

# Intentional Diction, Code Switching and Character Development -- Oh My!

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## Overview:

Nelson Mandela once famously said, “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.” Learners are taught that diction is “the choice of particular words as opposed to others” (ITS English Literature Dictionary). This definition fails to address the element of diction that makes it personal. This unit will look at ways diction is used to address a specific audience. For example, country singer Blake Sheldon sings “Honey Bee” employing such lyrics as “I’ll be your Louisiana. You’ll be my Mississippi.” While these lyrics can be understood by all people, they take on a particular familiarity for Southerners who feel a sense of home hearing the names of those states. The song goes on to express how attractive a girl is by saying “You’ll be my honeybee.” The hip hop artist Ludacris writes a song that’s thematically similar called “My Chick Bad”. The song addresses how attractive a girl is using words that connote something different than sweet. He says, “My chick bad, my chick hood/ My chick do stuff that yo chick wish she could.” These lyrics can also be understood by all people but to a farm-dwelling Southerner, these lyrics might not evoke the same sense of home that “Honey Bee” did. I use these songs because they bring up issues of intentional diction.

Analyzing the diction of a narrator leads to deeper understanding of narrator and audience. By having learners connect a speaker’s tone and diction to their actions, learners can have a deeper understanding of character and can recognize the importance of their own language. I want them to know that *who* says it is as important as *what* is said. For that reason I’ll have them read “The Lesson” and “A Story in Harlem Slang” where the voice is *essential* to understanding the theme. I’ll also have them read “If I Were a Poor Black Kid” by Gene Marks (an article criticized because of the perspective it’s coming from). Putting these next to each other stresses how important it is to use tone and diction appropriate to your audience. By further connecting those actions to upbringing, learners can recognize the importance of their own language. Studying voice prompts a study of stories’ biographical and historical implications. By focusing on stories that use various African American dictions, learners can come to a greater understanding of the benefits of using language appropriate to the group one belongs to, the importance of code switching and the efficacy of extending oneself to different groups and learning different codes.

Brian McLucas wrote a narrative about his experience in an African American Vernacular English (AAVE) class, which notes advantage of AAVE (namely having more utility and receiving more social acceptance). McLucas's narrative does not deny the advantage of using Standard English in the marketplace but he does stress AAVE's ability to convey more using fewer words. His narrative brings up important issues of the utility of AAVE that I would like learners to discuss.

Jeffrey Groger did a study on the earnings of black workers whose speech could be distinctly identified as black. This could be used to spark a discussion of market-place English. Learners will read "Brothers & Sisters" by Bebe Moore Campbell and further flesh out the correlation between the workplace and speaking Standard English.

The origins of African American speech patterns are important to understand as it's such a crucial aspect of in-group and out-group speak today. In the 1800s Africans were brought to America without consideration of putting Africans of like-language together. In fact, putting people who spoke the same language on the same plantation was discouraged because masters wanted full control of their slaves. What better way to achieve control than to enslave among a group of people who have trouble communicating with each other? In order to communicate African Americans were forced to establish pidgins that have made their way into African American Vernacular English today.

Learners will know other AAVE "isms" and we'll discuss why we use these and what they express. (We'll also discuss the "problems" associated with white people adopting AAVE "isms" and how that's different from other language learning.)

It's important that learners see AAVE as historically rooted but also as useful today. James Irving argues that black Americans have been robbed of their culture and are trying to create their own culture—something that they can identify with separate from the culture that oppressed them—and the continuation of AAVE is a large part of this identity-finding. James Baldwin makes a similar argument in "If Black English isn't a Language, Tell Me What is." Irving doesn't think that AAVE, at this point, could be approached "in a respectful manner by someone who isn't black" (McLucas). He argues that blacks are at an advantage because they can belong to multiple groups and switch between languages in a way that whites cannot. My hope is that learners recognize the advantages of becoming fluent in several languages and work to navigate the languages that will make them powerful.

