

# **Voices in the Classroom**

*Linguistic Interactions and African American  
English in Early Childhood Education*

By

**Tanya M. Lewis-Jones**

Voices in the Classroom: Linguistic Interactions and African American English in Early Childhood Education

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## Dedication

To my grandmother, Verniece Adelia Bugg Powell Overby (Mumma). I love you and I miss you. Your legacy lives on in all of us. This book is offered in your honor.

To my mother, Gladys Louise Powell Lewis, all that I have learned about teaching and learning comes from you. Without you, this book would not exist. I love you.

To my daughters, Tomasilienne and Nyasha, you are the inspiration for this work. Y'all got next!

To Raphael, thank you and I love you.

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To God be the Glory!

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## Chapter 1

# Angela's Voice: The Crisis of Linguistic Justice in American Education

### Angela's Story: Where It All Began

In 1619, a ship carrying the first recorded Africans arrived on the shores of Virginia. Among these early arrivals was Angela, a woman forcibly taken from present-day Angola, not merely a historical footnote, but a human being with memories, loved ones left behind, and a voice that would echo through centuries.



**Figure 1.1a** *Angela: Speculative Portrait.* Artistic rendering inspired by archival references to "Angela/Angelo," an African woman listed in the 1625 Jamestown muster. This image humanizes the historical record; it is **not** a documentary likeness

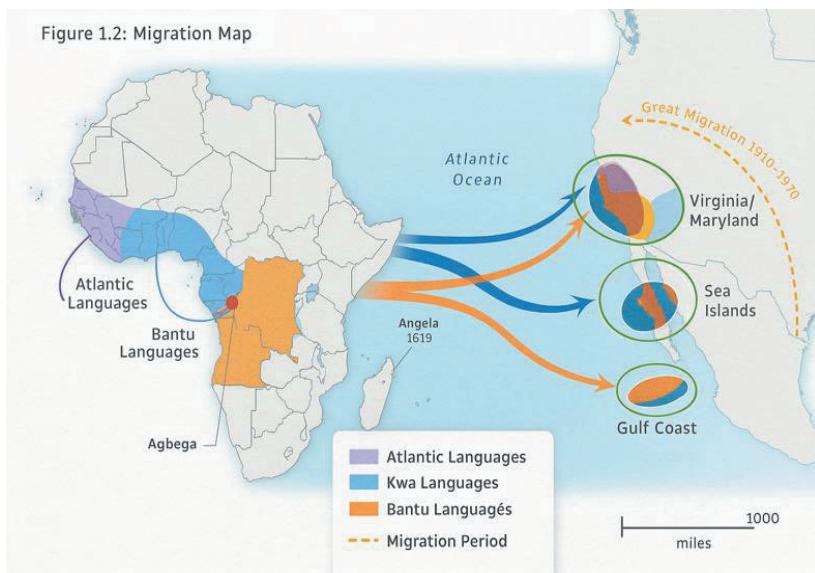


**Figure 1.1b** *Angela at Sea: The Middle Passage*. An imagined moment during forced Atlantic transit, evoking the confinement and uncertainty experienced by captives. Depicted restraints and setting are symbolic of maritime captivity practices of the era.



**Figure 1.1c** *Angela in Early Virginia: Field Labor*. Rendering of daily agricultural work in colonial Virginia. Scenes like this reflect the harsh conditions under which African people labored and formed new social and linguistic communities.

Angela stood on unfamiliar soil, her bare feet feeling the strange texture of Virginia earth. The salt air carried none of the scents of her Angolan homeland, no familiar cooking fires, no comforting mbanza drums in the distance. Most jarring was the cacophony of sounds assaulting her ears: harsh, incomprehensible words with none of the tonal richness of her native Kimbundu. How could she make herself understood when the very music of language had changed? Her throat tightened with fear, her tongue suddenly foreign in her own mouth.



**Figure 1.2** West/Central African Language Families and Diasporic Pathways to AAE Development

This map illustrates the geographic origins and diasporic pathways through which West and Central African language families contributed to African American English development. Kwa languages (blue), primarily from Ghana, Togo, Benin, and southwestern Nigeria, included Akan (Twi, Fante), Ewe, and Yoruba

