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Lyrical Insight: Looking at Changes in AAVE through Slave Spirituals, Blues and

Rap

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to test the validity of using song lyrics as a source of data to analyze AAVE trends. In this thesis I tracked prominent features in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) such as absence of a copula, verbal –s omission, and double negatives, from slavery to the present, while using song lyrics. I examined lyrics from slave spirituals (18th century), blues lyrics (1920s and 1930s) and current rap lyrics. I looked at music because it is a centerpiece of black culture and has been a constant vehicle of expression, unlike other forms of more traditionally used data. I tracked the rate of occurrence then compared the rates across the different genres. I found that –s omission seemed to be suppressed in blues lyrics, negative concord occurred in all three genres and that copula absence only appeared in rap lyrics. These findings were consistent with findings from previous studies (Bailey et al. (1989) Kortman (2004) and Pullum (1999), Myhill (1995),Bailey (1987),Wolfram (1969),Ash and Myhill (1986)
Labov (1995), Poplack (2005), Rickford (1998; 1999)), which used interviews, early slave recordings and manuscripts as sources for data collection. Because these findings reflect similar findings as my own, my hypothesis that songs can be an appropriate representation of trends in spoken AAVE, is supported.

I. Introduction

When one thinks of slavery, the first images that come to mind are those of

oppression, injustice and a general failing of humanity. Slavery's affects on American

culture are large and far spanning; however, despite slavery's far-reaching and negative

influences, black people were able to create a rich black American culture. African

American Vernacular English (herein referred to as AAVE), a dialect of American

English, is a large component of that culture. Since AAVE is an element of black culture,

being able to analyze and track changes with in it can give further insight into black

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culture. Linguists often use interviews, ex-slave narratives, black literature, plays, and

observations of conversations to gather data about the changes in AAVE.   This paper

tests the method of tracking the changes in AAVE by using a corpus of song lyrics. The

purpose of this paper is to see if this is a valid method to analyze AAVE.

II. Negative attitudes associated with AAVE

AAVE is both grammatically and phonetically complex. Like any other dialect or

language, AAVE varies according to age, social class and gender. Across all its varieties

(urban and rural), AAVE has a common set of linguistic features that distinguish it from

Standard American English (herein SAE), which will be discussed below.

Since AAVE does differ from SAE, there is an unfortunate and yet pervasive

view that AAVE is merely bad English or slang. In fact, in the early 20th century, AAVE

was seen as a "deficient form of white speech," not only by non-academics who had

"clearly racist motives," but also by educators and psychologists, "whose motives were

[to] increase educational success for African Americans" (Laneheart 2001). A specific

example of the negative attitudes towards AAVE can be seen in 1996, when the Oakland

California School system enacted a policy to treat AAVE as a dialect of English and use

AAVE as a language of instruction. This policy elicited a firestorm from the media. A

New York Times editorialist responded to the policy by calling AAVE "black slang",

thereby denying AAVE the legitimacy of being a dialect (Pullum 1999). Headlines of

editorials in other papers expressed similar negative sentiments: "Teach English, Not

'Ebonics'" (Allentown Morning Call) and "Street Slang Abandons Good Sense and Kids'

Futures" (Cleveland Plain Dealer) (Nunberg 1997). An article in *The Economist* went

so far as to mock AAVE by referring to Ebonics, (a name given to AAVE by Robert R.

Williams, a black scholar in 1973), as the "Ebonics virus" (Pullum 1999). The

negative attitudes expressed by the media, in regards to AAVE, indicate a stigma

associated with AAVE in some parts of mainstream American culture.

The opinions linked with AAVE by the press likely imply a disapproving view

of black culture held by members of mainstream American culture. The attitudes

attached to a language, or a dialect, are often reflections of the attitudes attached to

that language's culture; This is because language is a vehicle of culture, i.e., language

is a means by which culture is expressed and perpetuated (Street 1993). So, if the

vehicle is condemned, the culture is probably condemned as well. In this case, AAVE

is a means by which Black culture is expressed and interpreted. So, it can be inferred

that the negative attitudes towards AAVE are reflections of negative attitudes

towards black culture. These negative attitudes can be seen in the tumultuous race

relations through out American history. It is important to stress that negative

attitudes towards AAVE, specifically those that consider AAVE to be an

ungrammatical version of SAE, have no merit. The differences between AAVE and

SAE do not make AAVE less grammatical than SAE; neither dialect is better or more

correct than the other.

III. Features of AAVE

The features that this paper focuses on are copula absence, negative concord, -s

omission and aspect markers. I chose these features because they are heavily

researched and thus I can compare my own findings to other researchers findings.

This enables me to test the validity of my method of using song lyrics as a source of data.

III.1 Copula absence

Copula absence is the absence of an "overt form of *be"* that would be required in SAE as either *are/'re* or *is/'s*. The copula can be absent in the present tense with all subjects, except first person singular, as seen in (1-5)[1]. Since copula absence can only occur with the present tense, it is also a present tense marker. Also, copula absence can only occur where contraction of the copula is possible (4). It is important to note that copula absence is optional; that is to say, the same speaker can delete a copula in one sentence, while retaining it in the next (Rickford 1991).

1.   AAVE: We going to the mall.

   SAE: We are going to the mall.

2.   AAVE: Y'all crazy

   SAE: You (pl.) are crazy.

3.   AAVE: They funny.

   SAE: They are funny.

4.   AAVE: You jealous.

   SAE: You're jealous.

5.   AAVE: She cray.

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[1] Examples come from Gloria Mensah, a native speaker of AAVE.

SAE: She is crazy.

III.2 Aspect markers

AAVE uses forms of *be, done, gon'* and *be steady* to mark aspects in verb phrases.

