

Copula Absence in Interviews with African-American Celebrities

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Abstract

This article concentrates on one of the most noticeable features of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), the absence of copula (*is* and *are*). The variability of this feature has been studied and analyzed in interviews with ten African-American celebrities and officials.

I statistically analyze potential internal environmental constraints on copula deletion by highlighting favourable grammatical categories in which the feature occurs at the highest rate. This way, we are able to discover particular preferences in the behaviour of AAVE copula according to subject type and verb type.

Further, I consider the influence of social factors (gender, age, social status, ethnicity, and affiliation with Hip Hop culture) on the degree of copula absence within a frame of interspeaker variation and expose those external attributes that appear to stimulate an extensive usage of copula omission. The frequencies of copula deletion represent the levels of vernacular variants employed by each interviewee. My results are then compared with the outcomes of previous sociolinguistic findings on the external influences that have been reported to facilitate the rise in vernacular usage.

The central aim of this article is to statistically present the frequencies of copula deletion in the interviews with the selected celebrities in order to explore various causes for particular levels of vernacular or standard copula usage by considering internal grammatical mechanisms and the influence of social factors.

Key words: African-American Vernacular English, copula absence, internal grammatical constraints, social factors

Odsotnost glagola »biti« v intervjujih z afriško-ameriškimi medijskimi osebnostmi

Povzetek

V članku se osredotočimo na odsotnost glagola »biti« v sedanjiku (z izjemo prve osebe ednine), ki velja za eno najbolj edinstvenih prvin afriško-ameriške narečne angleščine. Variabilnost te jezikovne prvine analiziramo v intervjujih z desetimi temnopoltimi ameriškimi medijskimi osebnostmi.

V prvi fazi statistično analiziramo potencialne interne slovnične omejitve za odsotnost glagola »biti« tako, da izpostavimo favorizirana gramatična okolja v katerih se ta prvina najpogosteje pojavi. Na ta način odkrivamo vzorce pogostnosti pojavljanja dotične prvine glede na osebek in glagol.

Nadalje obravnavamo vpliv družbenih dejavnikov (spol, starost, socialni status, etnična identiteta in udejstvovanje v hip hop subkulturi) na količino odsotnosti glagola »biti« pri posameznih intervjuvancih ter izpostavimo družbene dejavnike, ki najbolj vidno stimulirajo ekstenzivno rabo obravnavane afriško-ameriške prvine. Frekvence odsotnosti predstavljajo določeno stopnjo rabe afro-ameriške različice glagola »biti« pri posameznemu intervjuvancu. Dobljene rezultate primerjamo z izsledki in ugotovitvami dosedanjih sociolingvističnih raziskav, ki obravnavajo vpliv

družbenih dejavnikov na stopnjo formalnosti jezikovnega izražanja oziroma na količino rabe črnskih jezikovnih prvin.

Temeljni cilj članka je statistično predstaviti pogostnost odsotnosti glagola »biti« v intervjujih z izbranimi medijskimi osebnostmi in poiskati vzroke za določeno raven črnske narečne ali standardne angleške rabe te prvine z analizo notranjih slovničnih mehanizmov in ob upoštevanju vpliva zunanjih družbenih dejavnikov.

Ključne besede: afriško-ameriška narečna angleščina, odsotnost glagola »biti«, notranje slovnične omejitve, družbeni dejavniki

1. Introduction

African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) is a social dialect or a non-standard language variety of American English that contains distinctive grammatical and phonological features. Because of these features, AAVE is considered a unique communication system that has been recognized among linguists as an alternate, regular, and systematic form of vernacular language. Speakers of AAVE might vary between the use of dialectal and standard grammatical features, which may be accommodated to the speech situation, the participants of interaction, the degree of formality, the function, or the topic. On the other hand, the alternation between AAVE and Standard English variants may be affected by internal linguistic restrictions or influenced by external social factors such as, gender, age, socio-economic status, ethnic identity, and the like.

The absence of inflected *is* and *are* (copula absence) has been regarded as a classic showcase variable in the research of AAVE (Rickford, 1999: 263). This article analyzes copula absence in the interviews with ten African-American celebrities and officials: Redman, a humorous rap artist; Chuck D, a rap authority and an activist; Oprah Winfrey, an internationally known talk-show host and a humanitarian; Prodigy, a hardcore street-conscious rapper, Queen Latifah, a former female rap artist turned actress; Colin Powell, a former US general and a statesman; Whoopi Goldberg, an actress, comedian, and talk-show host; BB King, a singer, guitar player, and one of the leading performers on the blues scene; MC Lyte, a pioneer female rap artist; and Michelle Obama, the current First Lady of the United States.

