

The grammar of urban African American Vernacular English*

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1. Introduction

Although the roots of contemporary African American Vernacular English (AAVE) were no doubt established in the rural South, its twentieth century development as a sociocultural variety is strongly associated with its use in non-Southern urban areas. Descriptive studies of AAVE that helped launch the modern era of social dialectology concentrated on Northern metropolitan areas (Labov et al. 1968; Labov 1972; Wolfram 1969; Fasold 1972), and this urban focus has continued up to the present (Spears 1982; Baugh 1983; Rickford 1999; Dayton 1996; Labov 1998). A tradition of descriptive studies of rural Southern AAVE now complements the urban focus (Wolfram 1974; Wolfram and Thomas 2002; Bailey 2001; Bailey and Maynor 1985, 1987, 1989; Cukor-Avila 2001), but large metropolitan areas continue to be at the center of many of the linguistic, social, and educational concerns attendant to AAVE.

The emergence of urban AAVE was certainly a by-product of the Great Migration in which African Americans moved from the rural South to large metropolitan areas of the North in the early and mid-twentieth century, though demographic movement *per se* is not a sufficient explanation for the cultural shift in which urban areas became the contemporary norm for AAVE. In 1910, almost 90 percent of all African Americans in the US lived in the South and 75 percent of that number lived in communities of less than 2,500. According to the Census definition, rural residents generally live in unincorporated places of less than 2,500 and metropolitan areas are counties of 100,000 or more with central cities of more than 50,000 people. Census-based definitions do not, however, consider social and cultural factors that may defy demographic criteria. Starting with World War I and continuing through World War II and beyond, there was a dramatic redistribution of African Americans as they left the rural South for northern cities. By 1970, 47 percent of African Americans lived outside of the South, and 77 percent of those lived in urban areas. More than a third of all African Americans lived in just seven cities – New York, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Washington, DC, Los Angeles, and Baltimore (Bailey 2001: 66). The large influx of African Americans in these metropolitan areas led to intensified racial isolation and, along with other social and cultural ramifications of such *de facto* segregation, a social environment conducive to the maintenance of ethnolinguistic differences.

Population movement among African Americans has shifted somewhat in the last several decades, as the influx of Southern in-migrants slowed and more African Americans move from the inner city to suburban areas, but this has hardly affected inner-city segregation. The 2000 US census indicates that approximately 60 percent of all African Americans now live in the non-South and that approximately 6 million African Americans live in the large metropolitan centers mentioned above. Some of these cities have become even more densely populated by African Americans than they were several decades ago. For example, the city of Detroit is now 83 percent African American (2000 US Census); in the mid-1960s, when the author conducted his fieldwork, it was only 37 percent African American (Wolfram 1969: 21). Furthermore, a half-century ago, the vast majority of middle-aged and elderly African Americans living in Northern urban areas were born in the South. In the 1960s, less than 10 percent of African Americans in Detroit over the age of 40 were born in the North; today the majority of African Americans were born there or in another metropolitan area. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the population demographics of non-Southern urban areas reveal the continued existence of well-established, largely segregated African American populations, especially for those living in poverty.

There are several reasons for the earlier and current interest in urban AAVE, ranging from personal and practical reasons to descriptive and theoretical interests. To begin with, most linguists who worked on AAVE in the 1960s lived near Northern metropolitan areas, where the contrast between African American speech and the varieties of the surrounding European Americans was most salient. During the launching period for AAVE studies (Labov et al. 1968; Shuy, Wolfram, and Riley 1967; Wolfram 1969; Fasold 1972), there was also an apparent link between AAVE and significant social and educational problems in American society, including urban poverty and racial disparity in school performance. These problems were acute in metropolitan areas, where they affected large numbers of a rapidly growing African American population. In fact, early studies of AAVE such as Labov's landmark study of AAVE in Harlem (Labov et al. 1968) and Shuy, Wolfram, and Riley's study of Detroit speech (1967) were funded by the US Office of Education because of the concern for an apparent correlation between vernacular speech and low educational achievement. Early sociolinguistic studies often addressed prominent educational issues such as literacy and educational achievement in addition to their focus on dialect description (Labov 1972a; Fasold and Shuy 1970).

As the study of AAVE progressed and encompassed rural Southern varieties of AAVE (Wolfram 1974; Bailey and Maynor 1985, 1987, 1989; Cukor-Avila 2001; Wolfram and Thomas 2002), questions about language change within African American speech emerged, largely subsumed under the *divergence hypothesis* (Labov 1987; Bailey and Maynor 1989; Poplack 2000; Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001). This hypothesis maintains that contemporary AAVE is evolving indepen-

dently in ways that increase the difference between AAVE and other vernacular dialects of English. The debate over the nature and extent of innovation continues, but most researchers (Bailey and Maynor 1987, 1989; Dayton 1996; Poplack 2000; Labov 1998; Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001) agree that the locus of independent innovation within AAVE is largely urban and that change within AAVE is diffusing from urban to rural contexts.

The significance of urban versions of AAVE is also connected to the establishment of contemporary language norms related to African American youth culture. Morgan (2001) observes that there is a new urban language ideology that relies, among other behaviors, on the differential use of linguistic features. As Morgan (2001: 205) puts it: "Thus, urban African American life is not simply represented in relation to in-group intersubjectivities, but through cultural symbols and sounds, especially linguistic symbols, which signify membership, role, and status so that (...) words, expressions, messages circulate as commodities".

The center of African American youth culture today is primarily urban, and many norms and models of behavior, including language, seem to radiate outward from these urban cultural hubs as the norms of contemporary, supraregional AAVE follow the lead of speakers in these urban areas.

