class taught in SE. Rickford then analyses one of Labov's best-known structural features in his research on AAVE: the contraction and deletion of the copula and auxiliary *be* (563). Although, Rickford writes, Labov has produced more research on the topic of AAVE than the deletion of the copula *is*, this particular feature has continued to be researched by linguists today. However, there were researchers that denounced Labov's copula deletion because of his research style or the data that was used in Labov's research of the deleted copula (564).

In Rickford's analyzation of (2), the *verbal artistry* of African-American speakers was an important facet in the Harlem Renaissance and the use of African American English in the poems, novels, music, etc. that are syntactically unique to AAVE. Rickford further explains that, although Labov was using these "speech acts" to show structural features of AAVE, Labov also showed the "verbal dexterity" of AAVE and its importance in maintaining African American culture (566). Rickford sates this poetic style in AAVE contributed to the rap and hip-hop culture of the 1970s and 1980s. This point in Labov's research is important as it directly relates back to the use of AAVE in literature and the author's intent on creating art through language, while also adhering to a stance of solidarity with Black people and the African diaspora by using language that connected literature to Black culture.

Labov's next contribution in (3) were the diachronic theories associated with the created and development of African American Vernacular English. Rickford states that Labov has varied opinions on the Creole origins of AAVE. In his work in the late 60s, Labov was decidedly against the Creole theory and many other linguists that agreed with it, stating, "...dialects of the same language are likely to be more different in their surface structure" (567). However, by the

early 1980s, Labov was pro-creolist theory as he found more research and evidence on Creole languages from Black linguists on the AAVE copula. Later in the 1980s, however, Labov switched again, and again aligned himself with the English language theory as he wrote the foreword for Shana Poplack and Tagliamonte's analysis of AAVE and its origins (568). At this point, Labov was less enthused with the Creole or English origins of AAVE and more interested in the *divergence hypothesis*, proposed by both Labov and linguist Wendall Harris. This hypothesis stated that AAVE "had diverged substantially from White vernaculars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century" which can be shown through the evidence Labov gave from his research in Philadelphia:

- 1) Demographic evidence that Blacks had been increasingly segregated from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, unlike White ethnic groups
- 2) Contemporary network and linguistic data showing that the highest frequencies of 3<sup>rd</sup> singular and possessive -s absence came from Blacks with minimal contact with Whites...
- 3) Blacks were not participating in sound changes evident among White vernacular speakers, like the fronting of /aw/ in *out*. (568)

This hypothesis has found supporters and critics. For example, many critics find the tense-aspects developments as features found in traditional African-American language rather than strictly occurring in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Other critics have said they don't view AAVE as uniform, and rather they see too many regional variability (569).

Lastly, in (4), Rickford analyses Labov's applications of AAVE to the social and linguistic perspective of the court system and the classroom. Labov focused on AAVE in these spaces because he wanted to improve the education of AAVE speakers. He wanted to "advocate

on their behalf in the courts and other forums” (569). He also focused on the classroom because of the 1977 case in Ann Harbor, which is a prime example of the discrimination and stigma surrounding AAVE-speaking students in the classroom. Another push for Labov to look further into the stigma of AAVE in the classroom came with the Oakland Resolution in the late 1990s. Much of his early research revolved around the phonological differences in AAVE and Standard American English that create homonyms that many teachers were not used to hearing, including but not limited to: the simplification of consonant clusters, weakening of final consonants, and the loss of the *l* and *r* phonetic sounds (570). Rickford states that Labov’s Harlem study contributed insightful information to teacher on forms of non-SAE in “language [the teachers] understand” in order to help them teach the students in their classrooms (570).

Author and linguistic Anne Harper Charity Hudley wrote a chapter of the book *The Handbook of African American Psychology* (2009) in which she analyzes African American English (AAE). She describes AAE as the language spoken by English speakers where Black Americans with low socioeconomic status have historically lived. Her definition, in turn, of SAE or WE crosses ethnic categories as the English spoken by the elite in “commerce, government, and education” (199).