I have transcribed the video interviews with the inclusion of copula forms which have been marked with the following abbreviations: (cf) – copula full, (ca) – copula absence, (cc) – copula contraction, and (cDC) – copula “don’t count”. The interviews are available on the World Wide Web, mostly on a video-sharing website, *Youtube.com*. The transcribed interviews represent the central data of my research and are enclosed in appendix.

Absence of copula is the absence of *is* and *are* for present tense states and actions, as in: “She nice” for Standard English “She’s nice” or “They working” for Standard English “They are working.” Copula absence appears to be one of the most common features of Black English. This feature also serves as the central argument in support of the Creolist hypothesis of AAVE’s origin. The feature is specific for AAVE, and it cannot be found in other American dialects, with some exceptions in White Southern Speech.

In its broader sense, the term copula combines what is technically known as copula *be* (before a noun phrase, adjective, and locative) and auxiliary *be* (before Verb + *-ing* or *gon(na)*). Therefore, in the narrow sense, we would have to distinguish

between copula *be* and auxiliary *be*, but I will use the term copula to refer to both for the sake of convenience, thus following previous studies.

A speaker of AAVE can produce such sentences, resulting in three different copula forms: “Tim *is* the leader” (full form), “She’s happy” (contracted form) or “He Ø talkin” (absent form) (Rickford, 1999).

As shown, the copula can be either absent, contracted, or full. It is important to consider the “don’t count” cases while analyzing this particular variable, meaning that we have to exclude the cases in which the copula deletion can never occur. The restrictions on copula absence include the first-person singular, for example, “I’m (cDC) the man”. **I the man* would be an ungrammatical statement, therefore, this is a “don’t count” case. Since the copula is categorically present in the first-person singular, it has not been specifically marked with a (cDC) abbreviation in the transcripts. Copula is (almost!) never absent in *it’s*, *that’s*, and *what’s*, as well as in *ain’t*, since it is internally contained in this negative form. This also applies to contracted negative forms *isn’t* and *aren’t*, while the variable can in fact be absent in full negatives *is not* and *are not*. Furthermore, copula cannot be deleted when directly following a relative clause, e.g., “*those two songs you just said is* (cDC) *more like...*” (Alim, 2004: 36) or when appearing in the final position of a sentence, e.g., *as they are*. The restriction also applies for *there is/there’s* and *here is/here’s*. (Alim, 2004: 289) Non-finite and past tense forms demand full form copula presence, e.g., “She will *be* here tomorrow” or “She *was* here yesterday” (Rickford, 1999: 62). All of these examples should be regarded as “don’t count” cases representing environments in which copula absence cannot occur.

However, the copula can in fact be absent before prepositional phrases and locatives (*they on the rise*), progressive verbs (*he runnin’ scared*), adjectives (*we wide awake*), negatives, and *gon(na)* (*we not just gon lay down*). (Alim, 2004: 141) Copula absence favors some of these grammatical categories more than others. Accordingly, researches of AAVE have been able to find certain internal restrictions on copula variation and have come to the following findings: *Verb + ing* and *gonna* are the following grammatical environments most favorable for copula deletion to occur while the least favorable is the following noun phrase. According to the preceding grammatical category, the subject type, studies show that personal pronouns favor the absence of *is* and *are* more than noun phrases and other pronouns (Rickford, 1999: 270). In terms of phonology, preceding vowels tend to favor absence while preceding consonants disfavour it (Alim, 2004).

One of the founding figures in sociolinguistics, William Labov (1969 and since), has claimed that AAVE speakers delete copula only in places where White speakers of English can contract it. Accordingly, *is* and *are* are deleted when they stand in positions where they can be contracted in Standard American English (SAE), e.g., *Where you going?*, *What you doing?*, *He going*, *We hungry*, etc. Where it is impossible to make contractions in SAE (e.g., *I wonder where he is*, *Where is he?*), it is also impossible for Black speakers to make deletions. Accordingly, contraction must feed deletion and the primary restrictions on copula absence are therefore phonological. However, some authors support the contrary view, that copula absence is indeed a syntactic, rather than phonological variable. Bender (2000) provides data showing that copula absence is possible in certain environments where contraction is excluded.