### **Rationale:**

In tenth grade, building self-awareness is crucial. Without proper self-awareness 10<sup>th</sup> graders are easily swayed by outside influences that have detrimental long-term effects. My goal teaching 10<sup>th</sup> graders is to ground them in a proud self-identity. They will try to do this by analyzing stories for their biographical and historical implications, by answering questions about the African American history that stories are coming out of, and by connecting their welfare with their actions and attitudes toward others. By pushing learners to analyze the diction of stories such as "The Lesson" by Toni Cade Bambara and "A Story in Harlem Slang" by Zora Neale Hurston, I hope to get learners asking questions about the kind of audience for which the

narrators are writing, the implications of their dialect on readers, and the assumptions we make about people given their speech. I will supplement the fiction reading with non-fiction narratives and studies on African American Vernacular English and Standard American English. These texts will be used to generate discussion and metacognitive thought about learners' use of language as well as to spark analysis of the stories and to help learners address PA State Standard 1.2.10.B: "assess the accuracy of facts presented in different types of informational texts by using a variety of texts and sources from all academic content areas identifying bias or propaganda where present."

Defining language becomes crucial in evaluating how much credence to give to a particular syntax and use of diction. Since learners are also asked to identify argument in non-fiction texts, reading James Baldwin's "If Black English isn't a Language then Tell Me What Is" becomes not only a worthwhile exercise in argument identification but also important in terms of drawing out the implications of dialect in the stories they read. It also explains the origins of AAVE from combining different African languages through what are known as pidgins.

In addition to this identity-centered discussion around voice, I would like to tie into learners' prior knowledge about point of view, reliable narrators, and the way tone and diction contribute to voice. Characterization is worked so intricately into speaker's voices that some discussion of this inter-relation is essential. Diction and tone can convey a lot about a character's motivation. The goal is for learners to see voice as a combination of language style, diction and tone and recognize the efficacy of expanding their own voice to reflect their ambitions.

**Strategies:**

I will begin with a lesson on voice encouraging learners to differentiate between a speaker's tone (attitude) and diction (choice of words). I will give learners 2 different short clips where **the tone remains the same**. The learners will identify the diction (given a box of diction words). For example:

Quote	Tone	Diction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You malefactor! Get your sophomoric wit and spurious stories off my property with celerity! I never want to see your appalling visage again.</li> </ul>	Irate	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Yo you grimy! I don't never want you by my crib. You drawl. You fraud.</li> </ul>	Irate	

Then I will give the learners 2 different clips where **the diction remains the same**. The learners will identify the tone (given a box of tone words). For example:

Quote	Tone	Diction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You inarticulate boor! You think this extravagant resort would house the likes of your unscrupulous self?</li> </ul>		Pompous
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You must understand that your argument is untenable. We cannot</li> </ul>		Pompous

support the inconsequential during the formative hours of our resort.		
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After telling learners that *voice* is made up of tone and diction, I will give learners different clips of speech from the characters in “The Lesson” by Toni Morrison and have them draw a line from the character’s quote to what the character wants. They will have to write why they matched that character with that want without having read the story. (It should be associated with that character’s voice in the quote).

After learners distinguish between tone and diction they will read “The Lesson” by Toni Cade Bambara and they’ll identify the speaker’s diction and tone. They will analyze why the speaker describes Ms. Moore the way she does. They will separate what they *know* about the characters from what they *can infer* about them. Details like the fact that Ms. Moore once went to college and came back to the main character’s neighborhood to look after young people’s education and the fact that Miss Moore always looked like she was going to church, gives the learners an idea of what kind of woman she is.

Details like the fact that the speaker is shoved off with siblings and cousins when her mother is “in a la-de-da apartment having a good ole time” forces learners to make connections between the character’s actions and character upbringing. They can connect these inferences with the connections they already made about the character’s voice. From there learners will write a short 2 paragraph piece arguing what the main character’s (Sylvia) ambitions are and how her circumstances may have contributed to those ambitions.

Recently there has been a lot of hype about an article by Gene Marks called “If I Were a Poor Black Kid.” The author is a middle aged white guy from a middle class white background who comes up with obviously middle class and middle aged values for poor black kids to take on. Learners will have to identify whether or not Sylvia would have ever listened to Gene Marks and why. They will then analyze whether people listened to Sylvia. We will elicit some discussion of the fact that speaking to people in like circumstances with like ambitions can be a lot more effective than speaking outside one’s experience. We will come back to code switching and talk about the ability to relate to several experiences using different types of language.

From there I will introduce Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and have learners place the speaker and Ms. Moore on different levels of his hierarchy. They will then have to describe how their needs contribute to the way they speak by modeling this practice with other speakers.

