

He right - he knows just what he talking about

Peter
Trudgill

email: newsdesk@edpchant.co.uk

The African American comedian Reginald D Hunter is rather popular in this country. Last time he performed in Norwich, the venue was sold out. One of his best remembered jokes comes from a TV appearance - it was a grammar joke.

Hunter's story was that he was in a bar talking to a British woman. She found out he was a comedian and asked him what he knew about Tommy Cooper. "He dead?" Hunter said. The woman answered: "I must correct your grammar - it's 'he died'." "Yes", replied Hunter, "at first he died, now he dead."

There are, unfortunately, people who still think it's OK to go around "correcting" other people's grammar. But Reginald's grammar here is very interesting. Like millions of other Black Americans, Hunter is a speaker of what linguists often call African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

This English variety can be very different from the dialects spoken by most White people in America. There is, sadly, a long history in the USA of this dialect, quite unjustifiably being looked down upon and discriminated against - just as African Americans have been discriminated against. But Reginald D



■ Reginald D Hunter's way of speaking may sound wrong to some - but it has its own rules and grammar.

Hunter's dialect is a perfectly normal language variety with its own grammatical structures.

One of these structures is the one illustrated by "He dead". In constructions like "She busy" and "He my father", AAVE has no copula - no verb 'to be'. And you can see why - it's totally unnecessary. The meaning is entirely clear without it. Many of the languages of the world have this same, very sensible construction. In Russian, he's dead is "on mertv" (he dead). Turkish has the same construction.

But AAVE also has the ability to make a grammatical distinction with the copula which isn't available in most other English dialects, including Standard English.

There's an important difference of meaning in AAVE between "she busy",

and "she be busy". You have to say "she busy right now", but "usually she be busy".

The point is that forms with 'be' refer to an event which is repeated or occurs habitually: it's often called "habitual be".

It would be wrong in AAVE to say "she be my mother", which would imply she was only your mother from time to time.

The correct form is "she my mother". Another well-known feature of AAVE is that it uses "he go" and "she do".

Norfolk people will agree that this is also very sensible grammar.

.....
■ This Saturday's EDP features an interview with Prof Trudgill ahead of the publication of his new book, *Dialect Matters: Respecting Vernacular Language*, a collection of his EDP columns.