Invariant *be* can be used in front of a verb phrase to express a habitual action or

state. This feature of AAVE differentiates it from SAE because it allows AAVE

speakers to express habitual descriptions without using specifiers, like *always,* as

seen in (6). The absence of *be* indicates simple progressive, as seen in (7). *Be steady,*

in front of a gerundive VP, indicates a continuous and intense action, as seen in (8).

Bin, in front of a gerundive VP, indicates the perfect progressive, as seen in (9). *BÍN* [2],

in front of a past-tense VP, indicates the distant past, but still continuing to the

present, as seen in (10). *Done,* in front of a past-tense VP, emphasizes the

completeness of an action, as seen in (11). *Finna* or *gon'* in front of an infinitive VP

indicates an action that will take place in the immediate future, (12). (Rickford

1991)

> 6. AAVE: He be running. (AAVE)
>
>   SAE: He runs often. (SAE)
>
> 7. AAVE: He talking
>
>   SAE: He is talking

---

[2] All capital letters indicate stress

8. AAVE: He be steady preachin'

   SAE: He's preaching in an intensive manner

9. AAVE: He bin talking to her

   SAE: He has been talking to her

10. AAVE: He *BÍN* had that jacket

    SAE: He's had that jacket for a long time

11. AAVE: He done ate the apple

    SAE: He ate the apple, completely.

12. AAVE: He finna/gon eat

    SAE: He's about to eat

(Rickford 1991)

III.3 Verbal *–s* omission

Verbal *–s* omission is the absence of the suffix *–s* on present-tense, third-person

singular subjects, as seen in (13). SAE requires the *–s*. (Rickford 1991). Again, it's

important to note that *–s* omission is optional, not required.

13. AAVE: My father work two jobs.

    SAE: My father works two jobs.

(Allsop 2010)

III.4 Negative Concord

Negative concord is a feature of many non-standard American English (NSAE)

dialects, including AAVE. For the purposes of this paper, negative concord will be

used as a control feature to compare the behavior of AAVE specific features and

generic non-standard features. Negative concord means that if a sentence is

negative " all negatable forms are negated", as seen in (14) (Rickford 1999).

14. AAVE: I didn't do nothin '.

SAE: I didn't do anything.

(Rickford 1996)

IV. Origins

Before further discussing the analysis done in this paper, it is important to

give background information on the current theories and debates relating to AAVE.

The most prominent issue debated, in regards to AAVE, is how it originated. One can

look at history to understand the development of AAVE. Slavery brought Africans

into relatively frequent interaction with Europeans. As a result, early slaves had to

learn English, perhaps in a very basic form, for survival. However, by the early 19th

century, the previous basic form of communication had stabilized, and, in fact, was "

much of the foundation of today's AAVE" (Poplack 2000).The next chapter of AAVE

began after the Civil War (1865), when blacks and whites segregated to the point

where black English and white English did not have as much contact as it did during

the slavery era; thus AAVE could develop further.

In the 1920s, many blacks moved north and west in search of work and

better lives (Poplack 2000). This large-scale move is referred to as the Great

Migration. Due to the Great Migration, the environment of most blacks changed from

rural to urban. This change in environment further isolated blacks from whites.

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Even though the physical distance between whites and blacks decreased, blacks became more isolated primarily because of the practice of redlining. Redlining, a term created by Northwestern sociologist John McKnight in the late 1960s, was the practice of denying certain groups, in certain areas, access to banking, real estate, health insurance, stores (Boccard 2000). Redlining often occurred when banks denied blacks mortgage loans, which made it impossible for them to buy homes in most areas, thus confining them to certain sections of cities. Private businesses also redlined by refusing to invest in black neighborhoods or higher black workers (Boccard 2000). Redlining effectively prohibited blacks from entering white society. With blacks having been forced into the outskirts of urban society, they had to establish alternate social structures, such as black-owned businesses and churches, to survive (Silver 1997). Those alternate social structures enabled blacks to go through out their daily activities without interacting with whites to a large extent (Silver 1997). The diminished interracial contact in cities allowed AAVE to evolve without a large influence from SAE.

<div align="center">IV.1 Creolist Theory</div>

There have been three main theories regarding the origin and development of AAVE. The first theory is the "creolist" theory (Poplack 2000). The creolist theory argues that AAVE is the "legacy of an earlier widespread creole, which has since decreolized" (Poplack 2000). In the initial years of slavery, the slaves spoke a variety of different African languages and could not communicate with each other. So, to facilitate communication with each other and their masters, they created a creole (Wolfram 2005). A creole language is a specifically customized language, which is

created when people who don't speak the same language need to communicate

(Wolfram 2005). Creoles often are composed of lexical items from the dominant

language, which, in this case, was English (Wolfram 2005). However, creole

languages often use grammatical structures of their mother tongues, which, for

slaves, would have been different West African languages (Wolfram 2005).

Proponents of a creole theory believe that AAVE developed from the creole that

early slaves used.

The creole -origins theory bases itself on certain features that are shared by

AAVE and other English-based creoles like Patwa or Gullah. Patwa is a language of

"ethnic identification for roughly two and a half million people" in Jamaica, which

developed in the mid 18th century, as a result of slavery. The eventual out

numbering of blacks to whites, lead Patwa to become prevalent in Jamaica (kortman

2004). The Gullah dialect is a dialect spoken by blacks on the coast of South Carolina

and Georgia. Gullah developed in the early 18thcentury, as a result of slavery. By the

late 18th century, slaves outnumbered whites two to one, which lead to their

concentration and isolation. This, in turn, led to the shaping of the Gullah language

(Moltke-Hansen 2005). Examples of features that are shared by Gullah, Patwa and

AAVE, along with other creoles, are the lack of subject-verb accord and copula

absence, as seen in table 1. Dillard (1971) has claimed that these features are

"pidgin [features] or decreolized features". With this being said, these shared

features are not by themselves indicative of a creole origin, according to Poplack

(2000).

