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# Arsenio Hall at the Crossroads: Uniting Two Speech Communities in One Act

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## RESEARCH QUESTION

Arsenio Hall is a late-night phenomena, accomplishing the seemingly impossible task of stealing an increasingly larger portion of television viewers during a timeslot that has been dominated by one television show for years. Every weeknight Arsenio Hall goes head-to-head with the king of late-night talk shows—Johnny Carson.

Critics wonder why Arsenio is so popular. As Arsenio puts it, "I'm the talkshow host for people who don't have a talkshow host. I am the talkshow host for the urban contemporary crowd, for the MTV crowd." Arsenio Hall's goal is to bring the ghetto to the suburbs and the suburbs to the ghetto.

What first caught our attention as late-night watchers of Arsenio Hall was how he seem to attempt this difficult multi-cultural task linguistically. We noticed that he seemed to use Black English Vernacular (BEV) in certain situations, and that he omitted it in others. We wondered what the underlying principles behind his code switches were; if they were systematic or haphazard?

## ARSENIO HALL: PERSONAL NOTES

We have included these notes to illustrate Arsenio's use of BEV, and to present both the newsmedia's and the audience's reaction to "The Arsenio Hall Show."

Biography: black; Mid-30's—age uncertain; born and raised in Cleveland's inner city; from a lower middle class family, father a preacher; mother divorced father because of abuse.

Excerpts from "Big Daddy Hall's New Jack Chit Chat":

Not only is this an ultrahip Aframerican show, but it's Dr Martin Luther King Jr's dream gone Hollywood. "All of God's children; black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and

Catholics, will be able to join hands together and sing" . . . LeVert's "Just Coolin.'" or watch Arsenio house Woody Harrison from Cheers like a landlord in a one-on-one game of basketball.

But black and white isn't the only line, Arsenio's tiptoeing along. One moment he's affecting the impeccable elocution of a millionaire's son; the next, he's rolling his shoulders, doing a *new jack* begging for an autograph: "Hey, boy-es, you large, you large, you so large, Money you Gigantor. My girlee wants an autograph, knowwhatI'msayin', but I told her, 'That's MacGyver, baby, he's too dope for that.'"

"If you're a yuppie, then I'm a buppie." The audience hoots "What?" Arsenio shoots back, offended, "I am a buppie." But the crowd won't budge. They don't care about the side of Arsenio Hall that claims a nouveau Aframerican aristocracy. Despite the vented Ron Rinkes suits with the draped '30's lapels and the slick TV table manners, they want Arsenio Hall to remain street forever. And every time you see him point to the band and say, "My Posse, let's get busy," or mimic a money-making homeboy talkin' street so dead-on you're waiting for hip hop speakologist Big Daddy Kane to come out and translate, you know he will.

A Harlem guy who leaves his *buddha-blear* (reefer) spot exactly at midnight, just to get home and watch the show, says "A lot of people say he's an Uncle Tom but that's just jealousy. The man is funny."

After the commercial, Arsenio says he heard a rumor that Hearn can step off into a funky slide and camel walk just as smoothly as the Godfather of Soul. Hearn's embarrassment stokes the troublemaker in Arsenio. Kicking the plush tweed Ottoman out of the way, Arsenio motions to Michael Wolff and the Posse—they drop the quick beat of "I Foot Good"—and proceeds to *good foot*. Arsenio's move

is not only entertaining for the audience, but it speaks sotto voce volumes to Hearn: "Don't be ashamed my brother. James is our Nijinsky and this is our Bolshoi."

"Can you say the word 'ass' on television?" he asks innocently. 'Can you say the word 'ass' for me? The audience responds like an obscene choir. 'Better yet, say it like the black folks do 'ay-ass'.'"

Asked whether he was second-guessing his own talent: "No . . . That kind of second guessing represents fear to me. I don't have time to be scared. If I allow myself to be frightened, I'll wind up in a McDonalds in Cleveland with two large cokes in my hands talkin' about 'D'yall need lids on these?'"

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Bonnie Urcioli in her article "Bilingualism as Code and Bilingualism as Abstract," in which she maps the code switching of Puerto Rican Spanish/English bilinguals, identifies a factor of great influence on the significance of the code switch: the contact situation—outer sphere, or inner sphere. The inner sphere operates under the principle of shared structural and social conditions; the outer sphere is marked by a sharp imbalance in class advantage. Code switches within inner sphere contacts, eg. blacks and Puerto Ricans, are not of great significance because a mutually intelligible base is understood. These code switches may be classified code neutral. On the other hand, code switches between Puerto Rican and Anglo speakers of English, or BEV and Anglo speakers of English are of great significance because the situation is governed by the understanding that there will be little understanding; therefore, every code switch is of linguistic and semantic significance in an attempt to increase intelligibility. Thus, dependent on the circle, the difference in form indicates either 1. no change, or 2. significant change.