2. The construction of urban AAVE

Historically, urban AAVE was established on the basis of transplant dialect communities of Southern rural speakers who moved to non-Southern cities during the early waves of the Great Migration in the first half of the twentieth century. There were patterns of interregional movement in which African American residents from coastal Southern states such as Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia tended to move northward to cities such as Washington, DC, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York and residents of Mississippi, Tennessee, Alabama, and Texas tended to move to cities such as St. Louis, Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit, as well as westward to Los Angeles, but most urban neighborhoods were mixed in terms of their Southern regional roots. The increasing number of African American in-migrants in these urban contexts, the shared Southern rural cultural heritage, the segregated living conditions, and the bi-racial ideology characteristic of most Northern urban cities certainly provided an ideal context for nurturing ethnolinguistic distinction.

The contrast between urban AAVE and the speech of the surrounding European American cohort communities is hardly at question; there is ample descriptive and subjective sociolinguistic evidence for this division. The intriguing questions about urban AAVE relate to issues of dialect leveling, accommodation, and innovation. To what extent are these urban varieties similar to and different from the rural AAVE varieties that were brought to the area originally? Which features of their Southern regional founder dialects have been retained and which have been

lost? How have these varieties accommodated to the regional dialect forms of the benchmark European American regional varieties in these urban contexts? What types of linguistic changes now differentiate urban AAVE from its Southern rural counterparts? And what is the significance of such differentiation? These are questions that must be addressed in a comprehensive examination of AAVE as it has developed during the twentieth century. Although most of the discussion of urban AAVE since the 1980s has centered on the extent to which it shows independent development and divergence from European American vernaculars (e.g. Labov 1987; Bailey and Maynor 1985, 1987, 1989; Dayton 1996), the sociolinguistic construction of urban AAVE is much more complex than the issue of independent innovation within AAVE.

There are several different kinds of language change that need to be considered in the comparison of contemporary urban AAVE and the Southern rural roots that provided the founder input (Mufwene 2001). First, there is a kind of dialect leveling in which traditional, localized Southern features may be reduced or lost. For example, in urban Northern AAVE there is no evidence of 3rd plural *-s* in *The dogs barks* even though this trait was a characteristic of some earlier regional varieties in the South (Schneider 1989; Montgomery and Fuller 1996; Wolfram and Thomas 2002). Similarly, past tense *be* leveling to *weren't* based on polarity (e.g. *I weren't there*), a regional trait of earlier African American varieties spoken in the Mid-Atlantic coastal region (Wolfram and Thomas 2002), is not found in Northern urban AAVE.

Earlier, generalized traits of Southern rural AAVE may also be lost, such as *a*-prefixing in *She was a-fishin'* or the use of *for to* complement as in *I want for to go now*. Although earlier studies of urban AAVE (Labov et al. 1968) recognized this type of change, it has become more evident with the expansion of studies of AAVE in the South (Cukor-Avila 2001; Bailey and Maynor 1985, 1989; Wolfram and Thomas 2002).

As already noted, change in urban AAVE may also derive from independent language innovation. Studies of *be* + *V-ing* as a 'habitual' marker (Bailey and Maynor 1985, 1987, 1989; Dayton 1996; Rickford 1999; Cukor-Avila 2001) suggest that it is largely an innovation of the post-World War II era and that the change has spread from an urban locus outward. While independent studies (Bailey and Maynor 1987, 1989) confirm this pattern of innovation and diffusion for habitual *be*, the status of other structures, such as the resultative-conditional *be done* in a sentence such as *If you leave it in the tub the chicken be done jumped out the tub by the time you get back* and narrative marking *-s* attachment in *He goes and sit down* is more disputable (Rickford 1999).

One type of sociolinguistic process associated with urban AAVE is *linguistic camouflaging*, in which a vernacular form resembles a standard or different vernacular form so closely that it is simply assumed to be identical to its apparent structural counterpart. However, this similarity may disguise the fact that the form

carries a distinctive semantic-pragmatic meaning or is constructed in a subtly different way. Spears (1982) shows that the use of a semi-auxiliary *come* in the sentence *They come talking that trash about him* seems quite similar to the standard English use of *come* with movement verbs as in *They came running when they heard the news*. Close examination of the use of the *come* in the former sentence, however, indicates that it fills a unique semantic-pragmatic role indicating speaker indignation. In an analogous way, camouflaging may also involve syntactic expansion based on a shared semantic-pragmatic reading, as in sentences like *They call themselves dancing*. While counterfactual *call oneself* is quite common with noun phrases in most English dialects (e.g. *They call themselves linguists*) or adjective phrases (e.g. *They call themselves intelligent*), its structural expansion to include *V-ing* complements sets AAVE apart from most other American English dialects. Some camouflaged structures, especially those involving grammaticalized semantic-pragmatic forms (Spears 1982; Baugh 1984), seem to be characteristic of subtle changes within urban AAVE, though it is of course possible that these structures simply may have been overlooked in rural varieties.

Thus far, we have discussed urban AAVE only in relation to its change from Southern founder dialects and its independent development, but part of its uniqueness may be found in its relationship to surrounding European American varieties. One of the distinctive traits of Northern Urban AAVE appears to be its relative immunity to the linguistic changes taking place in cohort white communities. Although this exclusion tends to be more salient in phonology than in morphology and syntax, a similar pattern of resistance may be found for regional grammatical patterns. Many AAVE speakers in Midland dialect regions such as Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, do not adopt regional morphosyntactic traits such as positive *anymore* (e.g. *We watch a lot of DVDs anymore*), *need* + past participle (e.g. *The car needs washed*), and 2nd plural *youns* or *yous*. Part of the construction of AAVE as an ethnic variety in its urban context is certainly related to its apparent lack of regional accommodation.

