

Nonstandard morphosyntactic features are agreed to be the ones which are most stigmatized, but we have no information about their degree of influence on the evaluation of academic writing. It is perhaps most surprising that empirical work has not been carried out on this question in educational settings. This study looks at the degree to which AAVE morphosyntactic features and their frequency contribute to the evaluation of a secondary-level composition.

In this research, a secondary (senior high school) essay described as “excellent” by experienced teachers was selected for modification. The essay was first modified by 1) converting a number of more complex syntactic structures (e.g., apposition, subordination) into less complex ones (e.g., simple sentences or coordinate constructions) and 2) substituting higher-frequency (or less sophisticated) vocabulary for low-frequency (or more learned) vocabulary. Care was taken to preserve the content of the original (a description of democratic versus autocratic forms of government).

The original and modified versions were then further modified by having a number of AAVE morphosyntactic features (e.g., copula absence, ‘it’ replacement of ‘there’) inserted and then doubling the occurrence of each of those features. In all, six versions resulted: The original version, the simplified version, the original and simplified versions with both “light” and “heavy” frequency of AAVE features. These six versions were then submitted to middle and high school teachers and administrators in a large, Midwestern urban school system which has a significant proportion of African-American pupils. The educators were asked to evaluate the essay, using the traditional A,B,C,D,F grading system. Each respondent saw only one version of the essay, and detailed demographic information was sought for each of them. The form also provided room for written comment on the task.

We expect the unmodified version of the essay to rank highest, but we are particularly interested in whether the lexical/syntactic simplification or the addition of AAVE will be more significant in contributing to lower evaluations of the other versions. We will report on the degree to which reduction of lexical/syntactic sophistication and the presence (and intensity) of AAVE features relatively influenced this evaluation and also how rater age, sex, ethnicity, subject specialization, and length of teaching experience influenced the ratings.