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Table 1. Shared Features of AAVE and creoles which distinguish them from

SAE

	SAE	AAVE and Creoles
No subject-verb concord	My brother lives in New York	My brother live in New York.
Zero Copula in Sentences	That car over there is black.	That car over there black.

(Allsop 2010, 20)

IV.2 The Anglicist and Neo-Anglicist Theories

The rival theories for the development of AAVE are the anglicist and the neo-anglicist theory. The neo-anglicist theory derives from the anglicist theory of the 20th century. The anglicist theory argues that AAVE developed from a non-standard English (NSAE), which blacks were exposed to and absorbed during slavery (Rickford 2006; Poplack 2000). The NSAE was most likely spoken by European settlers with whom blacks would have come into contact with. This theory suggests that because AAVE developed from NSAE:

> … there remain no essential differences between the
> speech of comparable groups of African Americans and
> European Americans in the rural American south, the
> regional source of the earliest African American Speech
> in the United States. (Wolfram 2005,1)

Proponents of the anglicist theory cite the example of negative concord in both AAVE and NSAE to support their hypothesis that there are hardly any differences between NSAE and AAVE. Negative concord derives from old and colonial English and is still present in NSAE and in AAVE, as seen in 15-17 (Howe 2000).

15. he never yet no vileynye ne sayde (Canterbury Tales, Chaucer from Howe 200)

16. I ain't never said that. (AAVE Howe 2000)

17. c. / sent her a wedding present twice and I ain't never heard from it

(Alabama White English, Howe 2000)

In light of evidence from ex-slave narratives, discovered in 1991, and original texts, the anglicist theory has been revised (Wolfram 2005,1). The updated theory, called the neo-anglicist theory, still claims that AAVE originated from an early NSAE, however it also claims that NSAE and AAVE have diverged to the point where AAVE is quite different from NSAE, and that this is a "relatively recent development… post-civil war"(Mufwene 1996).

A specific example of one of these differences is the habitual *be* in AAVE. Habitual *be* refers to the use of *be* in AAVE to mark a habitual action, as seen in (8).

8. AAVE: He be steady preachin'

SAE: He's preaching in an intensive manner

This feature was found in both manuscripts from Irish emigrants in the antebellum south and in slave recordings. However, habitual *be* has since disappeared from the English of Irish Americans, which could have been due to their assimilation into mainstream American culture (Montgomery 2010). Further evidence to support the neo-anglicist theory comes from Auer (2005), who claims that AAVE has not undergone the phonetic sound shifts characteristics of white vernacular English (Auer 2005).

Although proponents of the neo-anglicist theory assert that AAVE is based in English grammar, they don't exclude possible African and creole influences. Examples of African influences can be seen in some AAVE lexical items where the African lexical items are expressed in English. For example, the AAVE item "bad-mouth" [3] derives from the Hausa expression "mugum-baki", which literally means "bad mouth", but expresses the concept "to talk badly about someone" (Mufwene 1993). However, proponents of the neo-anglicist theory differ from proponents of the creolist theory because they argue that AAVE is not based in creole grammar.

V. Previous Research

Previous research findings are also worth mentioning because they serve as a point of comparison for my own findings and thus enable me to see if song lyrics are an effective source of data. There have been various previous studies done that have tracked copula absence, verbal –s omission and negative concord in AAVE using other sources of data. Sources of data that have been researched are early slave recordings (ESR) in Bailey et al. (1989), Kortman (2004), Pullum (1999) and Myhill

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[3] It is worth noting that "bad-mouth" has made it from AAVE into SAE.

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(1995), and case studies of negative concord in African Nova Scotian English by

Howe (1997) and modern day interviews. ESR are comprised of recorded

interviews, from the first half of the 19th century of eleven blacks[4], who were born

before the civil war. The African Nova Scotian English Corpus consisted of 19th

century interviews with seven descendants of American slaves who immigrated in

the late 1700s and 1800s to Nova Scotia. The informants were around the same age,

had little education and were in a low socio-economic bracket. Modern day

interviews occurred in the late 20th century and early 21st century, and were

conducted with various different groups of AAVE speakers primarily located in

cities in the North East.

V.1 Findings for Verbal –s omission

According to Bailey et al. (1989), only verbal –s omission occurred frequently

(ranging from 52% to 86.1%) in ESR. Verbal –s omission is noted as still being

frequently present in the late 20th century by Kortman (2004) and Pullum (1999).

V.2 Findings for Copula Absence

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[4] The studies I looked at used the same 11 interviews but there are more in existence.

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Myhill (1995) found a "significant difference between ESR and Modern AAVE" copula deletion rates. Myhil (1995) reported only a 6% deletion rate in ESR but a 50% deletion rate in modern AAVE interviews. Other studies support Myhil's findings; Bailey (1987) also concluded that copula deletion did not occur frequently in ESR. Wolfram (1969) found a 51% deletion rate in modern AAVE, Ash and Myhill (1986) similarly found a 50% deletion rate, while Labov (1972), reported a 72% deletion rate in modern AAVE. Labov (1995), Poplack (2005), Rickford (1998; 1999) also report similar findings.

V.3 Findings for Negative Concord

Howe (1997) analyzed data on negative concord from ESR and an African Nova Scotian English Corpus. He found that negative concord occurred with a high frequency, ranging from 80% to 90% in early AAVE. Labov (1992) had similar findings when looking at early AAVE in ESR; he concluded that negative concord occurred 99% of the time. Negative concord still occurs 90% of the time in modern AAVE as well as in NSAE (Wolfram 1969, Labov 1972).