Hudley accounts AAVE research first beginning in the 1960s to address the academic achievement gap between Black and White people. Research found that AAVE was a “full linguistic system” rather than a result of language “impoverishment” that many linguists assumed before research on AAVE (201). There are several variations and differences in the way AAVE is spoken because of the variations of speakers. Hudley explains that sociolinguistic research on AAVE does not examine the dialect in frequency of use by age, gender, and social class, although all of these features play a major role in the acquisition and use of AAVE.

Hudley describes how AAVE historically has been seen as a “substandard and undesirable” language (204). Hudley explains that the American school system deems AAVE as an underdeveloped or “lazy English” that children would rather use than SAE (204). However, many linguists have found that AAVE is “just as systematic and regular as any other language or variety of English” (204).

The case *Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children et al. v. Ann Arbor School District Board* (1979), Hudley writes, attempted at confronting the linguistic differences of the schoolchildren because of segregation and slavery. Eleven black schoolchildren attended a predominately white elementary school in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The students were put in remedial classes because of their use of African American English in school. The school “disregarded cultural and linguistic differences” and put the children in special-needs courses.

Children that speak AAVE, as Hudley explains, are constantly worried with the idea of “sounding educated” because their preferred dialect is not the norm in their learning environments (205). Hudley expresses the difficulties in understanding between a teacher and a student that speaks AAVE when discussing homework, classwork, etc. If a student says “I *bin* finished my homework” in AAVE, this phrase is understood to mean the student finished the homework long ago. A teacher that does not understand the linguistic differences between SAE and AAVE might not understand that the student meant the homework was already finished. However, students do not want to change the way they speak so their teachers can understand. Hudley explains this desire to use AAVE in spaces where SAE is more common underscores the speaker’s need to “keep it real” and not lose cultural features like speech and language around non-AAVE speakers. Speakers of AAVE do not want to “sound” or “act White” so they don’t lose the culture in their language. However, by continuing to use AAVE around mainly Black

speakers, SAE is further stigmatized as a “White” language used mainly around White people and not Black speakers (205).

Hudley concludes by discussing the teacher’s role in the classroom to help AAVE-speaking students by learning the cultural and dialectical differences of the language. As discussed before, Hudley’s research found that AAVE is not unsystematic and unstructured—listeners and researchers on sociolinguistics must understand this to appropriately understand AAVE in and out of the classroom (206).

Hudley’s analysis of AAVE and its use in Black culture is important in context of this thesis as we discuss language used in the home and in public, and how this language differs for the Black speakers in literature and how the author uses nonSAE to assert an identity for both the character and Black culture as a whole.

In the history and development of AAVE, two persuasive theories emerged on where and how AAVE originated. One theory is the *Creolist hypothesis*, which states AAVE is the “product of African slaves brought with them across the Atlantic during the Middle Passage” (200). The other theory Hudley describes is the *English hypothesis*, which theorizes that the AAVE dialect spoken today is just a natural variation of the English language among speakers in the United States. Linguists that believe in the English hypothesis rather than the Creole hypothesis argue AAVE is a dialect rather than an entire Creole language.

Author Shana Poplack (2006) wrote on the history of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and the stigmas surrounding the dialect. She adheres to the former theory of AAVE and analyzes the grammatic features of the languages, hypothesizing AAVE is a variation of the dialect spoken by the British who colonized the U.S. This theory is contested by other authors that study AAVE, mainly because other research has found that AAVE is a variation of

Creole and Pidgin languages of Caribbean islands and other African countries. However, Poplack theorizes that these *relic areas* of the African American diaspora where African Americans fled in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were able to maintain their language, culture, and religion for long periods of time because of their isolation. These communities were small and remote, which allowed little linguistic change in their language. Because these groups were able to maintain their own vernaculars, Poplack says these pockets of static language allowed for Early African American English (AAVE).

Poplack goes on to describe the *Comparative Method* in which her research has adopted for studying historic linguistics of two or more languages that share a “non-universal feature” that could only be transmitted through common ancestral sources. However, Poplack goes on to describe the differences of old English, creoles and AAVE as also needing the “variationist construction” of *constraint hierarchy* in order to accurately ascertain the comparisons of these languages. In her research, Poplack states this hierarchy serves as a tool for assessing the relationship of the similar or differing forms throughout the languages she researched. If two or more the varieties of the language share the same “highly structured hierarchy of constraints,” Poplack states that these languages likely have a similar ancestral source.

