“I done took this long enough”: African American English and Dialect Representation in 'The Help'

Representations of AAE in American literature have often been criticized for reliance on stereotypes and perpetuation of the minstrel tradition (Rickford 2000). However, as Holton (1984) notes, literary representations of AAE have evolved over time from stereotypical and inaccurate depictions to full and accurate portrayals of the variety. Recently, the study of dialect representation has grown beyond literature, to include portrayals of AAE in the media (e.g., Green 2002). Studies of dialect representation can benefit from a comprehensive approach which includes both film and literature. This paper analyzes the portrayal of AAE in the bestselling 2009 novel The Help, written by Kathryn Stockett, a European American, and in its 2011 film adaptation. The novel includes salient grammatical characteristics of AAE but has little phonetic representation; meanwhile, the film portrays both grammar and phonology. Both the book’s and the film’s representations of AAE are positive and accurate, avoiding many pernicious stereotypes which have plagued other representations of AAE.

Following Minnick’s (2004) guidelines for linguistic analysis of written representations of AAE, I analyze the way Stockett portrays the speech and narration of African American characters, and the effect her decisions have on readers’ perception of AAE and its speakers. Rather than relying on nonstandard orthographic strategies of phonetic representation, Stockett accurately uses grammatical characteristics to convey AAE as used by her characters. My analysis of the film consists of coding for features of AAE, and determines that the phonetic features absent from the novel were present in the film.

The Help faces criticism for its handling of race, and representations of AAE can never be entirely separated from this issue. However, at the linguistic level, The Help can be seen as part of the continuing evolution of AAE representation from stereotype to a complex and valued variety in American literature and film.

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