Another factor, which is of considerable interest in our study, is Urcioli hypothesis that the PRE accent marks a continuance of sound between PRE and PRS. In a sense, PRS is partially phonetically integrated with PRE. The question of borrowing here becomes one of degree rather than an absolute. Discernable accent becomes then a code carried over from one to another and is important because people

are classified by accent according to class status, age, gender and ethnic identity. Even though structurally there may be no discernible difference between PRE, BEV and SAE, the accent remains as evidence of code-switching.

In John Baugh's article "The Situational Dimension of Linguistic Power in Social Context," he identifies the trend of the 60's in that television portrayed the prevailing linguistic attitudes, which denigrated nonstandard dialects in favor of standard English. The implications were that standard English is the dialect of the rich and powerful. The question his observation raises for us is: How do we interpret the rising popularity of black TV sitcoms; how prolific is the use of BEV and what are socio-political implications of this rise in popularity? Although this issue is not addressed in this particular study, the implications make this issue suitable for further research.

His main thrust though is the situational implication of the principle of Linguistic Loyalty in BEV. He cites Ogbu's distinction between "autonomous" and "caste-like" minorities: autonomous are no longer economically or politically subordinate, while caste-like minorities, which tend to be nonwhite, continue to be socially dispossessed, and their linguistic differences only serve to heighten this isolation. However, the irony lies in the fact that, although linguistic differences can be overcome with a good education, the adoption of the standard English is seen as a rejection of the native vernacular, its culture and speakers. The pragmatic response to the paradox is that adult BEV speakers tend to shift linguistic styles depending on the circumstance. Although style shifting is a common linguistic occurrence, nonstandard speakers evidence a greater tendency to style shifting than standard English speakers, although they tend not to adopt standard English unless the move contains personal value for them.

Baugh identifies four situational types using language use in different social contexts to measure the extent to which Adult BEV style shift:

1. Type 1: speech events with familiar participants native to the black vernacular culture, sharing a long-term relationship which is close-knit and supportive.

2. Type 2: the participants are not well acquainted but are members of the black vernacular culture.
3. Type 3: participants are well acquainted but the black vernacular culture is not shared; solidarity may/may not exist between the two.
4. Type 4: participants are not familiar nor is BEV common to them.

In their book *Dialect Clash in America*, Brandes and Brewer deal with what they term Black Amerenglish. Although their studies are not the most recent—the book was published in 1977 and they still subscribe to the isolation theory of African language influence in the development of BEV—they still offer a useful outline of black grammar and code markers.

The features they identified and which we looked for as the basis for our analysis are:

#### GRAMMATICAL FEATURES

1. deletion of the third person singular, present tense marker “-s”
2. absence of the possessive suffix “-’s”
3. -ed suffix omission
4. the multiple negative

#### PHONOLOGICAL FEATURES

5. reduction of word final-consonant clusters; with the subsequent addition of homonyms in BEV not found in SE eg. built and bill, coal and cold.
6. formation of noun plurals from words which have undergone consonant deletion; the deletion is not haphazard, nor is the formation of the noun plural; eg. task . . . . tas’ . . . . tases.
7. the pronunciation of “th”
  - initial medial terminal
  - unvoiced /t/=/tink/ /f/=/inyfin/ /f/=/b f/ /f/=/frow/
  - voiced /d/=/dis/ /v/=/m v t/ /v/=/leyv/

8. “r-lessness”: appearing medially and terminally, the “r” is reduced to a vowel-like sound or deleted
9. “l-lessness”: reduced to an “uh” sound when occurring medially or terminally, or deleted altogether

#### HYPOTHESIS

Because the aim of Arsenio Hall’s late night talkshow is to unite the ghetto and the suburbs in one speech event, Arsenio will demonstrate linguistic awareness of the inclusionary or exclusionary effects of the use of BEV within the social contexts outlined in Baugh’s article. We expect to see a greater frequency of BEV with intimate BEV native speakers.

#### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We performed a case study of Arsenio Hall’s use of black vernacular in varying social contexts. We videotaped 11 of his nightly talkshows “The Arsenio Hall Show.” Using the social contexts outlined by Baugh, we divided Arsenio’s monologue and guests into 6 groups and analyzed for the frequency of BEV usage according to the grammatical and phonological markers of BEV found in Brandes and Urcioli.