Her research included tape-recorded conversations from residents in three African diaspora communities—Samana peninsula in the Dominican Republic, and both the Guysborough Enclave and North Preston in Nova Scotia, Canada. The Samana peninsula was settled by former slaves in the 1820s and the two Nova Scotian communities were settled by Black Loyalists after the Revolutionary War in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the marking of simple past, a commonly referred-to feature of African languages or creoles, was found to also be common in English-based creoles rather than from the former.

*He went to the mall, but he stop at the gas station.*

Her research also found that *strong verb* usage like *lie*, *speak*, and *blow* in Early AAVE and Nova Scotian vernacular are similar, specifically the morphological expression of simple past in these verbs. This means there's further evidence of Early AAVE originating from English.

*She come back yesterday without the milk.*

Another well-known feature of early AAVE is the marking of the simple present, which Poplack found to also stem from early English origins. Poplack states that “contemporary SAE requirement that subject and verb must agree in 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular is actually a fairly recent development” (467). This new phenomenon only dates back to the Early Modern English period, and before that the *-s* restriction on 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular was not a grammatical feature of dialects like Middle English.

*She look tired, did she sleep last night?*

In conclusion, Poplack found strong evidence that Colonial English is likely the original language from which AAVE was constructed by “triangulating Early AAVE structures with those of British-origin varieties which developed in similar circumstances of sociolinguistic peripherality” (473). In this, it can be deduced that Poplack agrees with the British English origins of Early AAVE and modern African American languages, which can be concluded from the experiments in Poplack's research. An important note that Poplack made in her research involved the “benchmark” principles that have been associated with contemporary “Standard” English rather than any other dialect of the language— “standard” is in quotations because it there is no specific reasoning behind why this form of English is considered standard, i.e. the benchmark. Poplack's research acknowledges the incorrect attempt of post linguists that claimed

that nonstandard versions of English, like creoles or AAVE, were “incomplete or incorrectly acquired.” Her research and evidence proved these dialectal features were not created, which would be the case if they were created by creolization of “incomplete” acquisition, but that they were retained from older dialects of the English language, which Poplack calls a “conservative” variety of the English language by contrast of the contemporary, “standard” variety.

The Creole origin theory, or *creolization* theory, insists that AAVE originated from Creole languages. In “*The Creole Origins of African American Vernacular English: Evidence from copula absence*,” John Rickford addresses the creolization theory through the deletion of the copula *be*, which is present in both AAVE and some Creole languages. Rickford first analyzed the “sociohistorical conditions” in which Africans came to the United States and how they created language that combined both English and creole language from the African diaspora. Rickford’s next kind of evidence is the “historical attestations” of AAVE that can be divided into two major categories: literary texts and interviews with former slaves (4). However, Rickford states there are flaws with both types of evidence, as literary texts are brief and are “open to questions of authenticity,” while questions of interviews might not be reliable because the recording could be interpreted in various ways (4). Rickford continues giving five other pieces of evidence that help distinguish this theory from the divergence theory that Poplack discusses.

In Allison Burkette’s article titled “The Use of Literary Dialect in Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” she analyses the linguistic features of AAVE used in the book Uncle Tom’s Cabin and its use in the voice of the characters. Burkette found that there was a correlation between “speaker variables and linguistics variables” (168). These variables focused on correlation between social class and education level, respectively. Correlation between these variables means Burkette

found reason to study how social classes and education level affect AAVE speakers. More specifically, these variables have been enforced in sociohistorical aspects as disadvantaging AAVE speakers. Burkette says this about Stowe's use of AAVE in her novel:

“That [Stowe] defends her novel so strongly ... leads one to believe that her use of language in it is deliberate, carefully constructed and, to the best of her ability, an intentionally accurate and consistent portrayal of the various dialects she was exposed to in her journeys through the Ohio River area and the South...” (168)