After they make connections between character upbringing, character motivation and character voice, they are ready to discuss code switching and the value of AAVE versus the value of Standard English. Learners will read Brian McLucas’s narrative about his experience in an AAVE class. They will answer some questions on the reading to gain a basic understanding of the difference between AAVE and SE and the advantages of each. They will then break up into pairs and complete a “Critical Discussion” about their own use of language. These discussions are directed by a group of 10 mandatory discussion questions that must be read aloud and responded to by each group member (audio recorded). Any additional questions they come up with for extra credit are to be written down and discussed at length on the audio-recording.

We'll then get back into a whole class discussion about their own use of language and the advantages of AAVE and SAE.

Following the discussion on the advantages of AAVE versus SAE learners will read an excerpt from "Brothers and Sisters" by Bebe Moore Campbell. This story is about Esther, a clerk at a bank who is hiring a new teller. She has to choose between a highly qualified white man she had almost already decided on named David Weaver and an African American teenager who walked in named LaKeesha Jones. Both candidates are highly qualified for different reasons. The factors that go into Esther's choice candidate tie in well to the discussion we'll have had the day before about students own use of language, the perception of AAVE versus the perception of SAE, and their knowledge of when to identify as part of a small group rather than when to appeal to part of the larger culture. I will cut the ending off the story and learners will have to write their own (saying whether or not Esther gives the woman the job, what the woman's reaction will be, and how she will act once working or decidedly not working). This creative writing exercise forces learners to apply their experience code-switching and their knowledge of linking character motivation and background to character voice in a story ending that they write themselves. Learners can compare and contrast the ending they wrote with the ending that Moore-Campbell provided.

Learners will make a board circling different tones they use, the type of diction they use when they speak in that tone, and they will write a 1-2 sentence clip of how they would speak using that diction and tone.

Then learners will be given an excerpt from Jeffrey Groger's study on "Speech Patterns and Racial Wage Inequality." In this piece Groger conducted a study to investigate whether the way people speak influenced the amount of money they make. In his study a bunch of people (black and white) were asked questions by a black interviewer. Their conversations were audio-recorded and played back to listeners. 80% of the time listeners distinguished whether the speakers were black or white. They were not able to tell how much schooling the speakers had or what part of the country they were from. Controlling for factors such as education and test scores, speakers whose speech could clearly be identified as "black" earned on average 12% less than whites and other black speakers whose speech was **not** clearly identified as "black". After reading and answering questions on this article, learners will get a chance to listen to their own critical discussions and identify aspects of their own speech that are AAVE or SE. They will then do a second critical discussion about their reactions to the article and whether or not they perceive the findings as accurate. They could launch into possible reasons for the discrepancy between the way one sounds and the amount of money one makes. They could also look into reasons that people perceive different types of voices in different ways.

After talking about AAVE and its disadvantage in the marketplace, we'll read "A Story in Harlem Slang" by Zora Neale Hurston to get an idea of the advantages of AAVE among African American peers. To kick off this story reading, students will take notes on a lecture on the origins of black speech patterns.

Learners will come up with AAVE “isms” and we’ll discuss why we use these and what they express. We’ll also discuss the “problems” associated with white people adopting AAVE “isms” and how that’s different from other language learning.

From there we’ll read the narrative of a black man named Irving who claimed to feel totally out of place originally when he began speaking German around native Germans. However, speaking German helped him to understand what the Germans were all about. He said that whites who want to speak AAVE should not follow his German example because: “Germans have an established language and culture respected by most people.” (McLucas) Irving argued that Black Americans have been robbed of their culture and are trying to create their own culture separate from the culture that oppressed them—and the continuation of AAVE is a large part of this identity-finding. Irving doesn’t think that AAVE, at this point, could be approached “in a respectful manner by someone who isn’t black” (McLucas).

We’ll move from there into a discussion of “jive” talk during the Harlem Renaissance. We’ll talk about the 2<sup>nd</sup> Great migration and how more “adjusted” blacks rejected the newly arrived migrants because of their speech. Speaking jive was a way of proving one belonged in the North. The language people associate themselves with plays a key role in the group with which they want to belong. We’ll talk about the advantages of belonging to multiple groups and switching between languages.

At this point learners will read “A Story in Harlem Slang” by Zora Neale Hurston. It’s interesting to note that the main character (Jelly) is not the one telling the story. By investigating who named him, what they named him, and the fact that after a month of living on Lenox Avenue he changed his name to Jelly, we are led to the significance of living in Harlem. We are also led to make history-to-text connections about the effect of Harlem on transplanted Southerners.