V.4 Findings for Aspect Markers

BEEN, be, done, and *gon'* all occur in modern day AAVE (Rickford 1975; Dayton 1981; Spears 1982; Baugh 1983). For the aspect marker *BEEN* and *be*, Myhil (1995) reported a low use in ESR, in fact there were only two tokens of each present in the recordings. In regards to modern AAVE, Myhil (1995) says that *be* is "one of the most salient" occurrences in modern AAVE.

VI. Song lyrics

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<center>VI.1 Song lyrics as a means to track features in AAVE</center>

As stated above, this paper focuses on the viability of using song lyrics to track changes in AAVE since its origin. I have chosen to use song lyrics, from slave spirituals, blues songs and rap songs as my sources of data to track the rate of occurrence of negative concord, copula absence and suffix –s omission in AAVE from slavery to the present.

Music represents a larger black culture (Fodde 2002). Music has always been an integral part of the African American community. With in black culture, music and music making is "a participatory group activity used to unite black people into a cohesive group" (Hayes 2000). So, many songs have been created communally to be representative of black culture or the black identity, in some way. To effectively represent a larger black identity, AAVE was and is often used in music (Fodde 2002). Thus, song lyrics could be an accurate representation of AAVE current to the times. So, using music as a corpus of data, could allow for a deeper understanding of the development of AAVE and also black culture.

I also decided to look at songs because music is the most consistent and constant form of Black cultural expression (Levine 1978; Neal 1999). Other, more frequently used sources of data, such as black literature and narratives, do not have the same level of consistency as music does. This is because, up until the early twentieth century, the majority of blacks were illiterate. This was primarily due to the fact that most blacks were ex-slaves, who had not had an opportunity to learn to read or write during slavery. Not until 1979, did the literacy rates between whites and blacks become equal (National Assessment of Adult Literacy). So, since the

majority of blacks could not write in the 19th century, literature, manuscripts,

interviews or narratives of ex-slaves would not have been written by the ex-slaves

themselves, but rather by white SAE speakers. This could have caused intentional or

unintentional SAE influences on the text, thus bringing into question the language's

authenticity as representative of AAVE. In order to compare AAVE from the 19th

century to the present, while avoiding the most amount of SAE influence, it is

essential to use a consistent medium of black self-expression that would have had

the least contact with SAE speakers, i.e., songs.

Early songs, unlike literature, had limited contact with SAE speakers (Hayes

2000). Since literacy was not a required component to create songs, blacks created

songs during slavery, independent of whites, and then preserved them orally. Also,

most songs were sung in segregated environments like churches or family homes,

which further caused them to have had limited direct contact with SAE speakers

(Hayes 2000). Although SAE speakers did transcribe some slave spirituals, due to

the artistic nature of songs, the SAE speakers were less likely to alter the lyrics of

songs, for fear of disrupting the rhyme schemes or their artistic value (Baraka

1963).

Some could argue that a drawback to using song lyrics is that song lyrics are not

exact replicas of everyday speech. The purpose of this paper is to test if that

drawback is detrimental to the validity of using song lyrics to analyze AAVE; To do

this, I compared my findings with findings from research that used other forms of

data. I found that my findings were consistent with those from other studies.

<center>VI.2 Slave Spirituals</center>

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Slave spirituals are arguably the earliest form of Black American music in the United States, so it makes sense to consider slave spirituals as representative of early AAVE. According to Mary Boykin Chestnut, a white southern antebellum author, slave spirituals were "the saddest of all earthly music" (Lowell 1939). W.E.B. DuBois, a black sociologist, called spirituals " articulate message[s] of the slave world" (DuBois 1903).

Before 1865, (the abolition of slavery), negro spirituals were mostly spontaneous sessions called "shouts". Shouts derive directly from West African culture. They consisted of church congregations, who, after worshiping, would stand in a circle and play rhythmic music while shouting out phrases or sounds. This would continue until the point of exhaustion (Lowell 1939). Before 1865, spirituals were sung outside of churches because they were forbidden to be included in the sermons by slave masters. Slave spirituals were developed mostly during the last century of slavery, which was nicknamed " the hey day of spirituals" (Lowell 1939). However after 1865, spirituals were sung primarily in churches. From 1865 to 1880, whites began to collect slave spirituals; the songs that will be analyzed in this paper were gathered in the book *American Negro Songs*.

Slave spirituals were often used to express a slave's "description and criticism of his environment" (Lowell 1939). Almost all slave spirituals were based in Christianity, because the Bible was the only literature that slaves were allowed access to. Slaves found comfort in religious stories, especially the stories recounting the Jewish struggle for freedom, for self-evident reasons. Interestingly, the slave spirituals, although based on the Bible, were not chronologically accurate. They

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often combined characters and stories from the Old and New Testaments in one

song.

Other than religious themes, slave spirituals were comprised of themes that

involved a desire for freedom, justice or vengeance (Bennet 1975). It would be

logical to assume that slaves were expressing their desire for vengeance against

their masters. An example of the vengeful theme can be seen in the quote from the

spiritual "Jericho" in (18). "Jericho" makes reference to the Biblical battle of Jericho

in the book of Joshua. In the story, Joshua led the Israelites into battle in Canaan

where they laid siege to the city of Jericho. The Bible claims that, after marching

around the wall of Jericho for seven days, on the seventh day, the Israelites sounded

their war horns and the wall of Jericho crumbled. Then, the Israelites proceeded to

destroy the city, leaving behind only one family. The slave spiritual "Jericho", if

considered in the context of slavery, could express the slaves' desire to destroy the

metaphorical walls and people, which kept them from their promised land, i.e, the

North.

    18. Joshua fit the battle of Jericho and the walls came tumbling
         down. (Bennett 1975)

Spirituals also encoded secret messages. For example, "home" would often

mean freedom or a safe space where fugitive slaves were welcomed. "Jesus"

referenced not only the biblical Jesus, but also someone who was an abolitionist.