Burkette describes Stowe's use of AAVE as “real language” that serves readers to further describe the characters and setting of the novel itself. Burkette's conclusion is that language, specifically AAVE in Stowe's novel, creates agency for character's experiences in novels and creates a reality that exists within the novel and out of it. Burkette states that, “If the speech of the characters sounds real, then perhaps the events and situations of the characters would also be accepted as real” (168). This is a major analysis of AAVE in literature that will be discussed in this thesis, as the language in *The Hate U Give* also gives agency to the character's experiences and how they mirror society. It is also important, Burkette explains, for Stowe to use AAVE as it connected the readers to the novel with a familiar voice similar to the vernacular the readers would use, which makes the novel more relevant for them. Burkette also makes an important note to express that it would be “easy” to analyze the dialect in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a critique of “hierarchical order of intelligence,” meaning smarter characters had more standard dialects, but Burkette emphasized that language does not measure mental aptitude or educational level.

Yamina Iles did similar research of BE in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* in her dissertation “The Use of ‘Black’ English in American Literature: The Case of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*.” In her research, she analyzed the use of BE in the literature, the cultural

aspects that occur within Huckleberry Finn, and the interpretation of the data she found within her research. In her research on characterization, Iles found that Twain "...uses distinctive varieties in his writing and makes a difference between the dialect of one character and the other" (43). Each character has a different speech pattern that is unlike the other characters, particularly with characters like Jim and Miss Watson. This distinct difference in vernacular exemplifies the socioeconomic divide that already exist between black and white characters in Twain's novel. Jim's speech in the novel is used to reveal that he is "...a black slave who is illiterate, poor, superstitious and uneducated" (43). However, the slaveowners in the novel, as Iles writes, are understood as being educated because of the stark contrast between their nonstandard Southern English dialects and Jim's nonstandard AAVE (44).

Iles goes on to analyze the phonology and grammar within Twain's novel. She states that the contractions and "informal written style" of the novel creates an easy and simplified read for the audience because the literature mirrors casual speech in "everyday conversations" (74). She states that most of the characters use nonstandard English for the reader's understanding. Iles cites James Bradstreet Greenough when he states that:

Even bad grammar is essentially just as good as good grammar; it become bad merely because it is associated with persons that we dislike or look down on. Any bad language is only such because it is not the accepted form of speech. (72-73)

Iles' goal in her research was to ultimately provide "a vivid image of the novel's fiction characters with a purpose to increase dialect awareness among readers of literary dialect" (Summary 1). Her research further paved the way for researchers to find more information on Black English that is used in literature, as well as the dialectical elements of nonstandard

varieties of English and their use in a character's behaviors. Ilse' work also gives a glimpse of the societal roles of these nonstandard languages, particularly in Twain's time period of the early twentieth century.

## CHAPTER 3

### LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF AAVE

In this chapter, the phonological, lexical, and grammatical features of AAVE will be analyzed. In Hudley's "*African American English*" chapter discussed before, she described each of these features in-depth and through the use of tables, which will be condensed in this thesis to only include a few main features of AAVE that vary from SAE. This thesis will not go in-depth in the phonological or lexical features of AAVE primarily because the phonological features of the language aren't represented well through text. However, these features will be shown in order to properly put into context the uniformity of AAVE and how it is used in real-life scenarios as well as in *The Hate U Give*.

The lexicon of AAVE speakers varies greatly from SAE speakers and from other dialects. Hudley states that many of the new words that now exist within the American English lexicon originated in AAVE. She goes on to state that "Many words that speakers of American English no longer think of as slang or nonstandard were once uniquely part of AAVE" (201). Many of the slang terms found on the website [www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com), Hudley explains, are due largely in part by AAVE speakers and their lexicon. Although there is a focus on the lexical "slang" of AAVE, there are problems in the language translation of lexicon for AAVE speakers in the classroom. Hudley cites another linguistic research study in which many relational terms for space, time/order, quantity, etc. are difficult for AAVE-speaking students to understand in the early stages of primary school education (201). Terms like *make* and *fix* differ in the lexicon of an SAE speaker than an AAVE-speaker. Some examples of these relational differences are shown below through an example from *The Hate U Give*:

Standard American English	African-American English
<i>“<u>M</u>ake her a plate.”</i>	<i>“<u>F</u>ix her a plate.” (92)</i>

SOURCE: Anne Harper Hudley “*African American English*”

