Asia Pacific Science Press

Critical Humanistic Social Theory
ISSN(O):3005-9291
ISSN(P):3005-9283
Vol. 2 No.3 (2025)

Syntactic Features of African American Vernacular English

Ruogu Sun*

Southwest Jiaotong University Hope College, Nanchong Sichuan, 637900, China

Corresponding author: Ruogu Sun, 921357443@qq.com

Abstract: This paper examines the syntactic features of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), a significant social dialect in the United States with roots in West African Creole. The study aims to systematically describe the key grammatical characteristics that distinguish AAVE from Standard English, focusing on its unique syntactic patterns. Through linguistic analysis and examples from literature, the research highlights prominent features such as the habitual use of "be," plural formation exceptions, specialized tense markers like "been" and "done," double negation, and other grammatical particularities. The findings reveal that AAVE operates under consistent and rule-governed syntactic patterns rather than random variations. The conclusion emphasizes that while AAVE is evolving, especially among younger speakers influenced by education and social integration, it remains a robust and structurally distinct variety of English, reflecting both cultural identity and linguistic innovation.

Keywords: African American Vernacular English; Syntactic Features, Habitual "be"; Double Negation; Verb Tense

Published: Sept 14, 2025

DOI: https://doi.org/10.62177/chst.v2i3.638

1.Introduction

Ethnic differences are an important factor in causing social variation in language. Especially in the United States, the mixture of unused ethnic groups and the intermingling of different cultures is an extremely important social phenomenon. This means that in the process of causing social variation in language, the ethnic factor is often linked to factors such as geography and occupation, and people with various ethnic backgrounds bring their ethnic influences or characteristics to the language when they speak English[1]. African American Vernacular English (AAVE), also known as Black English or African American English, has gradually become an important social dialect in the past decades because African Americans are a notable social class in social life. AAVE developed from West African Creole, which is distinct from both West African English and Stander English and is a separate system. It is one of the many variants of American English, such as variations in phonology and syntax, but these variations are regular and not chaotic or arbitrary[2]. In this paper, the syntactic features of African American Vernacular English are explained.

2.The Main Syntactic Features of African American English

Linguistically, the greatest difference between contemporary AAVE and White English is in the syntactic structure; the syntax is the most fixed part of the language, with the least variation, and it is also the part that is assimilated most slowly by White English compared to other elements of the language. African American English speakers throughout the United States use certain common syntactic structures despite geographic differences and differences in social class[3].

2.1 Use of the "be" Verb

The most obvious differences in the structure of AAVE are reflected in the patterns of use of the "be". These forms are used primarily to indicate habitual or recurrent occurrences.

If the state or event is not frequent or recurring, then "be" is omitted. For example, "The coffee bees cold" means "Every day the coffee is cold", while "The coffee cold " means "Today the coffee is cold". "Be" can also be used to express habitual progressive meaning: most of the problems always be wrong. Most of the time they are up on the playground. That fellow always is telling lie. "Be" is also used in conjunction with "do" to indicate a frequent occurrence in interrogative and emphatic forms: Do they be playing all day? This rule of using or not using "be" is consistent with the regularity of the African American English community as a system.

In addition to the use of "be" to denote habitual events, another important function worth noting is the ability of African American English speakers to use "be" to denote the notion of future time, and these subtle differences in meaning and usage are largely context dependent. The "be" in the future tense can be used in conjunction with the diminutive "ll" for "will". The simultaneous use of these two forms demonstrates the process of linguistic change from a more Africanized AAVE to a more Americanized AAVE. In the early years of African American English usage, only the "be" may have been used to indicate the future tense[2]. As time changed and the structure of AAVE shifted to White English, speakers of African American English began to use "will" as well. As the process of language change continues, we find two forms of the future tense.

African American English does not have a be verb in the present tense. e.g.,

(1) Irene really good girl. (AAVE)

(2) Irene is really a good girl. (Standard English)

If you want to use it, you should use the original form of the verb to be. e.g.,

(1) Linda be sexy and smart.

(2) Linda be sexy and smart. (AAVE)

(3) Linda is sexy and smart. (Standard English)

In the past tense, the verb "was" is always used, regardless of the person and number of the subject, e.g. They were still asleep when we entered the apartment. The verb "be" is often omitted in the passive voice where the actor does not have to show it. Interestingly, variations of "be" still occur in situations where their meaning requires their use. These forms are simplified when people use the variant forms of "be". For example, is and was usually used in conjunction with any subject of a sentence, regardless of whether the subject is singular or plural and regardless of the person of the subject, so we can use either "You ain't sick, is you?" in African American English or "She ain't home, is she?"

There are other sentences in which be is omitted are:

(1) before a noun or noun phrase: She the first one started us off.

(2) Before an epithet adjective: He fast in everything he does.

(3) Before a position word: You out the game.

(4) Before a negative word: But everybody not black.

(5) Before the -ing form of the verb: He just feels like he gettin' cripples up from arthritis.

(6) Before the future tense of gonna: He gon' try to get up.