Alim (2004: 147) states that Black speakers employ more copula absence when talking to a Black interlocutor and less absence when talking to a White speaker. They also use more absence when speaking with a male than when speaking with a female. Copula absence also appears more frequently when talking to somebody who is familiar with Hip Hop culture.

Some studies (Alim, 2002) on the copula absence and Hip Hop language suggest that speakers can vary their copula use according to the issues of ideology and identity: "...the artists and participants in the Hip Hop Nation (HNN), in seeking to present a "street-conscious" identity, are the main preservers and maintainers of Black Language (BL)" (Alim, 2004: 143). Alim's (2004) copula analysis in semi-structured conversations points to the importance of Hip Hop knowledge among other factors, such as race and gender. His study presented data for copula variability according to the interlocutor and showed that the White male Hip Hopper elicited more copula absence from Black speakers than the Black female non-Hip Hopper. Rowe (2003) suggests that Hip Hop artists are able to increase the speaker's awareness of the AAVE features by employing a "performance register" which coincides with the following finding: "Black American Hip Hop artists increase their rates of copula absence in their lyrics versus their normal conversation, the lyrical data is only indirectly interactive and NOT equivalent to conversation, which requires the direct participation of an interlocutor" (Alim, 2004: 143). Rickford and McNair-Knox's (1994) study shows stylistic sensitivity of the copula that confirms the above statements; however, some authors (Labov et al., 1968) conclude this is not the case. In his studies, Baugh (1979, 1983) found that Black street culture membership and familiarity did not affect the copula usage in a major way. Baugh attributes internal linguistic constraints more importance.

Alim (2004) concludes that internal linguistic constraints interact with external identity constraints producing stylistic shifts. His study shows that, linguistically, absence is affected most strongly by the following grammatical category when the preceding phonological environment and the following grammatical category interact. Therefore, the following grammatical category appears to be the most important constraint on the copula absence. Regarding identity constraints, race of the interlocutor played a major role among other significant factors such as gender, familiarity, and Hip Hop knowledge. Nevertheless, the studies on stylistic behavior of copula seem inconclusive and call for further research.

Earlier researchers of the copula variation (Labov, Cohen, Robbins, and Lewis, 1968) focused exclusively on *is* when analyzing copula deletion. The second person and plural *are* were defined as results of *r*-vocalization or desulcalization, the rule which produces *po'* from *poor* and *they* from *their*. Wolfram (1974) argued against that position claiming that desulcalization in *po'* and other cases was favored by the following consonant, while the deletion of *are* was not. After that, *is* and *are* were statistically analyzed either as separate variables or as if they were one variable (Rickford, 1999). My analysis will focus on *is* and *are* as if they are one variable.

To calculate the percentage of copula absence, I use the following formula:

$$(ca) : ((cf) + (cc) + (ca)).$$

I report the number of deleted tokens as a proportion of ALL the tokens in which deletion could have occurred. I refer to this as Straight Deletion (Rickford, 1999). The respective computing formula is strongly affiliated with the Creolist

position on the origin of AAVE. According to this theory, AAVE developed from an earlier creole which had categorical copula absence in many grammatical environments.

However, there is an alternative formula for calculating the percentage of deletion. Labov (1969) stated that the copula absence could only occur where contraction was possible in SAE, arguing that every copula absence once had a contraction. Labov's formula is designed within the Dialectologist View which claims that AAVE arose as a dialect of Standard English. The computation suggests that the contracted forms are the only ones to be deleted, therefore the full forms are excluded from the formula, which we refer to as Labov Deletion:

$$(ca) : ((cc) + (ca)).$$

In the study of Black English copula, Labov Deletion has been used most frequently although the choice of formula seems somewhat controversial. Since different researchers use different formulas, studies differ in results, which makes it difficult to compare and interpret the data (Rickford, 1999). Contrary to Labov's claim, a research by Bender (2000) showed that copula absence is possible in a couple of environments that exclude contraction.

I chose to use the Straight Deletion formula for computing the percentage of copula absence and compare the results to Labov Deletion. The two formulae differ only in the number of full forms in the denominator, however, their results may differ drastically in data with a large amount of full forms. (Rickford, 1999) Nevertheless, after searching for favourable grammatical environments for copula absence and looking for internal constraints on the variable in order to compare my final results with the previous studies, I will analyze the outcomes of both formulae.