##### Six Social Contexts for Speech Events

- I. Black English (BEV) & Black English (BEV): Close knit, native
- II. Black English (BEV) & Black English (BEV): Not close, native
- III. Black English (BEV) & Standard American (SAE): Shared Acquaintance
- IV. Black English (BEV) & Standard American (SAE): No commonality
- V. Black English (BEV) & Non-native American English (NNAE): No commonality
- VI. Black English (BEV): Monologue

##### Arsenio’s Guests According to Social Context

- I. Heavy D, Magic Johnson, Sinbad.
- II. Sherman Hemsley, Smokey Robinson, Carol Gidst (Miss USA), Don Cornelius.

- III. Rob Lowe, Jamie Lee Curtis.
- IV. Oliver Stone, Tom Hanks, Gloria Steinam, Farah Fawcett, Pierce Brosnan, Phil Donahue, Barbara Quayle, Siskel & Ebert, Glenn Close, Patti Austin, Eric Idle.
- V. Vlade (Czechoslovakian), Gloria Estafan (Cuban).
- VI. Arsenio Hall

RESULTS

TABLE I  
BEV MARKERS USAGE WITHIN SOCIAL CONTEXTS

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	Tot
voiced th=d	20	5	3	8	0	26	62
lexicon	4	1	2	2	0	17	26
drop final cons. cluster	13	1	1	2	0	8	22
“be” verb	5	0	0	0	0	7	12
“r” lessness	2	1	1	2	0	5	10
unvoiced th=f	2	2	0	0	0	0	4
absence of poss. suffix	1	0	0	0	0	3	4
“got”	1	0	0	0	0	2	3
“ax”	0	0	0	1	0	1	2
“l” lessness	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
multiple negative	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
drop initial vowel	1	0	0	0	0	0	1

TABLE II  
FREQUENCY OF USAGE  
SOCIAL CONTEXT FREQUENCY

- I: BEV and BEV: close knit 13.0
- II: BEV and BEV: not close 3.0
- III: BEV and SAE: close knit 3.0
- IV: BEV and SAE: not close 2.2
- V: BEV and NNAE: not close 0.0
- VI: BEV: monologue 6.0

Method used to determine the frequency of usage: Each 60 minute show is divided into three segments: monologue, guest, guest. From 11 shows, there were 22 guests and 11 monologues. We categorized the instances of BEV into the 6 social contexts (see Results). The total instances of BEV per category was divided by the number of guests that fell into that category. For context VI: monologue, seeing as there were no guests, we simply divided by the number of shows recorded.

ANALYSIS

In Table I, the two most frequently used markers of BEV are the phonological voiced th=/d/, and the black lexicon. With the /d/, this indicates that even though the structural properties of BEV and SAE are the same, the /d/ accent marks the switcher as being based in another code; however, the two codes SAE and BEV are mutually intelligible at this juncture. The use of lexicon can be exclusionary but often Arsenio begins his show with a definition of a BEV term that will be used in the monologue, thus creating an inclusionary affect. Accordingly, in all categories, except the final consonant cluster drop, the highest BEV usage occurs in the monologues where the exclusionary effect can be more consistently controlled. The majority of the other BEV markers found in the show tend to be phonetic variations of SAE rather than grammatical or structural varieties.

In Table II, the results show that the use of BEV varies according to social context. Context I showed the highest frequency of BEV with 13.0 (average number of instances of BEV). However, this was due to Magic Johnson, a black basketball player, who used an unusually high rate of BEV at 48. Other guests that fell into Category I had a frequency rating of 4.5. The category with the next highest rate of BEV usage was the monologue with an average of 6.0 instances per show. This supports our hypothesis. In his monologue, he is 1. not addressing a specific person, therefore does not have to take into account their familiarity with BEV, and 2. assumes more frequently the “new jack chit chat” street persona, as expected by his audience. The remaining categories evidence a decrease in the use of BEV according to social context as expected.

Interesting to note, is that Categories II and III show the same frequency of BEV at 3.0, even though category II consists of 2 speakers native to BEV though not well acquainted while category III includes a BEV speaker and a well acquainted speaker of SAE but nonnative speaker of BEV. This seems to indicate that familiarity between speakers is as important as a shared linguistic heritage when it comes to code switching between SAE and BEV. Also, the absence of BEV in category V indicates that competence in SAE by both speakers is required

before code switching into BEV occurs. This proves Urcioli's hypothesis that speakers within the outer sphere switch only when the switch is needed to increase intelligibility. Any switch that Arsenio would make would only decrease the intelligibility of their exchange. This requirement, while true in the context of a television show, does not necessarily hold true for daily situations/informal speech events.

