

African American English is its own dialect, and learning to speak it is no simple task

Unless you've been on a media blackout this summer, you likely have heard the story of civil-rights activist Rachel Dolezal, an ethnically white woman who has long presented herself as black. The story provoked curiosity and controversy, prompting some to object that she was clothing herself in a racial identity that was not rightfully hers. Dolezal is certainly not the only white person to be drawn to an African-American identity.

And though she may be unusual in having pretended to be black, some whites aim to sound black by adorning their speech with features of the variety of English known as African-American English (AAE). When is the use of AAE by white people a form of cultural theft, and when is it the natural outcome of a lifetime of experiences and relationships within an African-American community? A close analysis of a person's speech patterns can offer clues about the authenticity of his or her use of AAE.

Since the language we speak comes from our environment rather than from our genes, the overlap between AAE and black ethnicity is blurry; not all African Americans speak AAE, and some non-African-Americans do. But like all languages and dialects, AAE is a complex system, and mastering it takes a certain amount of exposure and interaction with actual speakers of the dialect, preferably early in life.

A more superficial exposure can leave tell-tale traces in the speech of non-native AAE speakers, ringing false to the ears of African Americans in much the same way as a bad actor's flimsy accent.

**The GLP aggregated and excerpted this blog/article to reflect the diversity of news, opinion and analysis. Read full, original post: [Rachel Dolezal & the Science of "Sounding Black"](#)**