Up to this point, we have treated rural and urban AAVE as if it were an obvious binary distinction, but this does not necessarily match the reality of contemporary African American culture and language. Such a distinction cannot simply be based on demographic statistics such as the size of the metropolitan area or population density, as one might be apt to do if relying solely on census data. Furthermore, the distinction between urban and rural may not be as relevant for contemporary AAVE as it once was. Thus, Cukor-Avila (2001) and Wolfram and Thomas (2002) show that traits formerly associated with urban AAVE are present among younger African American speakers in remote rural areas of the South. At the same time, African Americans in these regions may be abandoning local regional traits, showing a movement away from local dialect traits as they acquire traits associated with urban AAVE. For example, Wolfram and Thomas (2002) show a trajectory of change in which regional dialect features recede and structures associated with

urban AAVE intensify over four generations of speakers in Hyde County, North Carolina, a sparsely populated, outlying coastal region of North Carolina. Figure 1, an adaptation of the figure given in Wolfram and Thomas (2002: 200), shows an idealized change slope for four generations of speakers divided on the basis of different sociohistorical periods: speakers who were born and raised in the early twentieth century up through World War I; speakers born and raised between World War I and school integration in the late 1960s; speakers who lived through the early period of school integration as adolescents, and those who were born and raised after integration.

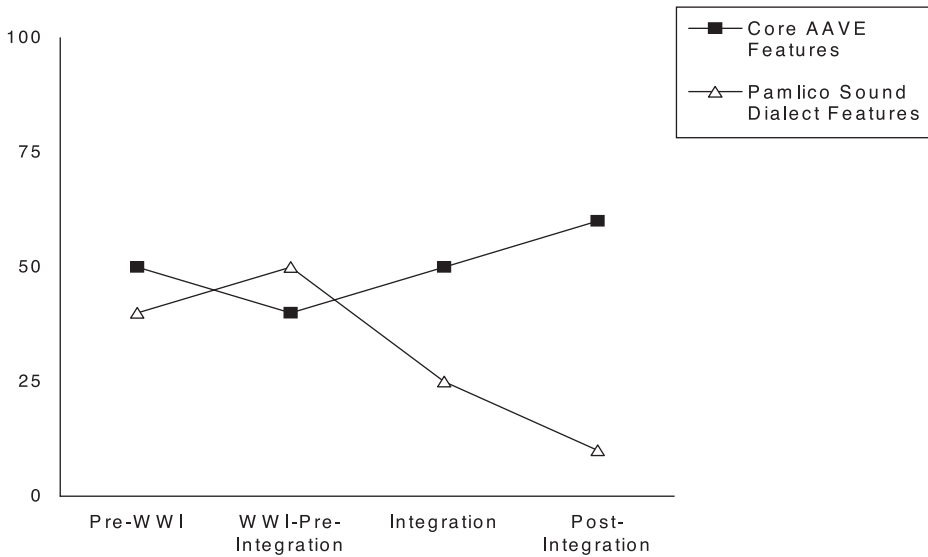


Figure 1. Idealized model of change for African Americans in Hyde County

The trajectory of change shows that African American speech has shifted rather dramatically over time, both in its intensification of features associated with urban AAVE and in its divergence from the local regional dialect norms. Can we truly say that African Americans in this remote region are now urban when they reside in a county inhabited by less than 10 people per square mile and having no public transit system, no shopping centers or malls, and no fast food stores? Wolfram and Thomas (2002) suggests that contemporary AAVE is characterized by a movement towards supraregional AAVE norms and a movement away from, or lack of accommodation to, local regional norms so that the urban-rural distinction is dissipating. At the same time, we recognize that current change is radiating from urban centers outward. Given the current status of AAVE, the use of the urban-rural distinction in this description must be interpreted in terms of its historical

context and the current pattern of diffusion within AAVE rather than in terms of a strict, demographically based dichotomy between urban and rural African American populations.

3. The grammar of urban AAVE

In this section, I outline some of the major structures of urban AAVE grammar. Given the historical connection to rural varieties of AAVE, the existence of supra-regional norms, and current patterns of diffusion, there are many traits of urban AAVE that are shared with non-urban varieties. In fact, the shared core of AAVE structures is an essential part of the unique linguistic story of AAVE. Nonetheless, there are ways in which Southern-based, rural and non-Southern, urban varieties differ. In describing the characteristics of urban AAVE in the following sections, I attempt to highlight some of the ways in which contemporary urban AAVE is similar to and different from other varieties, including rural Southern African American and European American varieties, non-Southern vernacular European American varieties, and standard English. For convenience, the description is organized on the basis of grammatical category.

3.1. Verb phrase

The most noteworthy traits of AAVE have typically been associated with the verb phrase, including the use of tense, mood, and aspect. For several decades now, researchers (Fasold 1972; Labov 1972a, 1998; Dayton 1996; Baugh 1983; Rickford 1999) have acknowledged that these dimensions distinguish AAVE from other varieties of English, although there is no consensus on its distinctive aspectual parameters. Although there are a number of distinguishing traits, the most prominent features are a distinct set of preverbal particles or auxiliaries.

3.1.1. Copula/auxiliary absence

The absence of copula and auxiliary for contractible forms of *is* and *are* (e.g. *She nice* for ‘She’s nice’ or *They acting silly* for ‘They’re acting silly’) has been one of the most often described structures of AAVE (e.g. Labov et al. 1968; Wolfram 1969; Fasold 1972; Baugh 1983; Rickford 1999). Although there are a number of descriptive and explanatory dimensions of copula absence that remain in dispute, including whether it is derived through a grammatical or phonological process (Fasold 1976), there is general agreement about its ethnolinguistic status. Wolfram (1974) and Feagin (1979) note that AAVE shares copula absence with some Southern white rural vernacular varieties of English, but that there are some qualitative and quantitative differences in the respective varieties. Copula absence

is quite pervasive in urban AAVE but is not found at all in Northern urban benchmark European American varieties. In Southern European American English varieties, mostly the former large plantation areas, it tends to be limited to forms of *are* and used at reduced frequency levels compared to AAVE. Studies of copula absence in apparent time and in different regions (Bailey and Maynor 1985, 1987, 1989; Cukor-Avila 2001; Wolfram and Thomas 2002) show that the process has been quite stable in AAVE for some time now, and that differences in urban and non-urban use are quantitative rather than qualitative.