## CONCLUSION

Because Arsenio Hall's agenda is inclusionary, bringing the ghetto to the suburbs and the suburbs to the ghetto, rather than exclusionary, he uses BEV in a way that is mutually intelligible for both guests and audience. Thus, our hypothesis is confirmed.

An interesting example of this is his interview with Magic Johnson. As Appendix I indicates, Magic Johnson had the highest rate of BEV usage for any guest and was even higher than Arsenio's monologues. During the interview, the frequency of BEV increased as the intimate nature of the topic increased eg. girlfriends, Friday night on the town. Arsenio would attempt to control the BEV usage by returning to less intimate and more neutral topics. Arsenio's topic shifts indicate his reluctance to allow conversations to become predominantly BEV, to the exclusion of his white audience. He is always attempting to create a comfortable balance for both his guest and his audience.

He exhibits further linguistic awareness of BEV's exclusionary effects for his guests as evidenced by his interviews with Gloria Estefan and Vlade (Laker basketball center), both NNAE speakers. Arsenio used no BEV as a courtesy to speakers where the SAE is a second language, realising that code switching would decrease intelligibility. His socio-political agenda for the show must take into account the linguistic competencies of both his audience and his guests.

The phonetic nature of the majority of the BEV markers adds credence to Arsenio's claim to be playing to both audiences. Different phonetic pronunciations of familiar terms are easier to understand by SAE speakers than actual lexical changes, and also not as likely to be labelled negative or "bad" language. Through language, he is trying to include in one speech event, two linguistic audiences that have

formerly been separated by the media, specifically and society at large.

The possible weakness of this case study is the small number of guests analyzed in certain social contexts, as well as the uneven distribution of guests throughout the social contexts. The uneven distribution of guests, predominantly BEV and SAE: not close, is however, a reflection on our society's prejudicial definitions of who's hot and who's not.

Implications for further study: there is an abundance of other BEV markers which have not been analyzed in this particular case study. However, we doubt further studies in this area would reveal further insight to our hypothesis. We see a need for further analysis of the use or absence of BEV by black speakers in the media to determine the reasons for either the inclusion or exclusion of BEV. eg. Why can a successful black doctor and his family, portrayed in *The Cosby Show*, not use BEV at all? Or, why does a major manufacturer of athletic equipment, Nike, use speakers of BEV as their spokespersons?

We realize that reading this research without the aid of watching Arsenio Hall in action limits the impact of his linguistic abilities. We recommend that the readers take some time and watch a few shows and do their own mini-research. Concentrate on Arsenio's use of BEV and decide for themselves if he succeeds in achieving mutual intelligibility for both speech communities.

## APPENDIX 1

### I. BEV and BEV: close knit a. Magic Johnson and Arsenio

"peepol" (people)  
 "wumon" (woman)  
 "how mi"  
 "had da lakes"  
 "I'm gun lose"  
 "plus you got two frien's der"  
 "loaned ja"  
 "da han"  
 "my actin skill"  
 "work dat hard"  
 "freepeat"  
 "could'a beat dem"  
 "workin on dat emmy"  
 "gonna do dat to ya boy"  
 "dis sponse ta"

“dis spouse be a coach”  
 “I forgot bout dat”  
 “heps high school students”  
 “have da grades”  
 “awl da proceeds”  
 “jus a ho”  
 “Arsenio be coaching”  
 “las year”  
 “who don’ have tickets”  
 “you dog me out”  
 “use” (you is)  
 “different people houses”  
 “I take Arsenio”  
 “Everyone from Michigan are here”  
 “den”  
 “I be the owner”  
 “hafta”  
 “I done ever”  
 “here it go”  
 “jus hangin”  
 “go dat route”  
 “pushin dat book”  
 “dis society”  
 “dat was some nice spots you did”  
 “he got to go”  
 “sign my boy”  
 “Arsenio like to shake foo”  
 “sty” (style)  
 “ya know I’m yo boy”  
 “was dat bout”  
 “you know sumpum I don’ know”  
 “da league”  
 “so fresh, so fly”

b. Sinbad and Arsenio

“boy can sing”  
 “he can throw down”  
 “them folks col”  
 “please don’ wear dem earings on national TV”  
 “a white suit that poly and ester wouldn wear”

c. Heavy D and Arsenio

“I’m having problems wid im”  
 “I gotcha”  
 “this heavy brother” (be deletion)  
 “dat chew”