varieties that contributed serial verb constructions, aspectual marking systems, and systematic copula alternations. Bantu languages (orange), from Central Africa including Angola and the Congo region, encompassed Kimbundu, Kikongo, and Umbundu varieties that provided complex aspectual systems, systematic copula absence patterns, and consonant cluster constraints. Angela, the Kimbundu speaker who arrived in Virginia in 1619, represents this Bantu linguistic heritage (red marker). Atlantic languages (purple), from the Senegambian coast to Liberia, included Wolof, Fulfulde, Temne, and Mende varieties contributing distinctive phonological patterns and discourse markers. Colored migration routes trace how these language families converged in specific American contact zones during the Middle Passage and subsequent forced migrations (1619-1808). Virginia/Maryland received mixed substrates from all three families, producing foundational AAE varieties with habitual “be,” copula absence, and aspectual “done” constructions. The Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia, with heavy Bantu and Kwa influence, developed Gullah/Geechee with the most conserved African features. Gulf Coast regions, influenced primarily by Kwa languages plus Bantu substrates, produced varieties with sophisticated aspectual systems and interactive discourse patterns. The Great Migration period (1910-1970, shown in dashed gold lines) redistributed these regional AAE varieties to Northern and Western urban centers, creating the systematic aspectual marking, phonological rules, and discourse patterns that characterize contemporary AAE. These features, which teachers encounter in today’s classrooms, reflect centuries of convergent linguistic development from multiple sophisticated African grammatical systems rather than approximations to English norms, connecting Angela’s 17<sup>th</sup>-century linguistic heritage to the gram-

matical knowledge that contemporary African American children bring to educational contexts.

As Angela's captors barked their foreign commands, she instinctively touched the small wooden amulet hidden beneath her tattered clothing, the last physical connection to her ancestral lands. Her fingers traced its familiar contours, finding in them sounds and syllables from home. This silent gesture of remembrance would become, unknowingly, her first act of linguistic resistance.

When they renamed her "Angelo, a Negar" in the 1624 muster roll, did they realize her true name still echoed in her heart? Each night, as she whispered prayers in her mother tongue, tears streaming down her face, she was preserving sounds that would subtly reshape the English forced upon her. Angela and her fellow captives carried with them more than memories, they carried the phonetic, syntactic, and tonal patterns of their native languages embedded in their very beings.

Angela's story represents one thread in a much larger tapestry of diasporic resilience. Across the Atlantic world, from the Creole languages of Haiti and Jamaica to Afro-Portuguese varieties in Brazil, Africans and their descendants restructured colonial languages in patterned, systematic ways. Angela was not an exception but part of a broader linguistic tradition of survival and creativity.

What emerged from this crucible of forced contact was not broken English, but the birth of a new linguistic system: African American English. Angela's voice—strained through trauma yet resilient with creativity—became the foundation for a language that would carry centuries of cultural wisdom, survival strategies, and artistic brilliance.

Yet too often, these children are corrected, silenced, or labeled as needing remediation as will be explored in later chapters. The same voices that carry centuries of cultural wisdom are heard as deficient, broken, or in need of correction.

## The Contemporary Crisis

Yet when four-year-old Marcus and six-year-old Aisha use the systematic features established in Chapter 1, they continue to face institutional correction rather than recognition, perpetuating the same fundamental choice Angela confronted: conform to linguistic demands or risk being labeled deficient.

Understanding this historical continuity is essential because it reveals that educational inequity is not accidental but architected. The theoretical frameworks that follow, sociolinguistic, raciolinguistic, and cultural resistance theories, emerge from this recognition that language evaluation has always been about power, not grammar.

The consequences could not be higher. When schools fail to recognize African American English (AAE) as a legitimate, structured linguistic variety, they perpetuate forms of educational apartheid that undermine both individual potential and collective justice.

In my own experience as a former school librarian in a predominantly African American charter school, I witnessed this contradiction daily. The student population was over 90% Black and over 90% qualified for free or reduced lunch, yet the entire kindergarten team had, for years, been composed of white women. As a younger Black woman, I was determined to be an example. My students gravitated to me, they noticed my shoes, my hair, and the way I told stories. When I read Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters aloud with joy,

sharing that my own daughter's name was Nyasha, I saw the deep emotional resonance that occurs when children see their cultural heritage affirmed rather than corrected in educational settings.

These moments revealed what happens when children's linguistic heritage is honored: engagement flourishes, identity strengthens, and learning deepens. Yet such affirmation remains the exception rather than the rule in American education.

## **Statement of Purpose**

This book examines how raciolinguistic ideologies; the ways that language evaluation is always already racialized shape educational experiences for African American children. Through historical analysis, theoretical frameworks, empirical research, and practical implementation strategies, it seeks to reimagine how educators understand, assess, and respond to linguistic diversity in educational contexts.