This section focuses on the preceding and the following linguistic categories that evoked the highest rates of copula deletion in this study. The calculations will be applied only with interlocutors who actually produced a certain amount of copula absence. Accordingly, the interviewees who exhibited zero percent deletion or an insignificant number of the feature's tokens could not be included in the analysis of internal restrictions. Percentages that result from a small number of deleted tokens, one or two, are marked with*.

Table (1) presents the overall frequencies of zero copula usage with individual interviewees throughout the entire data set.

Table (1): The overall frequencies of copula variation with individual interviewees.

Tokens	(ca)	(cc)	(cf)	Straight Deletion	Labov Deletion
Redman	37	10	51	37.7%	78%
Chuck D	14	8	21	32.5%	63.6%
Oprah Winfrey	2	27	23	3.8%*	6.8%*
Prodigy	82	10	44	60.2%	89.13%
Queen Latifah	6	10	22	15.7%	37.5%
Colin Powell	1	28	23	1.9%*	3.4%*
Whoopi Goldberg	7	15	22	15.9%	31.8%
BB King	6	7	35	12.5%	46.1%
MC Lyte	2	18	34	3.7%*	10%*
Michelle Obama	0	37	44	0%	0%

Evidently, Redman, Chuck D, Prodigy, Latifah, Goldberg, and BB King scored a notable percentage of copula absence while Winfrey, Powell, and Lyte's results do not appear to be statistically significant, since there were only one or two tokens of deletion in all of their transcripts collectively. The lack of omitted copulas has caused exclusion of Obama's results from the following calculations and observations.

I now turn to the overall interpretation of environmental constraints on the deletion of copula.

Table (2): Copula deletion according to the preceding grammatical environment with African-American celebrities - Straight Deletion.

	Personal pronouns	Noun phrases	Other pronouns
Straight Deletion	%	%	%
Redman	66.6	19.4	10
Chuck D	68.4	0	11
Oprah Winfrey	3.4	10	0
Prodigy	98.3	20.3	52.3
Queen Latifah	35.2	0	0
Colin Powell	3	0	0
Whoopi Goldberg	26.9	0	0
BB King	33.3	0	0
MC Lyte	10	0	0

Let us recall that personal pronouns have been proposed as the most favorable subject type for the absence of copula by outnumbering noun phrases and other pronouns in frequencies of the feature's occurrences (Rickford, 1999: 270), which is also vividly presented in Table (2). There are appreciable differences in the percentages between personal pronouns and other subject types, especially with Redman, Chuck D, Prodigy, Latifah, Goldberg, and BB King. The only exception is found in Winfrey's outcome, which has apparently been caused by a negligible amount of zero copula tokens. Similarly, MC Lyte's results may therefore appear quite irrelevant for that very reason (see Table (1)).

Evidently, the implication of Straight Deletion showed that personal pronouns attracted the absence of *is* and *are* at the highest rate, followed by noun phrases and other pronouns. This outcome is highly consistent with the previous findings, and it additionally reinforces the theoretical statements and analysis of copula variation according to the preceding grammatical category (Rickford, 1999; Alim, 2004).

The lack of reconciliation between Straight Deletion and Labov Deletion may lead to a fairly different outcome. For that reason, I now present copula variation according to the subject type by applying Labov's formula.

Table (3): Copula deletion according to the preceding grammatical environment with African-American celebrities - Labov Deletion.

	Personal pronouns	Noun phrases	Other pronouns
Labov Deletion	%	%	%
Redman	90.3	100*	25
Chuck D	68.4	0	50
Oprah Winfrey	4	33.3*	0
Prodigy	98.3	64.7	78.5

Queen Latifah	46.1	0	0
Colin Powell	3.8	0	0
Whoopi Goldberg	31.8	0	0
BB King	50	0	0
MC Lyte	14.2	0	0

If we compare the frequencies of absence in Table (3) with those in Table (2), we will notice that the appliance of Labov Deletion usually results in a higher and rarely in the same rate of copula omission. As mentioned before, the difference between the two formulae is the absence of full forms in Labov's denominator, (ca): ((ca + cc)), which might affect the final outcome, as in a 100 percent absence with noun phrases in Redman's interviews marked with*. The reason for such result lies in the complete absence of contracted forms with noun phrases in Redman's transcripts, which then only leaves us with deleted tokens to be divided. Such division will always result in 100 percent. Whether we find this calculation realistic or not is again a question of the Creolist-Dialectologist debate on the origin of AAVE. As in Table (2), Winfrey's deviation with noun phrases has been caused by a small number of deletions, two.