The phonological variations of AAVE are described by Hudley as being somewhat similar to South American English. There are distinct vowel variations that exist in Southern American English, for example, that are found in both White and Black speakers. A few examples of the phonological features of AAVE are shown below:

<i>Phonological Feature (Consonants)</i>	<i>Examples</i>
ask/aks alternation	<i>I /aks/ him a question.</i>
/s/ as [d] before /n/	<i>isn't as idn't, wasn't as wadn't</i>
glide [j]	<i>computer as compooter, Houston as Hooston</i>
initial /th/ as [d,t] and final /th/ as [d,t,s,z,f,v]	<i>they as day, with as whiff or wit</i>
syllable stress can shift from the second to the first syllable	<i>POlice, UMbrella</i>

SOURCE: Anne Harper Hudley “*African American English*”

<i>Phonological Feature (Vowels)</i>	<i>Examples</i>
/ij/ and /i/, /ej/ and /e/ merge before /l/	<i>Feel, and fill; fail and fell rhyme</i>
diphthongs as monophthongs	<i>Oil as all; time and Tom may rhyme</i>
/er/ as ur word finally	<i>Occurs in words such as hair, care, and there</i>

SOURCE: Anne Harper Hudley “*African American English*”

There are more phonological features of AAVE, but some of these particular features will be found in the coming chapters of the thesis. Thomas (2007), also commented on something he called the “variation in liquids” like /r/ and /l/-less variations in many words in AAVE (453). For example, words like *four* and *for* would be pronounced [foe] due to the *r*-deletion. Thomas discusses three variations of *l*-less variations in AAVE, but the most common, he writes, is the *l* deletion in a word like *feel* which would be pronounced [fio] (454).

The grammatical features of AAVE, according to Hudley, have been well-studied due to their “uniqueness,” as Hudley states, and the distinct language variety that AAVE inhabits (202). The systematic grammatical features of AAVE have not been acknowledged by society, although the grammatical features of the language are as structured and uniform as SAE. Some examples that Hudley gives for the grammatical features of African American English are shown below with a few examples from *The Hate U Give*:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Examples</i>
negative concord/multiple negation	<i>You act like you don't know no body 'cause you got to that school. (Thomas, <u>Hate</u>. 4)</i>
irregular verbs may be regularized	<i>I seened/seent her</i>
<i>done</i> may be used to mark distant past tense	<i>He done left already</i>
subject-verb agreement is not required	<i>They wasn't there</i>
copula deletion where it can be contracted in SAE	<i>She funny</i>
stressed <i>bin</i> may be used to mark the completion of an action	<i>I bin finished my homework</i>

copula <i>be</i> may be used to mark habitual action (invariant <i>be</i> )	<i>I bet they <u>be</u> doing molly and shit, don't they?</i> (Thomas, <i>Hate</i> . 9)
a plural may be unmarked	<i>fifty cent</i>
a possessive may be unmarked	<i>My mama house</i>
third-person singular verbs may be unmarked	<i>He talk too much</i>
relative clauses are not obligatory	<i>You the one she knows</i>

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SOURCE: Anne Harper Hudley “*African American English*”

In this case, grammatical features of AAVE are separate from the literature review because the features of the language are distinctly important in understanding the uniformity and system of the language itself. Many SAE speakers don't understand that AAVE is a language in itself and therefore has strict rules that make it a uniform language. I wanted to make sure readers understand the language features and how important they are in relation to the study and understanding of AAVE in context of the text, and in conversation.

CHAPTER FOUR  
AAVE IN THE TEXT

“We’ll be a’ight.”  
(Thomas, Hate)

AAVE in dialogue is one of the major elements Thomas makes use of related to how dichotomous Starr’s home life and school life can be. AAVE is used between Starr’s family and other black characters throughout the novel at different times to distinguish who’s being spoken to. The use of AAVE is unique in this novel because it can only be found between certain characters, which will be discussed in the next chapter. As discussed in the Literature Review, the use of AAVE builds a sense of community and connectiveness with AAVE speakers that does not necessarily occur with the use of SE. Thomas uses AAVE to create community within the novel for her characters, and also uses it to relate to her readers that might use AAVE. Thomas believes AAVE is a strong element within her novel, as it is present in some of the first conversations in the novel, when Starr is talking to her half-sister, Kenya:

“Stop following me and go dance, Starr,” Kenya says. “People already say you think you all that.” “I didn’t know there were so many mind readers in Garden Heights.” ...“Hey, I’m just saying. You act like you don’t know nobody ‘cause you go to that school.” (Thomas, Hate. 4)

Starr and Kenya are discussing Starr’s behavior at a party. In this example, Kenya’s use of double negatives and the deletion of the verb *be* are both ways in which AAVE is utilized in characters’ conversations. Kenya is describing what other students and peers think of Starr because she goes to a private school thirty minutes outside of their neighborhood rather than the high school located in Garden Heights. Kenya’s use of the slang phrase “that school” is

deliberate—many AAVE speakers will use common nouns or pronouns to refer to something they don't like or of little importance. By not stating the name of the school, Kenya disregards Starr's school entirely as meaningless or something that is not important to her.

Another example of both AAVE linguistic features and slang terms is a conversation Seven has with DeVante after Seven and Starr see him in Rose Park:

“What she means is thanks for helping us out,” Seven says, even though that's not what I meant. “We appreciate it.”

“It's all good. Them fools running around here 'cause the riots happening on their side. It's too hot for them over there.”

“What are you doing in the park this early anyway? Seven asks.

[DeVante] shoves his hands in his pockets and shrugs. “Posted up. You know how it go.” (Thomas, *Hate*.147)

DeVante is a King Lord, which is a fictitious gang in the novel. The AAVE phrase “posted up” is used in this instance to describe DeVante's position on the street so that he could sell drugs for the King Lords. His next sentence, “You know how it go,” is an example of missed subject-verb agreement that is a linguistic feature of AAVE. The slang term “too hot” means that there is too much police activity in one space for the King Lords to be comfortable on “their side” of Garden Heights (147).

Starr and her father Maverick, or “Big Mav,” have a conversation later in the book in which Starr seems to have an epiphany of sorts in what her role is as both a witness and an activist. This conversation is important in the topic of AAVE because Starr and Big Mav use this dialect in order to discuss important historical elements that create a context for the riots and demonstrations that are occurring in Garden Heights. Big Mav questions Starr on her

understanding of the phrase demonstrated by the acronym THUF LIFE (*The Hate U Give* Little Infants Fucks Everybody) in this conversation:

“A’ight, a’ight. You on it.” He gives me a dap. “So, what’s the hate they’re giving the “little infants” in today’s society?”

“Racism?”

You gotta get a li’l more detailed than that. Think ‘bout Khalil and his whole situation. Before he died.”

“He was a drug dealer.” It hurts to say that. “And possibly a gang member.”

“Why was he a drug dealer? Why are so many people in our neighborhood drug dealers?”

...

“Right. Lack of opportunities,” Daddy says. “Corporate America don’t bring jobs to our communities, and they damn sure ain’t quick to hire us. Then, shit, even if you do have a high school diploma, so many of the schools in our neighborhood don’t prepare us well enough...” (Thomas, *Hate*. 169)

In this conversation between Starr and her father, the reader is both given another explanation of the title of the novel and a critique of the experiences of Black people. Starr is educated on how Khalil’s life experiences were affected by a systemic oppression of Black people, which is also a critique of modern society that Thomas places within the text. It is also important to note that this conversation is taking place in AAVE, meaning the issues that Big Mav is discussing are being described through a language that has historically been viewed as inferior by “Corporate America.” Starr and Big Mav are discussing high-level topics of systematic oppression of Black people by corporate America in AAVE, which is a major point

that Thomas is making. Historically, AAVE has not been the language in which these issues are discussed, but the rather a language that cannot fully articulate these themes. Thomas is proving that AAVE can indeed be used when discussing big ideas like racial oppression. This use of AAVE also helps Starr in her own understanding of who she is and her place as a Black teenager that will soon be entering the work force—Big Mav is explaining to her, in their own language, how her identity shapes the way she might be employed in the future and how other people that look like her might be disadvantaged.