The central argument is that achieving educational equity requires more than policy reform or cultural sensitivity training. It demands a fundamental shift in how institutions listen to, evaluate, and respond to African American children's voices. This transformation must be grounded in:

- Recognition of AAE as cultural and linguistic capital.
- Reflection on the racist ideologies that have shaped educational practice.
- Redesign of curricula and assessments.
- Reparation for the harm caused by centuries of linguistic suppression.

The frameworks that follow, sociolinguistic, raciolinguistic, and cultural resistance provide the lenses needed to see Angela's legacy not only as history, but as the key to understanding why linguistic injustice persists in classrooms today.

## **Theoretical Foundations: Multiple Lenses for Understanding AAE**

To truly understand African American English and its role in education, we must examine it through three interconnected theoretical lenses that together illuminate AAE's complexity as both linguistic system and cultural artifact.

### **Sociolinguistic Theory: Language in Social Context**

The sociohistorical perspective positions AAE within specific historical contexts—from enslavement through the Great Migration to contemporary digital spaces, demonstrating how social conditions shape linguistic development. This theoretical lens reveals that language variation is not random but patterned, reflecting the social environments in which speakers live and interact.

Sociolinguistic theory, developed by scholars like William Labov, emphasizes that all linguistic varieties are equally complex and rule governed. This perspective challenges deficit models that position some language forms as “standard” and others as “non-standard.” Instead, sociolinguistic theory recognizes that linguistic features serve social functions, marking identity, group membership, and cultural values.

In educational contexts, sociolinguistic theory helps us understand that when African American children use AAE features, they are

not making “errors” but drawing on organized linguistic knowledge developed within their communities. Features like habitual “be” (indicating ongoing or recurring actions) or aspectual “done” (marking completed actions with current relevance) represent sophisticated grammatical distinctions that many languages make through similar mechanisms.

The theory also illuminates how code-switching, the ability to move between different linguistic varieties depending on context reflects advanced sociolinguistic competence rather than confusion or linguistic instability. When children demonstrate awareness of different audiences and adjust their speech accordingly, they display metalinguistic sophistication that deserves recognition rather than correction.

Lee's 2007 research offers a compelling reframe: when we approach African American English as a linguistic resource rather than something to correct, we strengthen how children learn to read and write. The key insight here is about metalinguistic awareness when students get the chance to examine and compare different language systems, something powerful happens. They develop a deeper understanding not just of language mechanics, but of how language works as a tool for meaning-making. What Lee demonstrates is that AAE isn't simply how some children communicate; it becomes a genuine pedagogical asset that can enrich academic learning. This is especially true in those early literacy years when children's natural language intuitions are at their most alive and accessible. Rather than asking students to set aside their home language, we can invite them into the kind of linguistic analysis that builds both comprehension and rhetorical sophistication.

Understanding sociolinguistic variation helps educators recognize that linguistic diversity is not a problem to solve but a resource to celebrate. Children who speak AAE come to school with rich linguistic knowledge that can be built upon rather than replaced.

### **Raciolinguistic Theory: Beyond Simple Dialect Difference**

Building on Flores and Rosa's (2015) groundbreaking work, raciolinguistic theory reveals how racialized perceptions of language have constructed AAE as "non-standard" despite its rule-governed nature. This theoretical framework moves beyond traditional sociolinguistic approaches to examine how language evaluation is inseparable from racial evaluation.

Raciolinguistic theory's central insight is that no matter how African American speakers modify their speech, they continue to be heard as linguistically deficient through what Rosa and Flores term the "white listening subject." This concept explains why linguistic features are evaluated differently depending on who speaks them. The same grammatical constructions that might be ignored or even celebrated when used by white speakers are criminalized when used by Black speakers.

The theory illuminates how linguistic appropriation operates in American culture. When white performers like Danielle Bregoli ("Bhad Barie") adopt AAE phonological patterns, syntactic structures, and cultural references, they can reconstruct these features into multi-million-dollar careers. Yet when African American children use identical features in educational settings, they face correction, remediation, or disciplinary action. This contradiction reveals that linguistic evaluation is never really about language - it's about race.

Raciolinguistic theory also explains why accommodationist approaches, those that focus on teaching African American children to code-switch or modify their speech often fail to address the underlying problem. Even when Black speakers acquire “standard” English, they continue to face discrimination based on racialized assumptions about their capabilities. The theory thus calls for reconfiguration approaches that challenge the listening practices and institutional structures that position Black voices as deficient.

For educators, raciolinguistic theory demands examination of their own listening practices. It requires honest reflection about whether they hear African American children’s language through deficit lenses and challenges them to develop what we might call “asset-based listening”—the ability to recognize linguistic brilliance regardless of the variety in which it appears.