Mention of "Black Moses" was a direct reference to Harriet Tubman and "Canaan"

referenced the north. (Lawrence- Mcintyre 1987) The song "Swing Low Sweet

Chariot" is full of coded messages, as seen in (19) below. The song references the

Ripley Underground Railroad station. A "train" or "chariot" meant the Underground

Railroad. The reference to "Jordan" was code for the Ohio River, which the station

was located next to. "Angels" is a reference to those who ran the Underground

Railroad.

> 19. I looked over Jordan and what did I see/ coming for to carry me
> home/ A band of angels

Despite evidence for the coded nature of spirituals, some scholars believe

that the spirituals did not contain codes, but rather expressed slaves' longing for

death (Bennet 1975). Regardless of the debate over if slave spirituals were coded or

not, they are a great source for early AAVE. Due to the nature of the slave spirituals'

creation it is hard to know who authored specific songs, so the data gathered from

the slave spirituals are not organized by singers, but they are rather grouped

together as a whole. I have tracked the rate of occurrence of various features of

AAVE using thirty slave spirituals.

VI.3 Blues

The blues originated in the "Deep South" in the late 1800s and was centered

on sad and gloomy themes, which often articulated social and economic difficulties

(Baker 1987, 11). The name "blues" is appropriate for the sad genre; It is speculated

that the word "blues", which was first recorded in 1741, originates from the term

"blue devil", which refers to sadness (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Early blues

songs were poorly documented because of the racial environment of the time and

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low literacy rates. Around 1902, however, there began to be mentions of the blues

movement in Texas, Mississippi and Georgia (Cohn 1999)

Predecessors to the blues were spirituals and shouts. The blues was also

influenced by "call and responses", which were the predecessors to spirituals. The

"calls and responses" consisted of a leader who would call out something and a

crowd would yell out a response. The "call and response" comes directly from

African tradition (Encyclopedia of African-American History 2010). However, blues

music is distinctive from spirituals and "call and responses" because it has a specific

chord progression, along with secular themes. In fact, blues shifted the main theme

of black music from religious to secular. Blues also coincided with the transition

from slavery to sharecropping. Levine (1997) argues that the development of blues

reflects the turn towards individualism in the black community and the desire to

express the new found freedom. Blues came to be considered its own genre with the

urbanization of black society during the Great migration, which also coincided with

the emergence of the recording industry. Blues songs were labeled race records, i.e.

music by blacks for blacks (Golding 2008). Due to blues' primarily black audience

and themes, blues was viewed as counter-cultural by white society (Golding 2008).

This also makes blues a great data source for AAVE because it seems likely that with

a largely black audience, and being rejected by white society, it used AAVE.

There were two main types of blues, Deep South blues and Urban blues. Deep

South blues was popular in the 1920s and 1930s. It was influenced by Jug bands,

which were bands that consisted of traditional and homemade instruments, like a

washboard or a wash basin (Charters 1977). Deep South blues would usually be

played informally, at local parties or gatherings, in a manner that encouraged

collaboration from anyone who wanted to join in. Urban blues, on the other hand,

had more structure to it, in that there was a clear distinction between the audience

and the musicians during performances. Also, this style focused more on the vocal

ability of the artists, since it was more performance-centered than Deep South blues

(Charters 1977). Additionally, performers of urban blues were primarily solo

female artists. In fact, women were considered the classic blues singers. This was

because women had more free time then black men, since the majority of black men

were traveling sharecroppers. While the men were travelling, the women stayed at

home usually working as domestics and so they had more time to put into the

community, local events and churches. These places were where most of the

performances of Urban blues would take place, so women, due to their involvement

already, could take full advantage of the opportunity to perform and hone their craft

(Baraka 1963).

I tracked features of AAVE in fifteen songs from the three most popular

urban blues singers of the early 20th century: Bessie Smith, Clara Smith and Ma

Rainey. I choose songs from these three women due to their popularity; I think that,

the most popular artists from a genre would have the largest audience and thus try

to be the most representative of the larger black culture.

VI.3.1 Clara Smith

Clara Smith was originally from South Carolina, where she performed in local

theaters. In 1923 she migrated to Harlem NY where she performed in cabarets and

eventually was signed to Columbia records. While at Columbia Records, she

recorded over 100 songs, many of which featured famous musicians, including Louis

Armstrong. She was nicknamed the "Queen of the Moaners" and was thought to be

second only to Bessie Smith (Friedwald 1996). Clara enjoyed a moderately

successful career and was making music until her death from heart disease in 1935

(Friedwald 1996).

VI.3.2 Bessie Smith

Bessie Smith was one of the most popular and highest paid blues singer of

the early 20th century (Friedwald 1996). She was famous for her soulful and

heartbreaking lyrics. Bessie started as a dancer and travelling musician in the Stokes

troupe, which toured through out the South. She broke away from the troupe in

1913, to form a solo act, primarily based at the "81" theater in Atlanta. There she

established a following in the South and on the East Coast. In 1923, Bessie moved to

Philadelphia and signed with Columbia Records. After signing with Columbia, she

achieved true stardom with her records being circulated, not only within the black

community, but in the white community as well (Friedwald 1996). Unfortunately,

Bessie's personal life wasn't as successful. She had a turbulent marriage and an

alcohol problem. Her life was also cut short when she died from injuries from a

serious car accident in 1937. (Friedwald 1996)

VI.3. 3 Ma Rainey

Ma Rainey was a mentor to Bessie Smith, but was also acclaimed in her own right.

Called "the mother of the blues", Ma Rainey had humble beginnings singing in the

church. She was first introduced to blues music in 1902 and from then on she

decided to sing the blues. In 1904, she met and married blues performer, Pa Rainey,

and the two became a duo act. For a brief period of time, around 1910, Ma Rainey

and Pa Rainey were in the same troupe as Bessie Smith. In 1923, she signed a solo

deal with Paramount Records and from there produced 100 songs towards the end

of the 1920s, Ma Rainey's career lost momentum and she eventually returned to the

South, where she opened up two theaters, and ran them until her death in 1939

(Lieb1983).