Nevertheless, the overall percentages in Tables (2) and (3) generally coincide, pointing to the right direction in terms of internal conditioning on copula variation according to subject type. In both tables, personal pronouns in most cases favour deletion more than the other grammatical categories.

Reports show that *Verb + ing* and *gonna* are the most stimulating following grammatical environments for the deletion while the least favourable is the following noun phrase (Alim, 2004: 145). Table (45) presents the results of my study.

Table (4): Copula deletion according to the following grammatical environment with African-American celebrities - Straight Deletion.

	Gonna	Verb + ing	Noun phrase	Adjective	Adverb	Preposition	Other pronouns	Verb + to
Straight								
Deletion	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Redman	100	66.6	8	15.3	30	60	0	100*
Chuck D	0	71	11.1	45.4	33.3	16.6	25	0
Winfrey	0	0	0	10*	0	33.3*	0	0
Prodigy	94	77.7	38.8	26.3	92.3	40.9	60	66.6
Latifah	100	30	0	0	0	20	0	0
Powell	0	0	0	0	20*	0	0	0
Goldberg	60	20	15.3	0	0	0	0	0
BB King	50	11	8	0	7	0	0	100*
MC Lyte	0	18.1*	0	0	0	0	0	0

Frequencies of deletion in the grid mostly expose *gonna* as the environment that attracted most deleted cases and accordingly the highest rates of absence. *Gonna* is followed by *Verb + ing* in the decreasing order of copula absence with five informants: Redman, Prodigy, Latifah, Goldberg, and BB King. Winfrey, Powell, and Lyte's results tend to be insignificant due to a small amount of deleted tokens (see Table (1)). Other percentages calculated on such basis are marked with *.

Nevertheless, there is a minor exception to the proposed order of favourability: Chuck D's results display *Verb + ing* as the grammatical category that elicited most deletions. Unfortunately, I could not confirm the favourability of *gonna* in Chuck D's case because there was complete absence of zero copulas and three contracted forms that the speaker produced with the respective environment.

Conclusively, I have shown that the arrangements of favourable grammatical categories in this study mostly correlated with the findings of previous researchers (Baugh, 1979; Rickford, 1999): *gonna* and *Verb + ing* forms evoked more copula omission than other verb types while noun phrases exhibited little or the least eliciting strength with all six interviewees who produced an appreciable amount of Black English copula in their speech.

The following frequencies are based on the exact number of tokens as in Table (4); however, they have been calculated by Labov Deletion.

Table (5): Copula deletion according to the following grammatical environment with African-American celebrities - Labov Deletion.

	<i>Gonna</i>	<i>Verb</i> + <i>ing</i>	<i>Noun</i> phrase	<i>Adjective</i>	<i>Adverb</i>	<i>Preposition</i>	<i>Other</i> pronouns	<i>Verb</i> + <i>to</i>
Labov								
Deletion	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Redman	100	85.7	100*	66.6	50	100*	0	100*
Chuck D	0	100*	50*	71	100*	50*	50*	0
Winfrey	0	0	0	25*	0	50*	0	0
Prodigy	94	90.3	87.5	83.3	100*	75	100*	100*
Latifah	100	37.5	0	0	0	33.3	0	0
Powell	0	0	0	0	33.3*	0	0	0
Goldberg	75	33.3	40	0	0	0	0	0
BB King	100*	33.3	100*	0	25	0	0	100*
MC Lyte	0	25*	0	0	0	0	0	0

As explained earlier, I shall first ignore Winfrey, Powell, and Lyte's results due to a negligible number of omitted tokens. Second, the increased frequencies in, for example, Redman's interviews with noun phrases and prepositions again result from the complete absence of contracted forms with these categories, as is the case with other informants in individual environments. Applying Labov Deletion in such cases results in a 100 percent absence which appears somewhat controversial and is therefore marked with *, as are the environments with only one or two deleted tokens. Similarly, other interviewees' frequencies that result from that very same type of calculation, i.e., (ca) : ((ca + cc)), have been marked with *. Accordingly, if we leave this calculating particularity aside, we should note that in most cases the proposed pattern still applies with the exception of Chuck D. Hence, Redman, Prodigy, Latifah, Goldberg, and BB King's omission of *is* and *are* by Labov's formula shows preference of absence with *gonna* and *Verb + ing* while noun phrases appear less favorable for deletion.