II. BEV and BEV: not close knit

“dat”  
 “Lufur” (Luther)  
 “somefin” (something)  
 “ain’t dat a kick in da head”  
 “I sure would like to go on da road wich jew”  
 (homeboy)

“jus lookin hansum”  
 “how you feel”  
 “backbitin and phonin”  
 “nut a lick”  
 “this brother will do it to ya”  
 “we still frien’s”  
 “I know whatcha doin man”

III. BEV and SAE: shared acquaintance

“what was dat about”  
 “what was on yo mine when you was opposite  
 Snow White”  
 “don’t dat itch”  
 “I check you out”  
 “I been wid a lotta dancers”  
 “I’ve not tal into it”

IV. BEV and SAE: no commonality

“let’s git right to it”  
 “heavy” “that’s heavy”  
 “kick it”  
 “one of them Ronald Reagan answers”  
 “do summin”  
 “he so tacky” (BEV woman)  
 “I saw dat playboy issue wid russian women”  
 (homeboy)  
 “you know you got a woman in your arms”  
 “did you ax for an explanation”  
 “what may you do this”  
 “he even tol you not to do it”  
 “one oar in da water”  
 “home girl is gone”  
 “you all did”  
 “was up”  
 “what’s dat all about”  
 “I need dis gig”  
 “what dat was”  
 “it want in yo body”  
 “be like Johnny, dat’s my thang”  
 “it can mess up yo whole day”  
 “he ain’t dat fine”  
 “he ain’t dat fine either”

V. BEV and NNAE: no commonality

VI. BEV: monologue

“STUPID: to begin the fun-filled festivities.”  
 “LARGE: greater than average in scope. A  
 succesful and extraordinary talent.”  
 “HYPE: to rouse excitability. Exhilarating.  
 Stimulating. Spectacular.”  
 “posse”  
 “they large” “he large” “Oliver Stone is  
 large”(when talking about a speaker of SAE,  
 uses “be” verb)  
 “ya understand what I’m sayin”

"was up" x2  
 "jus keep yo ass in the house"  
 "do dis"  
 "ya'll lying"  
 "you hard"  
 "id be"  
 "she looking at you"  
 "you engaged now"  
 "let's get busy" x6  
 "give somma dat to my posse"  
 "I would never learn da language"  
 "I didn' learn da rest of da letters"  
 "dis will be real cool"  
 "wid sauce"  
 "I don' even need jew here"  
 "you turn" (your turn)  
 "you fine" (your fine)  
 "you damn right"  
 "give it up for him"  
 "da group"  
 "gimme a beat"  
 "i jus had to do dat"  
 "jus to mess wi somebody"  
 "you gonna eat dat sandwich?"  
 "I feel luv in da room, let's share dat luv wid  
 celibate prostitutes"  
 "like everybudy else in da neighborhood"  
 "you can't put Flipper in da ca"  
 "bring yo ass in da water"  
 "if da walls could talk"  
 "I could give a damn about someone do a  
 chicken"  
 "Oh, Lawd"  
 "we havta call de guy in"  
 "I forgot to ax him"  
 "and dese ribs don have no bones, ribs got  
 some bones"  
 "dentist office"  
 "dose ol magazines, you pick it up an da cover  
 fall off"  
 "nunna da good Jackson's were there"  
 "get ready do"  
 "a hundred percent a men rap to a woman"  
 "you know you don' know nuttin 'bout no  
 backrub"  
 "how do dey know"  
 "when it's dat col usually you nose is runnin"  
 "and don't dat sign stuck in da grass ruin da  
 grass"  
 "removed wid a laser"  
 "he got a hickup"  
 "all kinda products"  
 "don't even do nothin fo us"  
 "tiles" (towels)  
 "I stole ya one of yo towels"  
 "I don know what dat's about"

"this line is bad"  
 "even white people mad cuz he bad"  
 "have you ever looked at MC Hammer shoe"  
 "tow up all kinda cars hit a pole"  
 "she know what I'm sayin"  
 "sick of dese tests"

## APPENDIX 2

This is an interesting example of the favoring of the oral tradition in the black culture:

story about a girl he went out with: "she went off: "who are you, Mr. Blackwell to tell me my earrings are too large." "I don't think I'm Mr. Blackwell, I just thought you might want to rethink those Angela Davis, hoolahoop size earrings or buy a St. Bernard. light em on fire and have him jump thru it"

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