Some linguists have argued that the omission of the verb be reflects a difference in deep structure between African American English and Standard English, but Labov and other linguists are wrong to argue that there is no be verb in the deep structure of AAVE. Various forms of the verb to be do occur frequently in the following linguistic contexts:

(1) In the ain't construction: It ain't no cat can't get in no ' coop.

(2) In the first person singular construction: I'm not strong drinker.

(3) In the abbreviated forms of I's, tha's and wha's: I's a real light-yellow color. Tha 's my daily routine, woman.

(4) In the non-finite verb form: You got to be good, Serena!

(5) In the imperative: Don't be messin ' with my old lady!

(6) In emphatic sentences: He is a expert.

(7) In a Yes/no question: Is she dead? -Count the bullet holes in her head.

(8) In a reflexive question: He ain't here, is he?

(9) After an elliptical sentence in a comparative structure: It always somebody together than you are.

(10) In an indirect question with a wh- clause: That's what he is: a brother. I don't care what you are.

The above usage of be shows that AAVE has clear rules, and the variant form of can be used for any subject, regardless of whether the subject is singular or plural, or whether it is in the first, second, or third person, which fully demonstrates the plasticity of African American English over White English in language use.

2.2 Differences in Plural Forms

When standard English nouns form plural forms, "-s" or "-es" is usually added to the end of the word. African American English generally follows this rule, but there are exceptions.

(1) In phrases that express quantity, the suffixes that form the plural form of a noun are often omitted, such as seven years ago, two cups of coffee, etc.

(2) In AAVE, a few nouns form plural forms by changing the endings, such as foot to

foots, and sometimes by adding a plural marker after the plural form already formed in standard English, such as mens for man.

In AAVE, nouns that end in consonantal affixes such as /s/ should be doubled and then formed into plural according to standard English rules, e.g. desk and test are written as dess and tess respectively, and then their plural forms are changed to desses and tesses. When African American English expresses affiliation, the way it is formed differs from standard English in that it does not depend on the endings of the noun, but on the position in which the noun comes out. This is especially true for pronouns in the second- and third-person plural, such as you room and they teacher, because the pronunciation of you and your, their and their is almost identical in the AAVE dialect.

2.3 Verb Tense

2.3.1 The special usage of Been.

There are strict grammatical rules for the formation of several other tenses in Standard English, such as He has arrived. African American English speakers use been for the recently completed past action. The meaning of "recently" depends more on the words used in the sentence to indicate time than on the actual duration of time itself. For example, "She has been tardy twice this semester." is correct AAVE. The use of "this semester" in this sentence is correct, regardless of whether the period time extends over weeks or months. However, if one were to express the idea that "she was tardy twice last semester," the correct AAVE expression would be "She was tardy twice last semester." This distinction may seem a little too strict, but it is important to remember that white English has similar restrictions on the way speakers express themselves. We can generalize a bit: on occasions when African American English speakers use been, White English speakers use have/has/had+been. It is important to note that AAVE uses only the verb form been without regard to the form of the subject or whether have is in the present or past tense[4].

"Been" is also used in conjunction with other verb forms to indicate a past action, which may be recent or long ago, e.g.,

The white English form that corresponds to AAVE is: have+been+verb. e.g.

(1) He has been married instead of He has been married. The connection between the past and the present.

As discussed above, it is not the time itself, but the way it is expressed that governs the choice of verb. Keeping this in mind will help us distinguish the past tense usage of "been+verb" from "be+verb". "been" can also be reread to express emphasis without regard to how long the action has been going on, and similarly, been can be used with other verbs to express emphatic assertions, such as: He has been gone, meaning: I understand the fact that he has left. Note that in both of the African American English stress patterns described above, been appears in the sentence without any time or stress modifiers. Therefore, the correct AAVE would be to say

"He has been gone," but it would be wrong if we added a time modifier. If there is another word in the sentence to indicate "emphasis" or "length of time," then the speaker will not repeat been.

2.3.2 The special use of Done.

The grammatical function of done is similar to that of have or had in standard English. e.g.

(1) I done told you already.

"Done" alone is used to express a past action, which may be just completed or already completed. But when it is used in conjunction with another verb, done usually means only the most recently completed action, so you can say "I done finish my work today." is wrong. But in AAVE, it is wrong to say "I done finish my work yesterday".

"Done" can also be used in AAVE in conjunction with been. In such sentences, done plays a role like that of white English have. It is also possible to choose other words instead of done in a sentence like this and still be correct in AAVE, and there is a complication in that this use of

done in AAVE makes it possible to express the future perfect tense, which is rarely used in White English.

The following is how African American English speakers express the future perfect tense: be+done+verb. e.g.

(1) He be done left by the time we get there.

(2) I done for go this name.

This usage is even found in the common black expression: "I be done - before you know".

2.3.3 The special function of context in AAVE.

African American English relies either on the sentence immediately following it or on the conversation to indicate temporal order. Therefore, AAVE does not have the -ed form when it comes to the concept of past tense and past perfect.