In conclusion, I have shown that personal pronouns in the data favoured copula absence more than other preceding environments, such as noun phrases and other pronouns. When analyzing the following grammatical category, I found *gonna* to be the most attractive verb type which was mostly followed by *Verb + ing* forms in the second place in decreasing order of frequencies. These findings strongly coincide with the patterns discovered in previous research on copula variation and internal conditioning (Baugh, 1979; Rickford, 1999; Alim, 2004). Close parallels were firmly confirmed when applying the Straight Deletion formula, however, the implication of Labov Deletion generally increased the frequencies of copula absence and rearranged the proposed pattern of favourable grammatical environments in some cases.

One of the main objectives of this study is to concentrate on quantitative interspeaker variation of Black English copula and accordingly consider and comment on various sociolinguistic factors that could potentially encourage a particular degree of copula deletion.

Initially, I also intended to consider the effect of interviewers' external characteristics on potential style-shifts of individual interviewees, as it was analyzed in Alim's study (2004). Style-shifting is alternation between styles of speech within a

linguistic repertoire of an individual speaker. However, it was often impossible to recognize and determine interlocutors' external factors because they focus either on the interviewers' physical features, such as race, gender, and age, or their assumed sociocultural knowledge and relation to the interviewee. My methodological approach of transcribing of the Internet faces some disadvantages as some of the video footages disable access to this information.

Similarly, since I have been dealing with mass communication, I planned to explore whether Bell's (1984) sociolinguistic model of audience design would apply for my sample of informants as well. According to Bell's theory, the audience is the primary factor in influencing speakers' style-shifting (Bell, 1991). Approval seeking has been recognized as a prime motive in accommodation. This is very powerful in mass communication, where we can assume that communicators are always in some sense trying to win the approval of their audience (McQuail, 1969). Speakers who use dialectal features apparently want to maintain a certain kind of audience or keep their credibility. The mass communication process is daily implied by most of our informants. It involves a disjunction of place, and sometimes of time, between communicator and audience, however, the speech situations that represent the core data of this study are rather specific since the interviews include at least two speakers in a face-to-face conversation who may be accompanied by the physically present audience and the outer, mass audience – "separated in space and often in time from the embedded communication situation" (Bell, 1991: 76). Unfortunately, I was not able to gather data on characterization of the audiences, which should include their media reception habits and demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, education, and occupation (Bell, 1991). Instead of considering interviewers' and audiences' characteristics, I will focus on the interviewees and explore how and if my results relate to the social attributes which have been highlighted as the ones that influence language use.

I will now glance through some general sociolinguistic findings and compare them with my results. For that reason, it is appropriate and convenient to revisit the overall percentages of copula omission used by the ten interviewees, which will serve as the basis for discussion in this section. Table (6) displays the numbers of tokens and percentage ranks of copula deletion with the selected celebrities.

Table (6): Copula variation in the interviews with African-American celebrities.

Copula Deletion		
	Tokens (absent/ present)	Straight/ Labov Deletion %
Redman	(37/61)	37.7/ 78
Chuck D	(14/29)	32.5/ 63.6
Winfrey	(2/50)	3.8/ 6.8
Prodigy	(82/54)	60.2/ 89.13
Latifah	(6/32)	15.7/ 37.5
Powell	(1/51)*	1.9/ 3.4
Goldberg	(7/37)	15.9/ 31.8
BB King	(6/42)	12.5/ 46.1
MC Lyte	(2/52)	3.7/ 10
Obama	-	0/ 0

Note: - represents the absence of variation; accordingly the amount of vernacular variants results in zero percent; * denotes an insignificant number of vernacular tokens.

According to general sociolinguistic patterns, women use more standard language forms favouring overt prestige, while men tend to use more vernacular forms (Holmes, 1992). Some explanations for women's linguistic behaviour point out that women are more status conscious than men, and they play the 'guardians of values' in a society. According to Holmes (1992), women are linguistically more polite than men, a finding confirmed by my final results as well.

Overall, the frequencies of copula deletion in Table (6) show a notable distinction of zero copula usage between male and female interlocutors according to both formulae, Straight and Labov Deletion. Collectively, the average frequency of absence for males equals 28.9 percent by Straight Deletion and 56 percent by Labov Deletion, while female interviewees used much less zero copula at the average rate of 7.8 percent by Straight and 17.2 percent by Labov's computation.

