San José State University Writing Center
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Black Language in Creative Writing

Storytelling is often incomplete without characters conversing with one another and, at times, with the audience. Character communication immerses the audience in your story's world, keeps your audience engaged, and reveals things about characters we may not have inner dialogue for. Through writing, we can tell many perspectives about the same story. Sometimes, we use different languages to communicate such viewpoints; Black Language is one of those languages!

What is Black Language?

Black Language (BL), also known as Ebonics or AAVE, is a subset of English consisting of regional dialects and colloquialisms frequently spoken by the Black diaspora. Black Language has developed over time since chattel slavery in the United States.

What Black Language Can Accomplish

Black Language, especially Black English, can reflect real-life conversation, develop relatability for BL-speaking audiences, and allow writers to experiment with English's fluidity.

Many English speakers use the language to convey different things during different scenarios. For example, the way someone may speak to their grandmother may not reflect how they speak to their friends—this change is considered code-switching. Therefore, writing Black English into conversational or situational dialogue is a great way to practice Black Language writing. Audiences will be able to see how BL works in dialogue, which then enhances understanding of real-life BL speech. Using Black Language can also bring in BL-speaking audiences because of relatability; if used appropriately and wisely, BL dialogue and writing can have inside jokes or tonal differences that expand beyond non-BL speakers. This also ties into Black Language's fluidity. Playing with tone, tense, and structures like the habitual "be" gives writers freedom to break or bend the rules of Standard English.

In an episode dubbed "Alligator Man" from the television show *Atlanta,* Black characters use Black Language: Uncle Willie, Adult Bystander, and Children One and Two. They share some commonalities (e.g., omitting of a sound or syllable in a word or replacing 'th' with 'd') yet have distinct voices, encompassing Black Language's linguistic diversity. An excerpt of their dialogue is provided as an example below along with an analysis of some key aspects of their language.

Atlanta Season 2, Episode 1: "Alligator Man"

Uncle Willie (played by Katt Williams): "And if they keep on tryna act like they gon' come in hea' and git me, then I'll let dat alligata loose and see what they do 'bout that."

Police Officer: "You don't have an alligator."

Adult Bystander: "Yes, he do!"

Child One: "He do got a alligator!"

Child Two: "Dat's da Alligator Man!" ("Alligator Man" 00:19:24-00:19:35)

"Do" instead of "does" - expresses present tense (Sidnell)

"Gon'" instead of "going to" - expresses future tense (Sidnell)

Dat - "th" replaced with "d" (That —> Dat) (Sidnell)

Git - nasalized vowel sound (Sidnell)

Who Can Write Black Language?

The answer to this question is a complicated one. The short answer is that anyone can write Black Language. The long answer is that it's more nuanced than that.

The conversation around who can tell what story or explain what experience has been explored for quite some time. Two speculative-fiction writers, Nisi Shawl and Cynthia Ward, authored a book and created a complementary writing course to tackle this concept called *Writing the Other*. In their book, Shawl and Ward base their guide and writing exercises on a trait categorization tool called Race/Orientation/Ability/Age/Religion/Sex (ROAARS).

While speech or language knowledge is not a part of the ROAARS model, it is certainly applicable because of the cultural significance of speaking a non-dominant language. The ROAARS tool helps writers categorize the traits of their characters and real people, confront biases, and highlight qualifiers that aren't scientifically measured and are culturally significant. One contextual approach Shawl and Ward apply ROAARS to is the "Reptile Brain," or your natural instinct:

"The reptile brain is [...] brilliant at pattern recognition. [...] Though ancient and primitive, the reptile brain can learn. In fact, it's a great learner. But it has no critical judgment. It remembers bad information as well as good. [...] Writing is considered speech. It gives you the opportunity to rewrite and revise. It gives you the opportunity to override the reptile brain"
(Shawl and Ward 6-7).

The bad side of reptile brain retention can be avoided using ROAARS and writing together, hence the exercises Shawl and Ward create for writers. We can understand the differences between Black Language and standardized English without using harmful stereotypes or inaccurate representations.

Dialogue Do's and Don'ts

Don't Conflate Slang and BL

Many people use slang words from Black Language (bae, cool, woke, chile, etc.), but BL does not consist of only slang. BL has its own grammar rules, structures, and tonal or contextual use. Conflating the two minimizes the complexities of Black Language, reducing it to something simplified or colloquial rather than an expansive and foundational part of modern English.

Don't Stereotype BL in Your Writing

Using stereotypes in creative writing can progress a plot point or provide a lesson for the readers, but don't forget that stereotypes are still just that: stereotypes! This idea goes for language in writing. Not all BL speakers are unintelligent, ill-mannered, or criminal, so don't limit Black Language to *only* unintelligent, ill-mannered, or criminal characters.

Do Consider the Context

Just as you wouldn't have a fluent Spanish-speaking character speaking random Spanish in the middle of a conversation, you wouldn't have a BL-speaking character start using BL out of nowhere. It's a good rule of thumb to consider the context and manner in which certain characters speak a certain way. If a character speaks BL, ponder the following questions:

- When and how does your character use BL?
- How do their speech patterns differ from other BL speakers, if at all?
- How does the setting affect BL speakers in your story?

These questions will also help you stay consistent throughout your work. If you have a Black character who uses BL with their parents but not with authority figures, that's fine! If you have a character who speaks BL at work and home, go for it. As long as you know your character and how they use Black Language, you're headed in the right direction.

Do Your Research

Another general but crucial rule of thumb—research, research, research. Look into Black Language in your downtime. You can conduct this research as you would for a paper. A Google search is all it takes to get the ball rolling. Read articles on BL being a spectrum of the English language. Find sources that discuss Black Language based on your setting, e.g., regional BL or differences between Los Angeles BL speakers and New York BL speakers. You can also start your learning journey with our handout on AAVE: Dismantling Standard English.

Doing research outside of articles and journals is also important! Here's a list of ways you can learn more about Black Language:

- Talk with BL speakers.
- Read literature written by BL speakers and with BL speaking characters. Some examples are listed below.
    - *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas
    - *Recitatif* by Toni Morrison
    - *Clotel, or the President's Daughter* by William Wells Brown
    - *The Wife of his Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line, and Selected Essays* by Charles Chesnutt
- Study BL conversations through observing conversations or media.

Activity: Write Your BL-Speaking Character

[This exercise is inspired by Exercise 1 in *Writing the Other.*] Pick any character from your favorite cartoon. They can be human, an extraterrestrial, or an underwater sponge.

Now that you've picked your desired character, think about their personality and their speaking mannerisms. Take five to six minutes creating a dialogue between you and that character using Black Language.

Reflect on the exercise with the following questions once completed:

1. What setting are you using for yourself and this character?
2. How does using Black Language add to or hinder the dialogue?
3. How did you write the Black Language in this exercise? What kind of Black Language is your chosen character using?
4. Does it make sense for this character to speak in this manner? Would they code-switch or only speak BL?

References

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