The theory’s implications extend to assessment practices, curriculum design, and teacher preparation. If language evaluation is always already racialized, then creating equitable educational experiences requires transforming the ideological frameworks that shape how Black children’s voices are heard and valued in schools.

### **Cultural Resistance Theory: Language as Liberation Practice**

Geneva Smitherman’s pioneering scholarship describes AAE as “linguistic push-back”, a means by which African Americans have preserved cultural autonomy while navigating oppressive systems. This theoretical lens positions AAE not simply as a dialect or variety, but as a form of cultural resistance that has enabled survival, identity maintenance, and community building across centuries.

Cultural resistance theory recognizes that language practices carry political and cultural significance beyond their grammatical features. When African American communities maintain distinctive linguistic practices, they preserve connections to ancestral traditions, assert cultural independence, and create spaces of belonging within a society that often marginalizes their experiences.

This perspective helps explain why AAE has persisted and evolved despite centuries of systematic suppression. The language serves functions that extend far beyond communication, it creates solidarity, marks identity, and maintains cultural memory. Features like call-and-response patterns, narrative structures, and rhetorical strategies connect contemporary speakers to traditions rooted in African cultures and forged through experiences of resistance.

The theory also illuminates why efforts to eradicate AAE in educational settings often fail and why such efforts can be psychologically harmful. When schools demand that children abandon their home language practices, they ask them to reject fundamental aspects of their cultural identity. This creates internal conflict that can manifest as academic disengagement, behavioral challenges, or identity confusion.

Cultural resistance theory suggests that educational approaches should harness rather than suppress the creative and resistant potential of AAE. When children's linguistic practices are recognized as cultural resources, they can serve as bridges to academic learning rather than barriers to overcome.

The theory also reveals how AAE has consistently served as a vehicle for broader social movements. From the spirituals that coded resistance during slavery to the hip-hop lyrics that articulate contemporary social critique, AAE has provided the linguistic foundation for

African American cultural production that challenges dominant narratives and asserts alternative visions of social organization.

For educators, cultural resistance theory demands recognition that children's linguistic practices represent cultural inheritance deserving respect and affirmation. It challenges educators to see AAE not as a problem to fix but as a tradition to honor and a resource to build upon in supporting children's academic and social development.

## **Research Questions and Methodology Overview**

The empirical research presented in this book investigates several interconnected questions that emerge from these theoretical frameworks:

**Primary Research Question:** How do raciolinguistic ideologies manifest in early childhood assessment contexts, and what are the implications for educational equity?

**Secondary Questions:**

- In what ways does assessor racial identity influence linguistic interactions between adults and African American children?
- How do children's linguistic performances vary depending on the racial and cultural identity of their conversation partners?
- What are the broader implications of these micro-level dynamics for institutional revolution?

The methodology combines historical analysis, mixed-methods empirical research, and participatory action research approaches. This multi-method approach reflects recognition that understanding linguistic justice requires both macro-level historical analysis and micro-level examination of how ideologies become embodied in interpersonal interactions. The research design acknowledges that African American children's educational experiences cannot be separated from the broader historical and social contexts that have shaped how their voices are heard and valued in institutional settings.

### **African American English as Systematic Linguistic Variety**

To challenge deficit narratives that continue to circulate in educational settings, it is essential to understand AAE's sophisticated grammatical features. This linguistic variety represents a complete, rule-governed system with consistent phonological, morphological, and syntactic patterns that distinguish it from other English dialects while maintaining internal coherence.

Feature	Example	Explanation
Multiple negation	<i>He don't know nothing 'bout that.</i>	Two or more negative elements within a sentence
Zero copula	<i>He on his way to work.</i>	Omission of the copula 'be' verb
Habitual <i>be</i>	<i>We be working all day.</i>	Use of the verb 'be' to indicate a habitual action
Done as an auxiliary verb	<i>They done messed up the game.</i>	Use of 'done' to emphasize the completed nature of an action
Final consonant clustar reduction	<i>lift'</i> for 'lift'	Reduction of a cluster of final consonants
Unmarked possessive	<i>My brother_car</i>	Absence of the possessive suffix <i>-s'</i>

**Table 1.1** Selected AAE Grammatical Features with Examples, General American English Equivalents, and Systematic Rules

This table presents selected features frequently discussed in AAE linguistic research, demonstrating the systematic nature of grammatical patterns that children bring to educational contexts. These features represent sophisticated linguistic knowledge developed through centuries of creative adaptation and community transmission. When educators interpret these systematic patterns as "errors," they fail to recognize underlying linguistic competence and may inappropriately refer children for remediation. The aspectual systems, phonological patterns, and discourse features shown here connect directly to the African substrate influences mapped in Figure 1.2, illustrating how Angela's Kimbundu heritage contributed to grammatical innovations that persist in contemporary classrooms. Rather than viewing these features as deviations from General American English, educators should recognize them as evidence of complex grammatical knowledge that deserves affirmation.

mation and can serve as foundation for academic learning. Key research sources include aspectual systems (Labov, 1972; Green, 2002; Rickford, 1999), phonological patterns (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016; Thomas, 2007), discourse features (Smitherman, 1977, 2000; Morgan, 2002), and cross-linguistic parallels (Winford, 2003; Mufwene, 2001).