3.1.2. Invariant *be*

Invariant *be* in sentences such as *Sometimes they be playing games*, also referred to as non-finite *be*, habitual *be*, and *be*₂, is probably the most salient grammatical trait of AAVE, to the point of becoming a stereotype. Its structural and functional properties have now been studied in a number of different urban (Labov 1972a; Labov et al. 1968; Wolfram 1969) and rural settings (Wolfram 1974; Bailey and Maynor 1985, 1989; Cukor-Avila 2001), as well as its development and diffusion over time and place. Although there is disagreement as to how *be*₂ might be represented in the grammatical system of AAVE (e.g. Fasold 1972), most analyses agree that *be*₂ marks a unique aspect referring to an intermittent activity, hence the reference to ‘habitual *be*.’

To begin with, the use of ‘habitual’ *be* or *be*₂ needs to be distinguished from several other uses of *be*, including those derived through phonological processes that affect contracted forms of *will* and *would*. In constructions such as *She be there in a minute*, the *be* comes from the loss of /l/ before a labial (*she’ll be* → *she be*) (see Edwards, other volume), whereas in a construction like *If they get a DVD player they be happy*, the form is derived from the loss of /d/ (*they’d be* → *they be*), since /d/ before a labial may geminate to the /b/ and then be lost in a general phonological process of degemination (e.g. *good bye* → *goob bye* → *goo’bye*). The difference between the phonologically derived forms, represented in (1) and (2) and the use of *be* in (3) is readily apparent in tag forms (1a, 2a, 3a) and negatives (2a, 2b, 3b).

- (1) *She be here in a minute.*
 - a. *She be here in a minute, **won’t she?***
 - b. *She **won’t be** here in a minute.*
- (2) *If they get a DVD player, they be happy.*
 - a. *If they get a DVD player, they be happy, **wouldn’t they?***
 - b. *If they get a DVD player, they **wouldn’t be** happy.*
- (3) *Sometimes they be playing tag.*
 - a. *Sometimes they be playing tag, **don’t they?***
 - b. *Sometimes they **don’t be** playing tag.*

Sentence (3) illustrates the fundamental syntactic and morphological properties that distinguish *be*₂ from its counterpart in other varieties of English; it does not alter its form in finite uses and takes *do* support in a way that is comparable to main verbs. Over the last half century, the habitual reference of *be*, particularly with *V-ing*, has grammaticalized in a change that has been spreading from urban centers outward. Practically all studies of AAVE show that younger vernacular speakers use *be V-ing* more than older speakers (Wolfram 1969; Cukor-Avila 2001; Bailey and Maynor 1987, 1989), and that urban speakers are more likely to use it than non-urban speakers (Cukor-Avila 2001; Wolfram and Thomas 2002). It is also possible that the use of habitual *be* may be age-graded, and that younger speakers who use it frequently will reduce its use as they get older, since it now has a strong association with black youth culture.

A more recent aspectual change is the semantic expansion of invariant *be* beyond its reference to habituality. Alim (2001), for example, notes that *be* is commonly used in hip-hop equative sentences such as *I be the truth* or *Dr. Dre be the name* in a way that seizes upon its iconic status as a marker of black speech. Under earlier analyses (e.g. Fasold 1972; Wolfram 1969), such stativity would have been considered ungrammatical, since it is incompatible with a habitual reading. Dayton (1996) proposes that highly affective utterances such as these may signify shift towards intensified stativity, or super-real status, rather than habituality. As with the original grammaticalization of *be V-ing*, this most recent change appears to be taking place in more urban versions of AAVE and spreading outward from that point.

3.1.3. *Completive done*

The use of *done* with the past tense of the verb, as in *They done used all the good ones*, is a persistent structural trait of AAVE that is shared with Southern European American vernacular varieties of English. Although the verbal particle *done* also occurs in Caribbean creoles, its syntactic configuration in AAVE and its semantic-pragmatic function differ somewhat from its creole counterparts. In AAVE, *done* occurs only in preverbal auxiliary position with past tense forms whereas it occurs with a bare verb stem (e.g. *They done go*) and can occur in clause-final position in some creoles (Holm 1988: 162). In many respects, it functions in AAVE like a perfect, referring to an action completed in the recent past, but it can also be used to highlight the change of state or to intensify an activity, as in a sentence like *I done told you not to mess up*. It is a stable feature, but it is more frequently used in Southern rural versions of AAVE than in urban AAVE.

3.1.4. *Sequential be done*

AAVE may also show a combination of *be* and *done* together in sentences such as *My ice cream be done melted by the time we get there*, marking a resultative or a future conditional state. On one level, this construction seems to function like a future perfect similar to standard English *will have melted* in the example given above. Dayton (1996) suggests that a newer use of this form functions more like a future resultative-conditional, referring to an inevitable consequence of a general condition or a specific activity, as in a sentence like *If you love your enemy, they be done eat you alive in this society*. According to Dayton (1996) and Labov (1998), the resultative-conditional meaning, which is often associated pragmatically with threats or warnings, is a newer semantic-aspectual development. This meaning, like some of the other nuanced meanings of auxiliaries discussed in the following sections, seems to be characteristic of urban AAVE. Although Dayton (1996) documented numerous examples of this type during her years of participant observation with AAVE speakers in Philadelphia, it still seems to occur rather infrequently in most varieties of AAVE.