We will go on to investigate the kind of authority that Jelly has and the fact that he gets this authority by “eyeballing” others and laughing full of scorn and pity. He also gets a certain amount of authority from giving the pimp’s sign. The impression of Jelly as one with swag can launch us into a discussion of the role of swag in today’s society and what it can mean aside from wealth. It is nice to look at swag in terms of what it says about security. This leads to our bigger discussion of pretenses.

Looking into the fact that Jelly’s hungry and the one mistake he makes is being honest about his hunger. This leads to a further understanding about the importance of pretenses in this newly made Harlem society. It’s important throughout our story that we point out that these pretenses are featured most prominently in Jelly’s speech. Other pretenses the learners should be able to pick out are the fact that Jelly claims to like white women better than black women (and we’re under the impression this does *not* have to do with color only but due to the fact that Jelly saw whiteness as a sign of money and he was hungry). We can pick out his reluctance to admit that he’s from the South or his reluctance to admit that he’s broke. The story ends with Jelly contemplating the South for a second and forgetting to look cool. Looking at this scene for pretenses we can see the utter desperation of Jelly’s situation and why and how diction becomes an important part of who he is (or who he’d like to be).

Learners will complete the unit with an essay evaluating the extent to which diction makes us who we'd like to be using evidence from "A Story in Harlem Slang," "The Lesson," the Brian McLucas AAVE narrative, the Jeffrey Groger study, Gene Marks' article "If I Were a Poor Black Kid," and James Baldwin's "If Black English isn't a Language then Tell Me What is."

### **Objectives**

- Make history-to-text connections
- Identify voice, tone, style and diction
- Explain how diction shows character motivation
- Explain how character motivation is driven by character background
- Explain how different historical realities are related
- Identify main ideas in fiction and non-fiction texts
- Write about theme (spanning non-fiction and fiction texts)
- Apply issues of race (from an African American perspective in the 1800s) to issues of race (from a white perspective in 2012)
- Use appropriate tone and diction
- Make text-to-self connections
- Draw links between causes and effects
- Analyze diction and tone
- Make and defend a point

### **Classroom Activities**

#### **Lesson #1: To walk the walk, you have to talk the talk**

##### **Lesson Overview:**

In this lesson learners will be introduced to voice (the basic vision of a writer/speaker) made up of tone (speaker attitude) and diction (speaker word choice). Learners will get clips where the tone remains the same and they have to identify the diction (given a box of diction words) and then clips where the diction remains the same but they have to identify the tone (given a box of tone words). Learners will look at clips of speech from the characters in "The Lesson" by Tony Cade Bambara and draw a line from the character's quote to what they infer that the character wants. They will then have to write why they matched that character with that want without having read the story. Their reasons should be associated with that character's voice in the quote. Learners will also connect character actions to character upbringing by drawing inferences around the story "The Lesson."

##### **Instructional Objectives**

Students will: discuss the difference between tone and diction

- Identify a speaker's diction and tone
- Connect character voice with character ambition
- Connect character actions with character upbringing
- Make inferences
- Listen critically and respond to others in small and large group situations.

##### **Instructional Plan**

Give learners two examples of angry speakers telling someone to get off their property. In one example the speaker's diction is supercilious and they're speaking Standard English. In the other example the speaker's diction is disgusted and speaking in African American Vernacular English. For a Do Now learners will be asked to identify (a) what message the speaker is delivering and (b) how they're trying to accomplish their message. Learners will discuss their answers and then be given two more examples of speakers telling someone they can't stay in a certain hotel. Both speakers use Standard English and condescending diction but the tone of one speaker is indignant and the tone of the other is sympathetic.

Learners will then get excerpts from "The Lesson" by Tone Cade Bambara along the left side of a paper. Along the right side they will get a list of character ambitions. Learners will draw a line from the characters' quotes to what the character wants. They then will say why they matched a certain character to a certain want. I will elicit answers associated with that character's voice in the quote.

After distinguishing between tone and diction, learners will read "The Lesson." They will analyze why the speaker describes Ms. Moore the way she does. Learners will fill out a chart separating what they *know* about the characters from what they *can infer* about them to connect character actions to characters' ambitions. Then learners will make connections between characters' actions and character upbringing. They can connect these inferences with the connections they made about the character's voice.