<div align="center">V1.4 Rap</div>

Rap is the speaking of rhymes and wordplay over a beat. It is one of the most

influential forms of music to date. Rap has spread to all corners of the globe and has

an incredibly large audience base. However, it has humble beginnings. Rap

originated in the Bronx, NY in the 1970s (Rose 1994). Rap developed communally;

similarly to spirituals, but instead of being centered in churches, rap's breeding

grounds were block parties. Block parties in the Bronx created an environment in

which large numbers of blacks gathered together with music and people would

often break out into spontaneous rhymes (Rose 1994).

According to Rose (1994), rap is a black idiom that prioritizes black culture

and that articulates black urban life, while not denying the pleasure and

participation of others. Common rap themes that fall under the categories of black

urban life and culture are social status, the violent loss of friends, male sexual power

over women or vice versa, social problems and pop culture references. Rap culture

was incorporated into gang culture and produced a sub-genre called gangster rap.

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Gangster rap had more violent themes, which spoke to the gritty aspects of inner

city life. It was often used as a way to represent a gang or continue disagreements

between different gangs. Unfortunately, this use of rap has lead to violent outcomes

(Kugelberg 2007). Currently, rap has become very mainstream and has developed a

larger audience. Consequently, its themes have been less gritty and more accessible,

but these songs are still written in AAVE and thus, are still valuable for the purposes

of this study (Mark 1999).

In this paper, I looked at three rap songs each from Jay Z, Kanye West and

Biggie Smalls. I only looked at three songs because each song was significantly

longer than the individual songs I analyzed from the other two genres; so, three

songs, from each artist, had a comparable amount of sentences as the total

sentences analyzed in the other two genres.

VI.4.1 Biggie Smalls

Biggie Smalls was a wildly popular East Coast rapper in the 1990s. He grew

up in Brooklyn and got involved with drugs and gang culture as a youth. By his early

adulthood he had been convicted of selling crack and served jail time. After his

release from jail, he recorded a demo and caught the attention of Puff Daddy, a New

York producer. Puff Daddy was so impressed with Biggie that he left Uptown

records, where he had been previously working, to start Bad Boy Records with

Biggie as his primary artist. Biggie began to collaborate on songs with well-

established artists of the time, including singer Mary J Blige and DJ Mister Cee. In

doing this, he garnered a large underground following. This following allowed his

first album, *Ready to Die,* to achieve platinum sales. Through out his career, Biggie

produced incredibly successful music, including his song "One More Chance", which

tied Micheal Jackson's "Scream" for the "highest debut ever on the pop charts" (Huey

2011). His lyrics were so popular because he portrayed street life with a gritty

honesty that was unrivaled (Scott 2000). Huey, from Billboard.com, explains Biggie's

draw:

> Biggie was a gifted storyteller with a sense of humor
> and an eye for detail, and his narratives about the often
> violent life of the streets were rarely romanticized;
> instead, they were told with a gritty, objective realism
> that won him enormous respect and credibility.

Unfortunately, due to his candor, he provoked an East Coast vs. West Coast

feud. Many speculate this feud, and the murder of his rival Tupac Shakur, led to

Biggie's murder, in 1997. His murder is still one of rap's biggest unsolved mysteries

(Scott 2000).

VI.4.2 Jay-Z

Jay-Z, like Biggie, is also a New York City native who came from a background

of drugs. Jay-Z first came out with songs in the mid 1990s and since then, has been

consistently making music that deals with themes of drugs, social issues, love and

status. He also is the CEO of his own record label, called Rocafella Records, which he

created in 1996. He created Rocafella Records because he wanted to be able to

produce his own music, instead of having to sign to an already existing record label

(Birchmeier 2011). This was an incredibly wise move on Jay-Z's part, for he is now

one of the most successful rappers to date, having been ranked as the top earner in

Rap by Forbes Magazine (2011). He was also on the Billboards' top artist of the year

chart in 2010 and 2009 (Birchmeier 2011).

VI.4.3 Kanye West

Kanye West, unlike Biggie and Jay Z, came from a middle class background in Chicago. He first entered the music industry through producing music for various other rap artists, including Twister, The Dream, 50 Cent and Jay-Z as well. It was in working as a producer for Jay-Z that Kanye became famous. After being impressed by Kanye's talent for producing catchy beats, Jay-Z signed him to his label, Rocafella Records. Kanye then began to produce his own rap songs, which became very popular. His albums have made Billboard's "Top Albums of the Year" chart for every year he has put out an album (Billboard 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009) He has also been awarded three "Top Rap Album of the Year" awards at the Grammy Awards (Birchmeier 2011). In addition, he was rated the third best rapper of the 21st century by Black Entertainment Television (BET.com).

VII. Methods

In order to track the changes in AAVE, it is necessary to come up with a consistent way of tracking the rates of feature occurrence in the song lyrics. I do this by adhering to the Principle of Accountability, which states that: "reports of the occurrences of a variant must be accompanied by reports of all non-occurrences" (Labov 2008). To come up with a rate of occurrence, I divided the number of occurrences of a feature by the number of all the places where the feature could have occurred. The following section details the qualifications of the environments where each feature could have occurred.

VII.1. Copula absence

There have been two competing theories for which environments should be considered when calculating copula absence's rate of occurrence in AAVE: Labov Deletion and Straight Deletion.

VII.1.1 Labov deletion

According to Labov (1995), the copula absence is caused by a deletion rule that is "fed by contraction", which means that copula deletion is dependent on contraction. So, contraction of the copula must happen first, for its deletion to occur. With this being the case, Labov argues that in order to calculate the percentage of copula absence, the number of null tokens should be divided by only the number of null-copula and contracted forms as seen in (20). In other words, the number of full-copula tokens should be disregarded.