3.1.5. *Remote béen*

The stressed use of *béen* with a past tense form of the verb may denote a special aspectual function that marks an activity that took place in the distant past. In sentences such as *I béen had it for about three years* or *I béen known him*, it refers to an event that took place, literally or figuratively, in a distant time frame. In some contexts, the form may be interpreted as the deletion of a contracted form of the perfect (e.g. *She's béen married*), thus camouflaging some of its subtle semantic difference from other varieties. For example, Rickford (1975) showed that European Americans and African Americans, when given the stimulus utterance *She béen married*, had quite different responses to the question *Is she still married?* European Americans interpreted the stressed *béen* as a deleted perfect form (e.g., *She's been* → *She been*) and as implying that the referent is no longer married, whereas African Americans interpreted it as a distinctive aspectual marker indicating that the referent had been married a long time. With the exception of the phrase *I béen known* or *I béen knowin'* (phonetically quite similar if not identical to *known* [noun]) in casual speech, the use of remote *been* in urban areas appears to be receding.

3.1.6. *Simple past had + verb*

One of the newer features of AAVE is the narrative use of the auxiliary *had* with a past or perfect form of the verb (see the section on irregular verbs) to indicate a simple past tense action, as in *They had went outside and then they had messed*

up the yard... . This use is equivalent to the use of the simple past (e.g. *They went outside and then they messed up the yard*) in Standard English. Whereas earlier descriptions of AAVE (Labov et al. 1968; Fasold and Wolfram 1970; Fasold 1972) do not mention this feature at all, recent descriptions (Cukor-Avila 2001; Rickford and Th  berge-Rafal 1996) observe that this construction may be quite frequent in the narratives of some preadolescents. Descriptions of AAVE document the narrative use of *had* + verb in both urban (Rickford and Th  berge-Rafal 1996) and rural AAVE settings (Cukor-Avila 2001). The fact that this feature is so frequent among preadolescents raises the possibility that it may be age-graded, and that AAVE speakers will diminish its use as they become adults, although this interpretation is discounted in some of the data from Cukor-Avila (2001). Of course, age-grading and language change are not necessarily incompatible notions, and it may be that it is a newer feature that shows some degree of age-grading.

3.1.7. *Specialized auxiliaries*

Several auxiliaries fill specialized semantic-pragmatic roles that subtly set apart AAVE from other vernacular varieties of English. Among these auxiliary-like constructions are the use of *come* to indicate a state of indignation, the use of *steady* to mark a continuative intensifying activity, and the use of *finna* to indicate an immediate future or planned event. The use of *come* with *v-ing* in the sentence *He come walkin' in here like he owned the damn place* (Spears 1982: 852) indicates a speaker's annoyance about the action or event. Structurally, this use closely resembles the use of *come* with movement verbs (e.g. *She came running*) in other varieties, and is thus a camouflaged form.

Another apparent camouflaged form is *steady* in sentences such as *Ricky Bell be steady steppin' in them number nines* (Baugh 1983: 86), where the adverb *steady* indicates an intensified, persistent activity. The specialized auxiliary *finna* in *I'm finna go*, related to the generalized Southern form *fixin' to* (also *fixta*, *fitna*, and *fidda*), refers to an immediate future or planned event. Camouflaged forms such as indignant *come* seem to be more recent developments concentrated in urban varieties, although it may be the case that these forms simply have not been noticed in Southern varieties because of their relative infrequency and structural similarity to related forms in benchmark European American varieties.

At the same time, the use of other auxiliaries in urban AAVE seems to be receding when compared with their use in Southern vernacular counterparts. Whereas double modals such as *I might could do it*, counterfactual *liketa* in *I was so scared I liketa died*, and causative *have to* in *I'll have him to do it* can be found in contemporary urban AAVE, they tend to be much more robust in rural Southern versions of this variety.

3.1.8. Irregular verbs

The irregular verbs of urban AAVE follow those found in other vernacular varieties of English, in particular, rural Southern white varieties. These include the extension of past as participle (e.g. *I had went down there*), the participle as past (e.g. *They seen it*), the bare root as past (e.g. *They run there yesterday*), and regularization of past tense (e.g. *Everybody knowed him*). Unlike rural Southern varieties, it does not tend to retain some of the older different irregular forms (e.g. *hearen* for *heard* or *clumb* for *climbed*).

3.1.9. Subject-verb agreement

Two aspects of subject-verb concord are prominent in urban AAVE, one relating to the attachment of the verbal suffix *-s* and the other relating to the conjugated forms of past and present *be* forms. Practically all studies of urban (Labov et al. 1968; Wolfram 1969; Fasold 1972; Rickford 1992) and rural AAVE (Cukor-Avila 2001; Wolfram and Thomas 2002) have documented the current-day pattern of 3rd sg. *-s* absence in sentences such as *She walk* for *She walks* and *She have money* for *She has money*. The incidence of 3rd sg. *-s* absence is so high for younger AAVE speakers in some sociolinguistic studies of core vernacular adolescents – reaching levels of between 75–100 percent for some speakers – that it has prompted several researchers (Labov et al. 1968; Fasold 1972) to speculate that contemporary urban “AAVE has no concord rule for verbal *-s*” (Fasold 1972: 146). This extensive pattern of absence seems to contrast with earlier Southern rural versions of AAVE, which are more prone to have variable attachment of verbal *-s* with 3rd sg. subjects. Furthermore, in some cases, Southern rural AAVE had verbal *-s* attachment with subjects other than 3rd sg., particularly 3rd pl. subjects as in *The dogs barks a lot* (Cukor-Avila 2001; Wolfram and Thomas 2002) but also with 1st and 2nd subjects (Schneider 1989; Cukor-Avila 1995). Evidence (Cukor-Avila 2001; Wolfram and Thomas 2002) indicates that 3rd sg. *-s* absence is shared by urban and non-urban verbal AAVE varieties, with some intensification of this pattern in core urban vernaculars taking place over the past half-century. Although it has been suggested that a specialized narrative use of verbal *-s* occurs in constructions such as *She takes your clothes and lend them to people* in one urban variety of AAVE (Labov 1987), this pattern has not been confirmed in other studies (Rickford 1999), and has been disputed as an innovation in AAVE (Wolfram and Thomas 2002).