In this conversation, Thomas is not only critiquing the world in which Starr is a means to affect change, she is also giving her opinion on the societal views of the Black experience and the threat of Black lives through the acronym THUF LIFE with the help of AAVE. Arguably, this conversation would not have the same powerful feel if it were solely written in SE because AAVE creates a tone of solidarity and trust that Thomas wishes to create for the readers experiencing the novel. Thomas understands that language influences culture and identity, and Starr and Big Mav are preserving their own Black identities while also discussing high-level concepts surrounding race and inequality in the country. Traditionally, these concepts would be discussed in SAE because the belief for so long was that AAVE speakers don't have the mental capacity or education to have these kinds of conversations.

In conclusion, Thomas uses linguistic features of AAVE to create a world for the people of Garden Heights, especially Starr's story and the story of the Khalil's of the world. Some of the elements of AAVE reinforce the theme of solidarity and connectiveness within the Garden Heights community. Also, the use of AAVE within conversation depicting "intelligent" or higher-level processing reinforces Labov's analysis that AAVE is not an inferior version of SAE but is a systemic language all its own. Thomas' use of AAVE is further proof of the

intellectualism that separates historic opinions of AAVE with modern views. Thomas also proves that language influences culture and identity through her use of AAVE in her novel, and it is especially noticeable when Starr is learning both about herself and her place in America as a Black person communicating through AAVE. Starr finds out more about who she is in relation to her peers, her family, and her community through AAVE.

CHAPTER FIVE  
CODE SWITCHING

“Williamson Starr doesn’t use slang—if a rapper would say it, she doesn’t say it...”  
(Thomas, Hate)

Although there isn’t much analysis on this novel due to its recent publication, there is a lot of analysis associated with the idea of code switching. Code Switching, in context of this thesis, is the process of changing or “switching” from one dialect of language to another depending on social context and setting. Code switching is particularly used by minority groups when they are around the majority group to communicate. In *The Hate U Give*, Thomas uses code switching for Starr in order for her to communicate at school, with police, or in any situations when we would need to be more “formal.” Starr’s understanding of code switching involves the concept of double consciousness, which is the idea that identity is divided into several distinct parts and one is constantly aware of those divisions. In this case, there’s Garden Heights Starr and Williamson Starr—two identities for the same person.

Starr says in the novel that there are two versions of Starr—the “Williamson” Starr and “Garden Heights” Starr. Throughout the novel, Starr is faced with conflicting ideas of what it means just to be herself. Williamson Starr denounces her racial differences from her white classmates. As Starr explains her experience at Williamson, she talks about how she must change in order to assimilate:

Williamson Starr holds her tongue when people piss her off so nobody will think she’s the “angry black girl.” Williamson Starr is approachable. No stank-eyes, side-eyes, none of that. Williamson Starr is nonconfrontational. Basically, Williamson Starr doesn’t give anyone a reason to call her ghetto. (Thomas, Hate, 71)

Starr goes on to say that she, "...can't stand [herself] for doing it," but she continues to act this way, nonetheless. Thomas uses these dichotomous personalities for Starr as a mechanism to express code switching from her home in Garden Heights to her life as a private school student at Williamson. Starr isn't happy that she constantly changes who she is when she goes to school. Not only does Starr change the way she speaks when she's at school, but she changes her entire attitude to be unassuming to her classmates. Her parents put her and her siblings in private school far from the school they were zoned for in Garden Heights, and because of that, she and her siblings aren't in the same socioeconomic status and class as the white students they go to school with.

Thomas makes a point to write the novel in first person, so the reader only knows Starr's thoughts and ideas. However, Starr's thoughts and ideas are written mainly in SE, meaning most of the AAVE throughout the book is only found in dialogue. This leaves a question for the reader—why did Thomas decide to write in AAVE in the first place? I believe she meant to convey the dichotomous thinking that exists within Black culture and the language they speak and other situations in which SAE must be used. Using AAVE, in some the middle-class Black communities, is a conscious effort that takes place in settings in which other Black people are using the vernacular. By making Starr code-switch through her thoughts in the novel, the reader understands that she makes a conscious decision to speak similarly to her peers in Garden Heights and her family at home. Code switching is a very conscious act, and Thomas does well in expressing the plights of code switching and its effects on how Starr views herself and the people around her.