Nevertheless, there were a few exceptions to the pattern proposed by Holmes (1992): Colin Powell exhibited only one token of deletion thus resulting in 1.9 percent by Straight formula and 3.4 percent by Labov Deletion. This result may lead to an assumption that gender is not a defining social factor or the main cause of the low frequency in Powell's case, considering that sociolinguistic factors correlate, overlap, and thus collectively form and shape the whole linguistic identity of a speaker. Therefore, the overpowering external contributor to the respective outcome remains to be discussed. Interestingly, I also noticed that Queen Latifah and Whoopi Goldberg scored almost equally in copula absence by Straight equation, while there was a little less than 6 percent difference in calculations by Labov's formula. Both female

interviewees, however, produced slightly higher rates of absence than BB King by Straight Deletion, but not when applying Labov's computation, as shown in Table (6).

Tables (6) and (7) display the highest usage of zero copula with male rap artists, namely Prodigy, Redman, and Chuck D, while the female interlocutors, Oprah Winfrey, MC Lyte, and Michelle Obama scored the lowest percentage in copula omission if ignoring Powell's results. The low absence with the respective female informants may indicate their alienation from Black English Vernacular, which correlates with the pattern proposed by Holmes (1992). Furthermore, Obama's zero percent copula absence by both formulae additionally coincides with general findings on gender and its influence on the amount of non-standard language use.

These interpretations and observations are represented more clearly in Table (7) which introduces the quantitative order of copula absence, as it was employed by the ten informants: speakers on the left side of the sequence used the highest ranks of vernacular variants.

Table (7): Gender; the sequences of AAVE usage with the selected interviewees in a decreasing order.

COPULA ABSENCE: STRAIGHT DELETION
Prodigy (m) > Redman (m) > Chuck D (m) > Goldberg (f) > Latifah (f) > BB King (m) > Winfrey (f) > MC Lyte (f) > Powell (m) > Obama (f)
COPULA ABSENCE: LABOV DELETION
Prodigy (m) > Redman (m) > Chuck D (m) > BB King (m) > Latifah (f) > Goldberg (f) > MC Lyte (f) > Winfrey (f) > Powell (m) > Obama (f)

Note: (m)-male; (f)-female;

The implication of age as a social variable does not seem to be fully coherent in most cases without the revision of certain definitions.

Teenagers use slang to indicate a membership in a group due to peer pressure and a tendency to reject societal norms. Between the age of thirty to fifty-five, people usually move away from the vernaculars and are more likely to use varieties closer to standard (Eckert, 1997). However, note that Black slang is a part of Black language, but not all Black language is Black slang. Slang refers to a language that is transitory and used by a certain group, such as teenagers or musicians, especially rap artists. African-American language (AAVE), however, is used by all groups in the Black community, and its words and phrases are stable over time (Smitherman, 2000). Although Black American street slang and AAVE's grammar often, but not always, interact, AAVE's linguistic features should not be perceived as slang characteristics only, but as grammatical components of a systematic language variety which has not been standardized.

Rickford (1999) exposed age as a very relevant external constraint on Black grammatical patterns:

Black teenagers are less assimilationist than their parents and especially their grandparents, and more assertive about their rights to talk and act in their "natural way." By contrast, Black adults, affected by the demands of the work-place, seem to be impelled away from distinctively Black patterns of language and behaviour. (Rickford, 1999: 274)

Before the analysis of the data according to age, I should report the ages of the informants: Redman, 40; Chuck D, 50; Oprah Winfrey, 56; Prodigy, 35; Queen Latifah, 40; Colin Powell, 73; Whoopi Goldberg, 54; BB King, 84; MC Lyte, 38; and Michelle Obama, 46.

In his study of Six Black East Palo Altans grouped by age, Rickford (1999) divided six informants into three age groups: old (76 years and over), middle-aged (38-42 years), and young/teenager (14-15 years). The results showed that in most cases teenagers employed higher frequencies of AAVE variables than the adults (Rickford, 1999: 264). Unfortunately, the ten interviewees could not be proportionally divided into three age groups: there are no representative teenagers since the youngest interviewee is 35 years old. Consequently, I have categorized the interviewees into two age groups: younger (35-50) and older (54-84) according to their collective average age which equals 51.6 and represents the dividing line between the two groups. By this classification, there are six representatives of the “younger” group (which would otherwise be referred to as a middle-aged group in the norms of western society) and four of the older one. Table (8) presents the average collective frequencies of copula deletion as used by the two respective age groups.