20. % of copula absence= # of null tokens/ (# of null + # of contracted tokens)

VII.1.2 Straight Deletion

According to Rickford (1998), the percentage of copula absence should be determined by including all of the copula tokens (full, contracted and null) in the denominator, as seen in (21).

21. % of copula absence= # null tokens/ (# of full +# of contracted + # of null)

For the purposes of this paper, I used the Straight Deletion method because it makes fewer theoretical assumptions about the structure of variation than Labov's method does.

VII.2   –*s* omission

According to Rickford (2005), the –*s* omission occurs exclusively after 3rd person singular verbs. I divided the number of –*s* omissions by the number of possible environments, excluding the ones mentioned above, where –*s* omissions could occur, to determine the rate of occurrences of –*s* omissions.

VII.3 Negative concord

Since double negatives can only occur in negated sentences with multiple possible negatable parts, I divided the number of negative concord occurrences by the number of negated sentences where negative concord could occur.

VII.4 Tense markers

The tense markers *gon', done* and *been*[5] are future and past tense markers. They also indicate different aspects of time. Thus, the environments in which they can occur are future tense statements and past tense statements. So, to determine their respective percent of occurrences, I first tried to divide their actual number of occurrences by the number of future or past tense verb phrases that occurred. However, after tabulating the data, all of these markers occurred at too small a rate

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[5] I initially wanted to track invariant *be* as well but I could not find occurrences in the lyrics which could have been a result of their artistic medium.

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in comparison with the denominator of the respective verb phrases. So, in order to

get a better picture of the occurrences of tense markers, I concentrated on the

amount of times in which the aspect markers occurred in each genre. It should be

noted that this method is affected by the amount of data there is from each genre, so,

to minimize this, I was careful to make sure that the data from each genre was

relatively the same size.

VIII. Results

The results from my analysis show that blues had the highest occurrence of

double negatives, while rap had the highest occurrence of copula absence. In

addition, spirituals had the highest occurrence of verbal –s omission, all of

which can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Rate of occurrences of Double Negatives, Copula Absence and Verbal –s
Omission in Spirituals, Blues, and Rap

	Spirituals(n^6)	Blues (n)	Rap (n)
Double negatives	(10/15) 66.7%	(19/37) 51.4%	(12/38) 31.6%
Copula absence	(0/11) 0%	(2/28) 7.0%	(79/157) 50.3%
Verbal –s omission	(8/10) 80%	(2/32) 6.3%	(23/44) 52.3%

The individual rate of occurrences for double negatives, copula absence and verbal -

s omission for each artist can be seen in tables 3 and 4.

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[6] I acknowledge that my *n* values are small, however I feel as though my data is still informative because it correlates with the results from other studies.

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Table 3. Rate of occurrences of Double Negatives, Copula Absence and Verbal –s Omission in Blues

Blues singers	Double negatives (*n)*	Copula absence (*n)*	-s absense (*n)*
Bessie Smith	(9/15) 60%	(0/ 13) 0%	(0/16) 0%
Ma Rainey	(4/9) 44.4%	(2/14) 14.3%	(2/14) 14.3%
Clara Smith	(6/13) 46.2%	(0/14) 0%	(0/2) 0%

Table 4. Rate of occurrences of Double Negatives, Copula Absence and Verbal –s in Rap

Rappers	Double negatives (*n)*	Copula absence (*n)*	-s (*n)*
Jay-Z	(4/18) 23%	(22/42) 59.3%	(3/5) 60%
Kanye West	(5/15)33.3%	(25/61) 37.9%	(4/11) 36.4%
Biggie	(2/6) 33.3%	(32/ 54) 59.3%	(16/28) 57.1%

In regards to the aspect markers, *gon'* had the highest occurrence rate in the blues, while *been* had the highest occurrence rate in rap. Also, interestingly, *done* had the same number of occurrences in Spirituals and Rap. (Table 5)

Table 5. Tokens of Aspect Markers in Spirituals, Blues and Rap

	Spirituals (*n*)	Blues(*n*)	Rap (*n*)
Gon'	0	7	1

been	0	1	11
done	19	1	19

IX. Discussion

Overall, my findings for the AAVE of spirituals and the AAVE of rap reflect the findings of other researchers in regards to early AAVE and AAVE in the late 20th century, mentioned earlier. There is a lack of research on blues-era AAVE that focuses on the rate of occurrence of copula absence, -s omission and double negatives; so it is inconclusive whether my data would match up to other data during that time.

As mentioned earlier, previous studies done by Howe (1998) and Labov (1992) found a high rate of negative concord occurrences, ranging from 80% to 99% in early AAVE. These studies have occurrence rates that are slightly higher than my own of 66.7%. However, in my opinion, this is not a large discrepancy.

Interesting aspects of these findings are the rapid emergence of copula absence in rap and the suppression of verbal –s omission in the Blues. If these statistics reflect AAVE, which I assume that they do, then it seems as though copula absence was not present in early AAVE, but after its emergence, it rapidly increased. It also seems as though, the –s omission was suppressed during the 1920s, in blues lyrics and possibly in speech, but reemerged by the end of the 20th century.

IX. 1 The suppression of -s omission and lack of copula absence in the Blues

The data from the song lyrics show that, during the blues era, there was very little copula absence. This could have been because copula absence did not fully emerge until after this era, or, because it was in the process of emerging during this era but had not yet become pervasive enough to be seen in popular culture.