Another code switch moment in the text was when Starr was being interrogated by the police:

“Hello.” My voice changing already. It always happens around “other” people, whether I’m at Williamson or not. I don’t talk like me or sound like me. I choose every word carefully and make sure I pronounce them well. I can never, ever let anyone think I’m ghetto. (Thomas, Hate. 95)

Before Starr even starts talking to the police, she notices a change in her behavior and her speech. Throughout the exchange with the officer, Starr was so focused on how she spoke that sometimes she didn’t explain the shooting the way she wanted to. Starr’s code switching in this dialogue is almost counterintuitive, as she is too worried about the way she talks and not what she says. Throughout the novel, a theme of code switching and dialect-change is apparent for Starr as she speaks during an interview, talks to a grand jury, and speaks to a crowd during a protest.

In an article titled “Attitudes Towards Black English and Code Switching” by Lisa M. Koch et. al, they describe BE speakers as historically being regarded as “ignorant or lazy” and that even Middle-Class Black Americans’ views on BE speakers have become more “negative” (31). The concept that BE is strictly considered “ghetto” in Starr’s mind also shows the ingrained self-hatred that is depicted through the objectification and criticism of AAVE and the people that speak it. The language has, historically, been regarded as inferior to SE, so it is not surprising that AAVE speakers themselves have a derogatory opinion on the language and how its viewed in society.

## CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Although *The Hate U Give* was Thomas' first ever published novel, in the past two years her contributions to modern society and Black culture have been noted and discussed over several different platforms in an effort to understand our own society and the complexity of the social and racial tensions that still exist today. As a Black woman in the twenty-first century, Thomas used her novel to share the experiences of a culture that navigates through this country every day in a constant state of alert. W.E.B. Dubois called this the "double consciousness." Through Starr's search to find her voice and her identity, she changes the way she thinks about herself and her place in America. She begins to make decisions that show she is viewing her own culture and language as simply different from the standard rather than as inferior or wrong. This acceptance of herself is integral in the novel as it reinforces the use of AAVE, a language that is so important in Black culture.

The use of AAVE in the novel *The Hate U Give* directly contributes to societal structures and social movements that exist in modern society. Thomas captures the social and racial values and identities of the Black experiences in twenty-first century America through the use of this language.

I also conclude that code switching is a regular device found in Black culture that affects the way Black people communicate and connect with nonblack people. This becomes increasingly important as, with the rise of social media, more Black vernacular and culture is getting spread throughout the world in ways they have not before. More non-Black people are using linguistic features of AAVE like the copula deletion and dropped -s in third-person singular. More noticeably, however, is the increased use of Black slang in non-Black spaces and

in non-Black communities. When this occurs, it is important to understand the history and significance of AAVE and how it was widely viewed as a language of uneducated people just 50 years ago. Although code switching is a new term, Black people and minority communities of color have been doing it since they realized their vernacular was nonstandard. Now, as AAVE is seeping into White middle and upper-class communities through social media and globalization, AAVE seems to be a fad that people are trying out because it seems like a more entertaining way to speak rather than a historically oppressed language variety. It is important to note, however, that although AAVE is mainly spoken by Black people, there are other communities that grew up using the language because they grew up mainly in Black working-class communities.

Starr's double consciousness is not solely found in the context of this novel. Through her language, Starr finds a self-awareness that she didn't consciously know she possessed by code switching and changing the way she spoke when she was around non-AAVE speakers. This double consciousness connects the novel to modern society, as there are Black people today that hold the same idea of double consciousness in their minds when they speak to a supervisor as opposed to a friend back home.

Through AAVE, Thomas is able to capture the social and racial values of Black American life and the societal conditions we abide by in ways that haven't been discussed traditionally. The use of nonstandard language and code switching to critique modern society and social justice movements is a phenomenon that hasn't been seen in the twenty-first century, but will likely become the norm of Young Adult fiction as the years go on and more research is conducted. Thomas uses this language in order to reference the solidarity of Black culture in her novel and to also convey ideas and narratives of the cultural movement outside of her novel around the murders of people like Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Eric Gardner, and several

others. The use of AAVE in *The Hate U Give* brings a realness and concreteness to the text and the plot overall and truly signifies how language influences identity and, more specifically, the Black identity in the United States in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, a mere 65 years since the Civil Rights Movement began.

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