The same verb form can indicate both the present and the past tense when time is expressed in context. African American English, like Chinese, uses words like "last week" and "everyday" to express time without changing the verb form. Many AAVE verbs have no change of person, and the same verb form can be used for all subjects, regardless of the singular or plural. The subject and number of a verb are indicated by the context of the sentence or by one of the words in the sentence. We say that AAVE uses the context to indicate the number of the verb about the subject, but this does not mean that AAVE does not have the concept of plural and all relations. African American English just does not add -s or -s'. These kinds of features of Black American English are very similar to Chinese, and it is not difficult for us to understand them[1].

2.3.4 Double negative or multiple negative forms.

One of the characteristics of AAVE is that it often ignores grammatical choices and uses double negation of multiple negations. In the middle of the 18th century, some grammarians suggested that two negatives could not be used in a sentence at the same time. Negative echoes have been disappearing from Standard English since then, but they are still widely used in AAVE and some other English dialects. For example, African American English can turn the sentences They will bring nothing. and Nobody will ever bring anything. into They won't bring nothing. and Nobody won't never bring nothing. For emphasis, you can also reverse the position of the auxiliary verb and the first indefinite pronoun in the sentence, e.g., in the second sentence above, as Won't nobody never bring Nothing.

The double negative form dates to Shakespeare's time and is widely used among whites today, but the multiple negative forms are unique to AAVE[1]. Its characteristic is the extensive use of multiple negatives, which is confusing to non-African American English speakers. e.g.

(1) Ain't nobody gonna beat me at nothing.

(2) I ain't seen nothing like dat no place.

(3) Don't nobody say nothing after that.

2.4 Other Grammatical Features

In the process of changing African American English, that is, in the process of changing the African model into the American model, due to the lack of formal language instruction, some overkill forms of language, such as "they does", have emerged[5]. This is entirely due to the lack of understanding by African American English speakers of the variable rules of stander English: since the third person singular He is followed by does, the plural third person they can also be used in conjunction with does. There are also several such sentences in AAVE, such as "they does" and "I does".In standard English, the subject is the third-person singular general present tense, and the predicate verb is followed by "-s". To avoid grammatical errors like

We sings, they studies, the predicate verb is always in the original form, no matter what kind of person and number it is. e.g.,

(1) Natasha goes to the United States. (AAVE)

(2) Natasha goes to the United States. (Standard English)

For the same reason, have and do are not restricted by the person and number of the subject, and there is no notion that the third-person auxiliary verb needs to be changed. For example, he have, she don't, etc. are very common.

The second point, standard English allows double subjects, especially when the noun used as the subject is far from the predicate verb, e.g. The plant over there in the corner behind the chair with the embroidered cushions, it's almost as old as I am. This grammatical phenomenon is mainly derived from the dialects of English spoken by other ethnic groups. It is important to note that African American English uses this unique form to express emphasis rather than by repeating certain words for emphasis purposes. Of course, this feature of AAVE is not obligatory.

In addition to that, standard English relies on reversing the order to form a direct question: What's that? AAVE requires that the verb be placed after the subject: What that is? In indirect questions, the modal auxiliary verb of the subordinate clause can also be moved

forward, and African American English even changes I wonder where she can go to I wonder can she go where. In the Why he took it category, only the rising tone is used to reflect the character of the question.

In Standard English, the negation ain't is only occasionally found in colloquial and colloquial speech, but since the 18th century, ain't has been the most common negation in alldialects of English. African American English ain' can replace not only am not, isn't, aren't hasn't, haven't, etc., but even didn't' can even replace the negative form of past tense auxiliary verbs such as didn't. e.g.,Tom ain't working.

3.Conclusion

African American English is now in a period of transition, with older Blacks mostly still

using the old dialect, but the younger generation reflecting the influence of freedom and access to education in their language, gradually moving closer to Standard English. Of course, it is impossible for blacks and whites to completely assimilate in terms of thinking and language, and the differences in their respective cultural backgrounds still play a hindering role. Black American English, as the main language used by this group of black Americans, is the most widely used minority language in American society. Although there are many obvious differences between African American English and Standard English in terms of pronunciation rules and syntactic structure, as one of the many variants of American English, it is bound to play an increasingly important role in many areas of social life in the future as a major English language that is increasingly valued by society throughout the United States.

Funding

no

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Reference

[1] Brooks, G., & Stavros, G. (1970). An interview with Gwendolyn Brooks. Contemporary Literature, 11(1), 1–20.

[2] Burling, R. (1973). English in black and white. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

[3] Dillard, J. L. (Ed.). (2010). Perspectives on black English (Vol. 4). Walter de Gruyter.

[4] Fasold, R. W. (1975). [Review of the book Black English: Its history and usage in the United States, by J. L. Dillard]. Language in Society, 4(2), 198–221.

[5] Michaels, L., & Ricks, C. (Eds.). (1980). The state of the language (Vol. 498). University of California Press.

[6] Trask, R. L. (2000). Historical linguistics. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press & Edward Arnold (Publishers) Limited.