The second concord pattern affecting urban AAVE is the regularization of present and past forms of conjugated *be*. AAVE is much like the vast majority of other vernacular varieties of English in its use of *be* leveling; in the present tense, *are* and *am* level to *is*, as in *The folks is home* or *Y'all is here*, while past tense *be* levels to *was*, as in *The folks was there* or *Y'all was here*. Past tense *be* leveling is

much more common than present tense leveling in AAVE, as it is in virtually all varieties of vernacular English having *be* regularization. The comparison of leveling over time and place indicates that the incidence of *be* leveling is diminishing somewhat (Wolfram and Thomas 2002), probably due to the effect of prescriptive norms. Nonetheless, *be* leveling, particularly with past tense, remains an integral and robust pattern within urban AAVE.

3.1.10. Other verb phrase structures

There are other types of verb structures that distinguish AAVE, but these are restricted to particular lexical verbs and their complements. For example, the verb *beat* in AAVE may function as an intransitive verb, as in *We beat* for 'won', whereas it is required to co-occur with an object in other varieties of English as in *We beat the team*. This use of intransitive *beat* is quite common in urban versions of AAVE. Or, a verb plus particle may function together lexically as in *blessed out* for 'scold' or 'swear at' in *She blessed him out*. This use is common in both urban and rural contexts and is shared with Southern European American English. The use of *say* to introduce a quote, as *She told him, say, "Where you been?"* is similar to its use in some creoles, prompting speculation that it is a vestige of creole influence (Rickford 1999: 9). *Say* may also be extended in AAVE to refer to non-human and inanimate objects, as in *The rock say "boom"*, which distinguishes its use in AAVE from other varieties using the general quotative *go*, as in *The rock went "boom"*. The verb *go* in the construction *Here go the house* functions as a static locative in AAVE, distinguishing it from benchmark European American varieties that use it only as a dynamic locative. There are a number of differences of this type that distinguish AAVE from other varieties but they are related to individual lexical items or phrasal complements and not to the overall grammatical configuration of AAVE.

3.2. Negation

The formation of negation in AAVE is not particularly distinct from other vernacular varieties of English in the US and beyond. To begin with, it participates in negative concord, or multiple negation, in which a single negative proposition may be marked both within the verb phrase and on postverbal indefinites, as in *It wasn't nothing* or *They didn't do nothing about nobody having no money or nothing like that*. In this respect, it is no different from the majority of vernacular dialects of English (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998). In urban areas, the incidence of negative concord is sharply stratified; some low-status speakers show the categorical realization of negative concord while middle-class speakers often show very low frequency levels or no negative concord at all in their sociolinguistic interviews (Wolfram 1969: 156).

AAVE also participates in a type of negative concord that involves a preverbal indefinite and verbal negative as in *Nobody don't like him*, which is equivalent to the standard sentence *Nobody likes him*. In standard varieties of English, it is possible for the two negative propositions to cancel each other, as in the longstanding American TV advertisement phrase, *Nobody doesn't like Sara Lee* [pastries], which of course implies that everyone likes the product. Although some isolated sentences of this type might be syntactically ambiguous, the intent of most sentences is readily apparent from the context in which they are uttered.

Related to the preverbal negative pattern is a type of inversion of the negative auxiliary and indefinite subject, as in *Don't nobody like him*, meaning 'Nobody likes him' or *Ain't nobody home* for 'Nobody is home'. Constructions like these are often used for emphasis, especially if the indefinite is stressed, as in *Don't nobody like him*.

Negative concord can also be transferred across clauses, as in a well-known example cited by Labov (1972: 130), *It ain't no cat can't get in no coop*, referring to the fact that cats are not able to get into the bird coops built on the roofs of apartment buildings. Although it has been speculated that this type of cross-clausal negation might be unique to AAVE, Southern-based European American vernaculars (Wolfram and Christian 1976: 113) also use cross-clausal negative concord. This type of concord is quite infrequent in AAVE, as it is in other varieties where it is found, and there are lingering questions about the default interpretation of cross-clausal negatives.

Like other vernacular dialects, AAVE uses *ain't* as a general preverbal negative for present tense *be* (*am not, isn't, aren't*) and for the perfect auxiliary *haven't/hasn't* as in *She ain't here* or *She ain't been there lately*. In this respect, AAVE is no different from other vernacular varieties of English. However, AAVE is unlike most European American vernacular varieties in generalizing the use of *ain't* for *didn't* as well, as in *She ain't do it*. This distinctive use is fairly widespread in urban varieties of AAVE, although it is camouflaged by other, shared uses of *ain't*. The generalized past tense variant *wont* for *wasn't* and *weren't* in *I wont there yesterday*, found in some Southern vernacular varieties, is not typical of urban AAVE. Finally, *ain't* and *don't* may be used with *but* to indicate 'only' or 'no more than' as in *She ain't but three years old* or *He didn't take but three dollars*. As with most other aspects of negation in urban AAVE, this is shared with Southern rural African American and European American vernacular varieties.

3.3. Nominals

Although many of the characteristics of the noun phrase in AAVE are shared with a wide range of English vernacular varieties, there are also a few traits that set it apart from European American vernaculars in the US. Perhaps the most noteworthy of these is the absence of inflectional *-s* on possessives and plurals. The

absence of possessive *-s* in sentences like *The dog_ tail was wagging* or *The man_ hat was old* are rare among other American English vernaculars. This is a relatively stable feature in AAVE wherever it is found in the US, though Rickford (1999: 271) suggests that it may be subject to age-grading since it is more frequent among younger speakers.