## **Phonological Features**

AAE demonstrates systematic sound patterns that reflect both historical influences and ongoing innovation. These patterns include final consonant cluster reduction (where “test” becomes “tes”), the merging of certain vowel sounds, and specific patterns of consonant deletion and substitution. Importantly, these are not random variations but follow predictable rules that speakers apply consistently across different words and contexts.

## **Morphological and Syntactic Patterns**

Perhaps most significantly, AAE employs aspectual markers that provide grammatical distinctions absent in other English dialects. The habitual “be” construction (“She be working hard”) indicates ongoing or recurring actions, while completive “done” (“I done finished”) marks actions completed with current relevance. These features represent sophisticated grammatical distinctions that many world languages encode through similar mechanisms.

Language	Habitual	Completive	Progressive
African American English (AAE)	<i>be</i> + V-ing (habitual "be") Example: <i>She be working late</i> Translation: 'She habitually works late'	<i>done</i> + past participle (“done” + past participle) Example: <i>I done finished</i> Translation: 'I have finished'	<i>BEEN</i> + V (stressed "BEEN" for remote past) Example: <i>She BEEN married</i> Translation: 'She has been married (for a long time)'
Yoruba	<i>máa n</i> + V ( <i>máa n</i> + V for recurrent actions) Example: <i>Ó màa n se</i> Translation: 'He/She habitually does it'	<i>ti</i> + V (“ <i>ti</i> ” + V) Example: <i>Mo ti pari</i> Translation: 'I have finished'	<i>n</i> + V ( <i>n</i> + V for progressive aspect) Example: <i>Ó n rógùn</i> Translation: 'He/She is improving'
Haitian Creole	<i>ap</i> + V ( <i>ap</i> + V for habitual actions) Example: <i>Li ap travay</i> Translation: 'He/She works (habitually)'	<i>fin</i> + V (“ <i>fin</i> ” + V) Example: <i>M fin fini</i> Translation: 'I have finished'	<i>ap</i> + V ( <i>ap</i> + V for progressive/time reference) Example: <i>Li ap boujoné</i> Translation: 'He/She is grumbling'

**Table 1** Habitual, Completive, and Progressive Aspectual Markers in AAE, Yoruba, and Haitian Creole

**Figure 1.3** Cross-linguistic Aspectual Marking Systems - AAE in Global Context

### Key Insight

Across languages, habitual, completive, and progressive aspects are marked differently but serve parallel grammatical functions, demonstrating how African American English aligns with global linguistic patterns observed in languages of West African and Caribbean Creole origin. These systematic correspondences suggest shared typological features in aspectual systems, with each language employing distinct morphosyntactic strategies to encode similar temporal and aspectual meanings.

**Note:** AAE = African American English; V = verb. Tone marks on Yoruba examples indicate phonemic tone distinctions (ò = low tone, ó = high tone, ñ = syllabic nasal with tone).

This comparison demonstrates that AAE's aspectual features represent systematic grammar found globally, not deviations from English norms. The table shows how AAE's habitual "be," complete "done," and remote "been" constructions parallel aspectual systems in Yoruba (a major substrate language), Haitian Creole (developed under similar contact conditions), and other world languages including Mandarin Chinese, Russian, and Portuguese. These cross-linguistic patterns reveal that when African American children use aspectual markers, they demonstrate mastery of temporal relationships that many languages require—intellectual sophistication that deserves recognition rather than correction. The systematic nature of these features, documented across multiple language families, challenges deficit narratives by positioning AAE within global patterns of grammatical complexity. Angela's Kimbundu aspectual system contributed to this sophisticated temporal marking that contemporary children continue to demonstrate in educational contexts, connecting centuries of linguistic creativity to present-day classroom interactions.

AAE also demonstrates regular patterns in negation, question formation, and verbal constructions. The use of "ain't" follows consistent grammatical rules, multiple negation serves emphatic functions common across world languages, and copula deletion occurs in predictable linguistic environments.