From there I will introduce Maslow's hierarchy of needs and have learners place the characters on different levels of the hierarchy. They will then put themselves on different levels of the hierarchy explaining why they put themselves and the characters on each. They will describe how the needs of each person on their sheet contributes to the way they speak by using sound recorder and explaining their sheet to a partner.

Recently there has been a lot of hype about an article by Gene Marks called "If I Were a Poor Black Kid." The article is ridiculous for several reasons (the most obvious being that the author is a middle aged white guy from a middle class white background who comes up with obviously middle class and middle aged values for kids to take on). Learners will have to identify whether or not Sylvia would have ever listened to Gene Marks and why. They will then analyze whether people listened to Sylvia. We will elicit some discussion of the fact that speaking to people in like circumstances with like ambitions can be a lot more effective than speaking outside one's experience. We will come back to code switching and talk about the ability to relate to several experiences using different types of language.

Following this discussion learners will begin their POU (performance of understanding)—a project that will grow with them throughout the course of this unit. The POU for this unit is a Tone & Diction Diary done in Microsoft One Note, where we can easily attach video footage, writing, and audio recordings. The first reflection they'll have to write comes from video footage I'll upload to their notebooks from the beginning of the year. Learners will identify how someone conveys an angry tone, how someone conveys amusement and whether elevated diction correlates with success in school. Learners will then write a reflection on the different speech clips. The next day, learners will come in and analyze their own speech writing about (1) speech habits they already have that help them to express themselves (2) speech habits they already have



that make people think less of them (3) goals they have for growing as a speaker this year (4) someone (famous or local) whose speech they admire, and what they admire about it.

**PA Standards:** 1.1.10A, B, D; 1.3.10C; 1.5.10 C

**Assessment:**

Do Now: Tone & Diction Chart

Inference in “The Lesson” Questions and Chart

Audio Recording of how needs contribute to the way we speak

3 paragraphs on whether or not Sylvia would have ever listened to Gene Marks and why

Tone & Diction Diary—tone & diction entries (videos I provide)

Tone & Diction Diary—entries they write based on their own speech

**Lesson 2: You are what you say. Ain’t you?**

**Instructional Objectives**

Students will:

- Distinguish styles and appropriate uses for them
- Identify voice, tone, style and diction
- Identify main ideas in fiction and non-fiction texts
- Write about theme (spanning non-fiction and fiction texts)
- Use appropriate tone and diction for a given audience
- Make text-to-self connections

**Instructional Plan**

Learners read Brian McLucas’s narrative about his experience in an AAVE class. They will answer some questions on the reading to gain a basic understanding of the difference between AAVE and SE styles and the advantages of each.

They will then break up into pairs and complete a “Critical Discussion” about their own use of language. These discussions are directed by a group of 10 mandatory discussion questions that must be read aloud and responded to by each group member (audio recorded). Any additional questions they come up with for extra credit are to be written down and discussed at length on the audio-recording. We’ll then get back into a whole class discussion about their own use of language and the advantages of AAVE and SAE.

At this point I will re-introduce learners to their Tone & Diction Diary POU. It includes (1) analyzing recordings of other people, (2) recording themselves during interviews (among friends and when interviewed by an educator) (3) several self-video reflections. They’ll watch two job interviews of candidates who would like to teach at our school. A series of questions about the style of English the candidates use will follow.

Learners will then read an excerpt from “Brothers and Sisters” by Bebe Moore Campbell. This story is about Esther (a clerk at a bank who is hiring a new teller). She has to choose between a highly qualified white man and an African American teenager who walked in named LaKeesha Jones. Both candidates are highly qualified for different reasons. The factors that go into Esther’s choice candidate tie in well to the discussion we’ll have had the day before about

students own use of language, the perception of AAVE versus the perception of SAE, and their knowledge of when to identify as part of a small group rather than when to appeal to part of the larger culture. I will cut the ending off the story and learners will have to write their own (saying whether or not Esther gives the woman the job, what the woman's reaction will be, and how she will act once working or decidedly not working). This creative writing exercise forces learners to apply their experience code-switching and their knowledge of linking character motivation and background to character voice in a story ending that they write themselves.

Learners will be given the opportunity to read their own endings to the Moore-Campbell piece. We'll follow their analysis of the story with an actual reading of the story's ending. Learners can compare and contrast the ending they wrote with the ending that Moore-Campbell provided.