The formation of plurals in AAVE is noteworthy for several reasons. First, there is the pattern of *-s* absence related to measure nouns with quantifiers, as in *I got 50 cent_* and *It's four mile_ from here*. The absence of the plural *-s* with measure nouns is a characteristic of a number of Southern-based varieties of English as well as some Northern rural vernacular varieties (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998; Wolfram and Christian 1976), and is probably more robust in Southern-based, rural varieties than it currently is in urban AAVE. However, AAVE may also have a more generalized absence of *-s* plural unrestricted by the type of noun, as in *some dog* or *two boy*. Although generalized plural *-s* absence is a trait of urban AAVE, it is relatively infrequent, with typical absence levels less than 10 per cent out of all the cases where it might occur. Older, more rural versions of AAVE show a higher incidence of generalized plural *-s* absence, with some speakers showing levels up to one-third of all potential cases. Another type of plural marking involves the regularization of irregular plurals, including shifts in word class status from irregular to regular (e.g. *oxes, geoses*), the attachment of plurals to forms that have zero marking in other varieties (e.g. *three sheeps, two corns*), and redundant marking of irregular plurals (e.g. *two firemens, childrens*). In this regard, it is like other vernacular varieties of English, apart from some differences in frequency levels.

It has been suggested (Labov et al. 1968) that a type of associative plural *an 'em* in AAVE, as in *Jerome an 'em* for 'Jerome and his friends', is more similar to English creoles than to other varieties of English, but this type of associative plural is not unusual in other varieties of American English, including Southern and Northern European American varieties. The use of the second person plural *y'all* in *Y'all done now* or *It's y'all ball* is quite common in both Southern and Northern versions of AAVE and therefore contrasts with second person plural formation in regions that are characterized by variants such as *youse, you guys, or youns*.

A couple of distinctive traits of AAVE are found in the possessive pronouns. The use of the possessive pronoun *they* in *It's they book* is quite robust in most urban and rural regions of the US, and it usually distinguishes AAVE from benchmark European American vernaculars. The regularization of *mine* to *mines* in *The book is mines* is quite robust in most varieties of AAVE, though it appears more typical of preadolescent speakers than older speakers.

AAVE shares a number of pronominal traits with other vernacular varieties of English, including the regularization of the reflexive *hissself* as in *He washed hissself*, the extension of the objective form *them* for attributive demonstratives such as *She likes them apples*, and the use of objective forms in coordinate subjects

as in *Me and him got style*. It shares benefactive datives as in *I got me a new car* with Southern dialects. Urban AAVE also shares null subjective relative pronoun in embedded sentences such as *It's a man come over here talking trash*. The use of *what* as a relative as in *That's the man what I was talking about*, found in some forms of earlier AAVE, is no longer found to any extent in urban AAVE.

3.4. Question formation

There are two aspects of question formation that distinguish AAVE syntax, both involving subject auxiliary inversion. First, questions may be formed without subject-auxiliary inversion, as in *Where that is?* or *Why I can't go?*. These non-inverted forms tend to occur with *wh-* questions and syntactically simple sentences. While the productive use of simple non-inverted question order may be receding, it is still quite common in some fixed phrases such as *What it is?* or *Who that is?* At the same time, embedded questions may retain subject-auxiliary inversion, as in *I asked her could I go with her*, contrasting with the standard pattern in which *if* or *whether* is used with non-inverted order, as in *I asked him if I could go with him*. This is a stable pattern shared with a number of vernacular varieties.

4. Conclusion

The descriptive profile of urban AAVE grammar given in the above sections indicates a robust, dynamic sociocultural variety that maintains continuity with its historical Southern rural roots while becoming the locus of current innovation within AAVE. At this stage of development, factors of social class, speech community, identity, and language ideology are probably as essential as the rural-urban dichotomy but the historical role of this relationship cannot be disputed. Large metropolitan areas appear to be the current sociocultural centers for innovation and the establishment of supraregional norms in AAVE, with change diffusing from these urban locations into more rural regions (Cukor-Avila 2001; Wolfram and Thomas 2002).

In tables 1–3, we summarize the status of the major grammatical structures surveyed in this description: Table 1 summarizes innovative and intensifying features of urban AAVE; table 2 summarizes receding features; and table 3 summarizes stable features. Our primary basis for comparison is rural AAVE during the period of the Great Migration, simply labeled Southern AAVE, but we also compare urban AAVE with earlier AAVE (the nineteenth century), Southern European American vernacular English, and Northern European American vernacular varieties. In the comparison, a check ✓ indicates that the feature is present and parentheses around the check (✓) indicate that the feature is infrequent. The checklist is naturally subject to the usual kinds of limitations associated with qualitative

summary inventories of this type. In this case, the limitation includes our differing levels of knowledge about the status of some structures in earlier AAVE and benchmark European American varieties.

Table 1. New and intensifying structures in urban AAVE

Structure	Urban AAVE	Rural AAVE	Earlier AAVE	Southern EAV	Northern EAV
habitual <i>be</i> + <i>v-ing</i> e.g. <i>I always be playing ball</i>	✓	(✓)			
intensified equative <i>be</i> e.g. <i>She be the diva</i>	✓				
preterit <i>had</i> + V e.g. <i>Then had tripped</i>	✓	✓			
resultative <i>be done</i> e.g. <i>She be done had her baby</i>	✓				
indignant <i>come</i> e.g. <i>They come talkin' that trash</i>	✓				
-3rd sg. -s abs e.g. <i>She run everyday</i>	✓	✓	✓		
<i>ain't</i> for <i>didn't</i> e.g. <i>I ain't go yesterday</i>	✓	(✓)	✓		
counterfactual <i>call oneself</i> e.g. <i>He calls himself dancing'</i>	✓	✓		(✓)	