However, what is interesting and puzzling about the blues era, is the suppression of –s omission. This suppression could have been specific to music or a general trend in AAVE at that time. If the suppression of –s omission were a general trend, then we would expect to see –s omission suppressed in other data from the era; However, as stated above, there is a lack of data that focuses specifically on –s omission rates in the blues era, so this would be hard to prove. One possible way to see if the suppression of –s omission was isolated to music specific mediums would be to analyze interviews or talking recordings from Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey and Clara Smith. If the suppression was music specific, then there would not be similar suppression in those other data sources. However, if the suppression of –s omission were done on a subconscious level, because it was a general trend of spoken AAVE, it would appear in all data sources from the artists.

IX.2 Outside cultural pressures during the blues era.

There could be a causal relationship between socio-historical factors during the blues era and the rate of –s omission, copula absence and double negatives. The early 20th century was a tumultuous time in the United States for race relations. Blacks were in the process of acclimating into a post-slavery society, which seemed to have the promise of inclusion and upward mobility, but, in reality, it was rife with racism and discrimination (Bringham 1972). During this time, the civil rights movement was slowly getting under

way and the ideals of Booker T Washington were in the forefront of black consciousness.

Washington argued that the only way blacks would earn equal rights and treatments from

their white counterparts was if they bettered themselves and acted with respect and

dignity to the point where whites would accept them (Washington 1896). This mentality

of acclimating to white culture was pervasive and also a survival tactic for many blacks

because of the heightened racial tensions and violence of the time. During this early

period of the 20th century, the KKK and other white supremacist groups created a reign of

terror to ensure that, despite blacks' newly found freedom, they were still seen as inferior

(Bringham 1972). So Washington's pro-assimilation and anti-agitative philosophy was

forged into the black identity for the majority of the first half of the 20th century

(Bringham 1972). This could have fostered a linguistic environment that stifled the use

of AAVE distinctive features like –s omission.

This mentality of assimilation could also shed some light on the suppression of

certain distinguishing features of AAVE in songs. If artists were trying to ascribe to

Washington's ideals, whether consciously or if they had been socialized into following

them, that would explain the minimizing of speech features, like –s omission, that further

differentiate between blacks and whites. This would also explain why the double negative

was not suppressed; as stated earlier negative concord does not exclusively occur in

AAVE but rather is shared by NSAEs as well. Thus, negative concord would not have

been solely identifiable as black and therefore it would have been unnecessary to

suppress it.

Artists could have suppressed–s omission also in an attempt to have a more

mainstream audience, instead of being pigeonholed into the genre of race records. This

would be reflected in the lyrics of Bessie and Clara Smith particularly, since both had

mainstream audiences compared to Ma Rainey. As can be seen in table (3), both singers

tie for the lowest rate of –s omission and copula absence along with having the higher

rates of double negatives than Ma Rainey. In other words, they utilized the least of the

polarizing features and the most of the unifying features of AAVE.

Artists during the blues era had valid reason to try and assimilate their speech to

reach a wider audience, because during this time white artists were appropriating black

music. These white artists were covering black songs and then becoming more successful

than their black counterparts (Rubenstein 1998). So, it would make sense if, to try and

capitalize on this appropriation tactic, black artists de-blackified their own music.

These factors could have led to the suppression of –s omission of AAVE in blues

lyrics and the lack of copula absence in blues lyrics. A wider study of blues lyrics and

AAVE from other data would be necessary to test this hypothesis of a connection

between AAVE in lyrics and the sociopolitical factors of the time.

<div align="center">IX.3 Kanye West's –s omission and copula absence</div>

Another interesting result visible in the data is the low occurrence rates of –*s*

omission and copula absence by Kanye West, in comparison to those of Biggie and Jay-

Z. This could be due to Kanye's middle class upbringing. There has been a proven

correlation between class and the use of AAVE; middle class blacks tend to "employ only

variants of SAE in their discourse" (Linnes 1998). –*S* omission and copula absence are

both features distinctive to AAVE, thus, it is fair to assume that Kanye West's low rate of

occurrence for these features are due to his middle class background.

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X. Conclusion

In comparing my findings with outside research, it seems as though using song lyrics, as a source of data, is a viable method to gain insight into trends with in AAVE. This is the case except when external factors might influence the use of AAVE, as in the blues era. However, due to lack of research of spoken AAVE during that time, it is inconclusive whether or not the same influences were seen in spoken AAVE. Therefore, a study of a larger corpus of songs would be necessary to further test the validity of this method.

Appendix of Songs

Slave Spirituals
LORD, I DON' DONE
SWING LOW SWEET CHARIOT
(First version)
DESE BONES GWINE RISE AGAIN
BEFORE I'D BE A SLAVE (OH, FREEDOM)
AIN'T THAT GOOD NEWS
AIN'T GONNA LET NOBODY TURN ME 'ROUN'
A LITTLE TALK WITH JESUS
ALL GOD'S CHILLUN GOT WINGS

Blues
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Waitin' For The Evenin' Mail (1923)
Shipwrecked Blues (1925)
Prescription For The Blues (1924)
I Never Miss The Sunshine (1923)
Don't Never Tell Nobody (1923)

Ma Rainey
Awful moanin blues1928
Moonshine Blues 1927
Sissy Blues lyrics 1926
Don't fish in my sea 1927
Big feelin blues 1928
Barrel house blues 1923

Bessie Smith
I ain't got nobody 1927
Send Me To The 'lectric Chair lyrics 1927

Nobody knows when your down and out 1923
I've Got What It Takes But It Breaks My Heart
Cemetery blues 1923
Jailhouse Blues 1929

Rap

Jay-Z
Big Pimpin (Extended)" 2000
Hollywood 2007
Jockin' Jay-Z (Dope Boy Fresh) 2008

Kanye West
All Falls Down 2004
Who Gon Stop Me 2011
The New Workout Plan 2004

Biggie Smalls
Hypnotize 1996
Suicidal Thoughts 1994
Big Poppa 1994

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