Then learners will be given an excerpt from Jeffrey Groger's study on "Speech Patterns and Racial Wage Inequality." In this piece Groger conducted a study to investigate whether the way people speak influenced the amount of money they make. In his study a bunch of people (black and white) were asked questions by a black interviewer. Their conversations were audio-recorded and played back to listeners. 80% of the time listeners distinguished whether the speakers were black or white. They were not able to tell how much schooling the speakers had or what part of the country they were from. Controlling for factors such as education and test scores, speakers whose speech could clearly be identified as "black" earned on average 12% less than whites and other black speakers whose speech was not clearly identified as "black".

After reading and answering questions on this article, learners will get a chance to listen to their own critical discussions and identify aspects of their own speech that are AAVE or SE. They will then do a fourth Tone & Diction Diary entry about their reactions to the article and whether or not they perceive the findings as accurate. They could launch into possible reasons for the discrepancy between the way one sounds and the amount of money one makes. They could also look into reasons that people perceive different types of voices in different ways.

Learners then need to interview each other (video record—5<sup>th</sup> Tone & Diction diary entry) for the bank job LaKeesha Jones applied for applying the proper tone and diction for a job interview to their interviews.

**PA Standards:** 1.1.10A, B, D; 1.3.10B, C; 1.5.10 C; 1.6.10A, C

**Assessment:**

Read and answer questions on Brian McLucas piece

Critical Discussion of students' own use of language (audio recorded)

Tone & Diction Diary Entry on job interviews

Writing Their Own Ending to Bebe Moore Campbell piece

Analysis questions on Jeffrey Groger's study

Tone & Diction Diary Entry (Listening analysis on their own audio-recorded critical discussion earlier)

Tone & Diction Diary Recording: record themselves interviewing and being interviewed for the bank job LaKeesha Jones applied for.

### **Lesson 3: High thoughts must have high language.**

#### **Instructional Objectives**

- Apply issues of race (from an African American perspective in the 1800s) to issues of race (from a white perspective in 2012)
- Analyze the benefits and detriments of AAVE
- Use non-fiction texts to support a point
- Identifying differences in tone (when and what can change about them to prove a point)

#### **Instructional Plan**

Learners will receive direct instruction on the origins of African American Vernacular English in America. One theory about how AAVE began is from a pidgin. Pidgins are simplified syntactical phrases that could transcend “close” tribal differences and be understood by people from different places. Masters who needed to speak to slaves who knew very limited English would use these simplified subject-verb constructions. Slaves from different regions who needed to communicate with each other adopted pidgins as well. As Africans began to learn English these pidgin verb constructions made their way into the vernacular. Often times these verb constructions are more expressive than traditional verb constructions. Check out the form of expressing the verb “to be” in AAVE:

James happy = James is happy right now

James be happy = James is usually happy/a happy person

These two ways of describing James' happiness both drop/shorten the verb to convey different ideas. Also:

James been done his homework=James finished his homework a while ago.

The addition of "been" to the 3rd sentence stresses how far past the action was.

There was a tendency to drop the use of a possessive marker.

John's cousin= John cousin

There is a use of multiple negation.

"Can't no one tell you you ain't somebody." (Jessie Jackson)

Learners will know other AAVE “isms” and we’ll discuss why we use these and what they express. (We’ll also discuss the “problems” associated with white people adopting AAVE “isms” and how that’s different from other language learning.)

Learners will then read James Baldwin’s “If Black English isn’t a Language then Tell Me What Is?” AAVE, in addition to being historically rooted is useful today. We’ll review James Irving’s argument that black Americans have been robbed of their culture and are trying to create their own culture—something that they can identify with separate from the culture that oppressed them—and the continuation of AAVE is a large part of this identity-finding. We’ll discuss this idea of identity finding in language. We’ll review an article from earlier where James Irving stated his belief that he doesn’t think that AAVE, at this point, could be approached “in a respectful manner by someone who isn’t black” (McLucas). He argues that blacks are at an advantage because they can belong to multiple groups and switch between languages in a way that whites cannot. Learners will write a Tone & Diction diary entry on whether they believe Irving’s assertion that Black English cannot be approached respectfully by someone who isn’t black.