Table 2. Receding urban AAVE features

Structure	Urban AAVE	Rural AAVE	Earlier AAVE	Southern EAV	Northern EAV
remote <i>been</i> e.g. <i>I been ate it</i>	(✓)	✓	✓		
double modals e.g. <i>I might could do it</i>	(✓)	✓	(✓)	✓	
<i>a</i> -prefixing e.g. <i>I was a-huntin'</i>		✓	✓	✓	
leveling present <i>be</i> to <i>is</i> e.g. <i>We is here</i>	(✓)	✓	✓	(✓)	
3rd pl -s e.g. <i>The dogs barks</i>		(✓)	✓	✓	

Table 2. (continued) Receding urban AAVE features

Structure	Urban AAVE	Rural AAVE	Earlier AAVE	Southern EAV	Northern EAV
counterfactual <i>liketa</i> e.g. <i>I liketa died</i>	(✓)	✓	(✓)	✓	
causative <i>have...to</i> e.g. <i>We'll have him to do it</i>	(✓)	✓	(✓)	✓	
<i>wont</i> for past <i>be</i> e.g. <i>I wont there yesterday</i>		(✓)		✓	
different irregular forms e.g. <i>It riz in front of me</i>		✓	✓	✓	
<i>for to</i> complement e.g. <i>I want for to bring it</i>		✓	✓	✓	
<i>what</i> as a relative pronoun e.g. <i>The man what took it</i>		(✓)	✓	(✓)	
non-inverted simple questions e.g. <i>What that is?</i>	(✓)	✓	✓		

Table 3. Stable urban AAVE features

Structure	Urban AAVE	Rural AAVE	Earlier AAVE	Southern EAVE	Northern EAV
copula absence e.g. <i>She nice</i>	✓	✓	✓	(✓)	
completive <i>done</i> e.g. <i>She done did it</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
negative concord e.g. <i>She didn't do nothing'</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
preverbal indefinite e.g. <i>Nobody don't like it</i>	✓	✓	✓	(✓)	
negative inversion e.g. <i>Didn't nobody like it</i>	✓	✓	(✓)		
<i>ain't</i> for <i>be + not have + no</i> e.g. <i>I ain't been there</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
regularized <i>was</i> for past <i>be</i> e.g. <i>We was there</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
irregular verbs past for participle e.g. <i>I had went</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 3. (continued) Stable urban AAVE features

Structure	Urban AAVE	Rural AAVE	Earlier AAVE	Southern EAVE	Northern EAV
participle for past e.g. <i>I seen it</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
bare root past form e.g. <i>Yesterday I run fast</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
regularized past form e.g. <i>I knowed it</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
different past e.g. <i>It riz up in front of me</i>		✓	✓	✓	
<i>finna</i> quasi auxiliary e.g. <i>I finna do it</i>	✓	✓	(✓)	✓	
quotative <i>say</i> e.g. <i>He told him say, "Leave"</i>	✓	✓	✓		
stative locative <i>here go</i> e.g. <i>Here go the pencil</i>	✓	✓	(✓)		
Plural					
measure noun pl. abs. e.g. <i>three mile</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
generalized <i>-s</i> abs. e.g. <i>three boy</i>	(✓)	✓	✓		
regularized irregulars e.g. <i>oxes</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	(✓)
subject relative pro deletion e.g. <i>It's a man took it</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
benefactive dative e.g. <i>I got me a new car</i>	✓	✓	(✓)	✓	
possessive <i>-s</i> absence e.g. <i>the girl hat</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
regularized <i>mines</i> e.g. <i>It's mines</i>	✓	✓	✓	(✓)	
regularized <i>hissself</i> e.g. <i>He shaved hissself</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
possessive <i>they</i> e.g. <i>It's they book</i>	✓	✓	✓		
2nd pl. <i>y'all</i> e.g. <i>Will y'all be there</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
demonstrative <i>them</i> e.g. <i>I love them shoes</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 3. (continued) Stable urban AAVE features

Structure	Urban AAVE	Rural AAVE	Earlier AAVE	Southern EAVE	Northern EAV
associative <i>an 'em</i> e.g. <i>Derek an' em will be there</i>	✓	✓	✓	(✓)	(✓)
existential <i>it</i> e.g. <i>It's a J Street in DC</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
existential <i>they</i> e.g. <i>They's a J Street in DC</i>	✓	✓	(✓)		
inverted embedded questions e.g. <i>I asked could I go</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	(✓)

By far, the largest inventory of structures is represented in table 3, which lists the stable structures of AAVE. These traits were present in the Southern rural varieties of AAVE originally transplanted to urban non-Southern areas, thus showing the historical and current continuity of AAVE as it now transcends regional boundaries. There is certainly innovation and intensification as shown in table 1, as well as recession as shown in table 2, but these inventories are not nearly as exhaustive as the stable core of AAVE regardless of region. Notwithstanding some regional variation, there is strong support for a supra-regional core of AAVE, affirming the primary sociocultural and ideological basis for the construction of present-day AAVE.

It is also noteworthy that the non-Southern, urban context of AAVE tends to stand in stark opposition to benchmark European American varieties in these metropolitan areas. In an important sense, urban AAVE is more, though not isomorphically, aligned with Southern rural European American vernacular varieties than it is with surrounding European American Northern vernaculars. This dynamic is probably a reflection of the bi-racial ideology that defines most urban areas in the US and the developing oppositional identity that has developed in African American youth culture. As Fordham and Ogbu (1986) observe, young African Americans in urban areas do not want to 'act white'. In this context, 'speaking white' is the most salient indicator of white behavior. Although the notion of 'talking black' is constructed in such a way that it cannot be reduced to a simple inventory of structural traits as described here (Morgan 2001), linguistic features are certainly a part of this construction, and provide support for the perpetuation of ethnolinguistic distinctiveness. Urban AAVE may change and redefine itself over time and with changing social conditions, but it seems certain that it will remain the most prominent and significant sociocultural variety of American English for some time to come.

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