From this reading, learners will go into a critical discussion about their language (How often do they use AAVE to make someone feel better—using terms of endearment—[Hey girl, what’s wrong]? Do they use AAVE as a social tool? When? What are the more “ghetto” things they’ve heard people say? What’s their reaction to hearing this? Are black people portrayed as “ghetto” on the news? Do they think there are any problems with the way the news is done?)

After that discussion we’ll read two articles about courts that took on the issue of Ebonics in schools. In one court case (the Ann Arbor, MI case: [http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~engl21-c/africanamerican\\_engl.htm](http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~engl21-c/africanamerican_engl.htm)) the court ruled that teachers had to train kids in Standard English as they spoke AAVE (a different language). Learners will write whether they think this ruling was the right thing to rule and why. In the other disagreement, The Oakland Ebonics Controversy, Oakland mandated instruction in dialect “both for maintaining the legitimacy and richness of such language and to facilitate [students’] acquisition and mastery of English skills” (Rickford). Unfortunately the ruling was misunderstood. Some people thought teachers would have to teach Ebonics. Others believed that the ruling implied African Americans were genetically predisposed toward a certain language. Others believed the law meant more money would be given to ESOL classes. In fact the law only meant that teachers had to recognize AAVE and give instruction on how to speak Standard English.

For their Tone & Diction Diaries learners now have to do a news report on the court ruling in the Ann Arbor Michigan case *or* the Oakland California Case. The goal of this project is for learners to synchronize their message with their tone. The news reports will be sent to St. Mary’s High School—a Catholic school in San Francisco. These students will grade the news editorials on message, style, and diction.

In the first lesson my learners wrote a Tone & Diction diary entry about the tone, diction and style that best conveyed them as a person. I will encourage them to recall that diary entry when they present their news editorial. This is a matter of speaking consistently with the message of their piece. Students are allowed to speak in African American Vernacular English or in Standard English. They may wear blazers or hoodies. They have to speak an editorial in their most convincing authentic language about what the courts ruled in these cases, how people may have taken it too far...or may not have taken it far enough, and what they propose we should do about the problem of language. In their report they must make a point about the importance of language, the role of AAVE and Standard English in our society, and whether African American Vernacular English and Standard English should be on their way to convergence or divergence. The students in San Francisco will send back a grade of Advanced, Proficient, Basic, Novice or Unacceptable in the categories of message, style and diction and they’ll have to provide comments as to why they gave learners the grade they gave them.

The learners will be forced to think about how they’re perceived by others, how they’re perceived by peers and whether their language is authentic.

**PA Standards:** 1.1.10A, B, D, 1.4.10A, 1.5.10C, 1.6.10 A, B

**Assessment:**

- Note-taking worksheet on the origins of African American Vernacular English

- List of AAVE “isms” where they add 3 of their own
- Answer discussion questions on James Baldwin’s “If Black English isn’t a Language then Tell Me What Is?”
- Tone & Diction diary entry on whether they believe Irving’s assertion that Black English cannot be approached respectfully by someone who isn’t black.
- Questions on Ann Arbor Ebonics and the Oakland Ebonics controversy
- Critical discussion about their own language (audio record)
- Tone & Diction Diary News Report on the court ruling in the Ann Arbor Michigan case or the Oakland California Case. The goal of this project is for learners to synchronize their message with their tone.

## Annotated Bibliography/Resources

### Teachers Use:

Baldwin, James. “If Black English isn’t a Language, then Tell Me What Is.” *The New York Times On the Web*. 29 July 1979. Web. 19 May 2012 <

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-english.html>.> This piece explains that language is politically rooted and as such, the politics of American slavery renders “Black English” very much a language. Learners will use this piece as a springboard for discussion.

“History of African American English in the U.S. Northern Arizona University.” Web. 19 May 2012. < [http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~eng121-c/africanamerican\\_engl.htm](http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~eng121-c/africanamerican_engl.htm).> This article explains the origins of Black English through pidgins dating back to the slave trade. He mentions modern controversies with African American Vernacular English such as the Oakland Ebonics Controversy and the situation in Ann Arbor Michigan.

Rickford, John R. “The Ebonics Controversy in my Backyard: A Sociolinguist's Experiences and Reflections.” *Department of Linguistics Stanford University* (1999) Web. 19 May 2012. This article describes in detail the issues behind the Oakland Ebonics Controversy. It lays out what the law said and various ways it was misinterpreted.

Smitherman, Geneva and John Baugh. “The Shot Heard from Ann Arbor: Language Research and Public Policy in African America.” *Howard Journal of Communications* Volume 13, Issue 1, 2002.  
<<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/106461702753555012#preview>.>  
Web. 19 May 2012. This article lays out the controversy surrounding the boys attending Martin Luther King Elementary School in Ann Arbor, MI and the ruling that stated they needed to be trained in Standard English so they could compete on a level playing field with all the other kids.

Straker, David. “Maslow’s Hierarchy” *Changing Minds*. Web. 19 May 2012.  
<<http://changingminds.org/explanations/needs/maslow.htm>>. This article explains Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Often times people’s needs correspond with the tone they use and learners will have to use their notes on the hierarchy to fill out a tone and diction chart.

## Learners Use:

Bambara, Toni Cade. "The Lesson." <http://cai.ucdavis.edu/gender/thelesson.html>. This story is one where the protagonist's voice is essential to the theme of the story. The main character's language is that of a pretend tough teenager when the theme of the story is toughness and how much it can't be conveyed through pretences.

Campbell, Bebe Moore. "Brothers and Sisters." Berkeley: The Berkeley Publishing Group, 1994. Print. This is a story illustrating the correlation between the workplace and speaking Standard English. It is the springboard to a discussion learners will have on Standard English versus African American Vernacular English.

Grogger, Jeffrey. "Speech Patterns and Racial Wage Inequality." *Harris School Working Paper Series* 08.13 (2009). Web. 19 May 2012.  
<[http://harrisschool.uchicago.edu/about/publications/working-papers/pdf/wp\\_08\\_13.pdf](http://harrisschool.uchicago.edu/about/publications/working-papers/pdf/wp_08_13.pdf)>.

Hurston, Zora Neale. "A Story in Harlem Slang." [http://www.copperbeechstudios.com/fdu-lit-nyc/texts/hurston\\_story\\_in\\_harlem\\_slang.pdf](http://www.copperbeechstudios.com/fdu-lit-nyc/texts/hurston_story_in_harlem_slang.pdf). This is another example of a story about pretenses and language. The main character's language is that of a Harlem gangster though he is really a broke man from the South trying to fit in.

Marks, Gene. "If I Were a Poor Black Kid." *Forbes Magazine*. (2011). Web. 19 May 2012. This article was highly criticized. In it a middle aged white man told poor black kids what choices they should make. The language does not match his purported audience and the tone does not seem to be sympathetic to the poor black kids he's talking about. Learners will have to identify whether or not Sylvia would have ever listened to Gene Marks and why.

McLucas, Bryan. A Sociolinguistic Interview. *University of Texas at San Antonio*, 28 October. 2006. Web. 19 May 2012. <<http://bryan.myweb.uga.edu/papers/intrvw.html>> This article talks about James Irving's experiences in an AAVE class. He provides good insight into the benefits of speaking and learning AAVE as well as the power in using AAVE and SE as an African American.

## Appendices-Standards

- 1.1.10A apply appropriate strategies to analyze interpret and evaluate author's techniques in substance and style
- 1.2.10.B assess the accuracy of facts presented in different types of informational texts by using a variety of texts and sources from all academic content areas identifying bias or propaganda where present.
- 1.1.10.D Demonstrate comprehension/understanding before reading during reading and after reading on a variety of literary works such as comparing and contrasting text elements, assessing validity of text based on content and evaluating author strategies
- 1.3.10C Analyze the use and effectiveness of literary elements used by authors in a variety of genres

- 1.3.10A Identify and analyze the differing characteristics that distinguish the literary fiction and non-fiction forms of narrative poetry drama and essay. Determine how form relates to meaning
- 1.3.10B Analyze the characteristics of different genres and compare works that express a universal theme and provide evidence to support the views expressed in each article
- 1.4.10A Write poems, short stories and plays
  - Apply variety of organizational methods
  - Write with an awareness of tone mood and style
  - Include literary elements and devices
- 1.5.10 C Write with controlled and/or subtle organization
  - Sustain a logical order throughout the piece
  - Effective intro and conclusion
  - Coherence within and among paragraphs through transitions and parallel structures
- 1.6.10 A Listen critically and respond to others in small and large group situations. Respond with grade level appropriate questions ideas or opinions
- 1.6.10 B Demonstrate awareness of audience using appropriate volume and clarity in formal speaking presentations.