Table (8): The average percentages of copula absence according to two age-groups.

	YOUNGER (35-50): Prodigy, MC Lyte, Redman, Latifah, Obama, Chuck D	OLDER (54-84): Goldberg, Winfrey, Powell, BB King
Copula absence: Straight Deletion	25%	8.5%
Copula absence: Labov Deletion	46.3%	22%

Notice that the feature conforms to the age factor since the younger group of interviewees collectively employed higher frequencies of vernacular variants. However, with respect to the overall age-group approach, the interpretation of this social variable according to interlocutors’ dialectal usage represented in a form of a decreasing sequence appears to be more complex. The following table introduces the quantitative order of zero copula produced by the ten speakers: informants on the left side of the sequence employed the largest rates of vernacular variants; representatives of the younger group are marked with (y) while (o) denotes interviewees in the older group.

Table (9): Age; the sequences of copula deletion with the selected interviewees in a decreasing order.

COPULA ABSENCE: STRAIGHT DELETION
Prodigy (y) > Redman (y) > Chuck D (y) > Goldberg (o) > Latifah (y) > BB King (o) > Winfrey (o) > MC Lyte (y) > Powell (o) > Obama (y)
COPULA ABSENCE: LABOV DELETION
Prodigy (y) > Redman (y) > Chuck D (y) > BB King (o) > Latifah (y) > Goldberg (o) > MC Lyte (y) > Winfrey (o) > Powell (o) > Obama (y)

Notwithstanding the fact that a sample of ten informants is too small and too specific to make any plausible conclusions for the African-American speech community in general, the aim of this analysis is to explore whether a random group of African-American celebrities might confirm the general pattern considering age as a social factor. Referring to Table (9), we can see that the left side of the sequences is in most cases represented by the majority of speakers from the younger group, especially by Prodigy, Redman, and Chuck D. Additionally, the youngest candidates, Redman and Prodigy, are positioned at the very beginning of each sequence. Nevertheless, there are a few exceptions to the proposed pattern which I plan to discuss individually by considering other social factors besides age that might play a larger role in affecting the degree of linguistic formality with the selected speakers.

One of the interlocutors of such matter, whose results do not completely correlate to age as an interspeaker category, is BB King, since he did produce a certain amount of Black English copula. Apparently, age does not seem to be a defining factor for the oldest speaker in my research. A similar observation may be applied to Whoopi Goldberg. On the other hand, if relying solely on the age factor, we would expect a higher quantity of deletion with MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, and Michelle Obama, as the representatives of the younger group.

Overall, we can confirm that the age factor contributed to the amount of copula omission to a certain degree, specifically with Prodigy, Redman, and Chuck D on the “younger” side of the spectrum, and with Winfrey and Powell on the other side. However, the effect of age as an external constraint appears to have a minor influence on the selected interviewees in comparison to gender, since the arrangements of informants according to their age and copula deletion were not as straight-forward and were more difficult to interpret.

Labov’s study (1966) in New York City helped to develop elementary findings of modern dialectology by proving that social class and the degree of formality in speech correlate, thus, the higher the social class, the more formal the speech. However, class aspirations are important as well. In order to be associated with the upper and upper middle class, speakers tend to convert or shift their linguistic code towards more standard language forms.

Social class has been broadly defined as “a group of people at the same social or economic level” (Crowther, 1995: 204). Nevertheless, in many cases, the financial status can be separated from the circle of people one associates with because a high income does not necessarily affiliate a person with prestigious or powerful associates. In fact, income and social status do not always correlate, for instance, small business persons may earn more than, for example, school teachers but are perceived as having a lower social position. Some American studies showed that the correlation between income and class had decreased, and it rated at about 45 percent a good decade ago (Argyle, 1994: 9). The level of person’s status may therefore be assessed according to

his or her income, degree of education, occupation, wealth, popularity etc. Social status is the prestige earned by a person's position in a society. Judging by the financial and social level, entertainers, especially Hollywood celebrities, may be associated with the upper class although they may not have a formal musical or acting education. Social class is associated with social status or position, since class consists of many social positions. Since public figures and celebrities are considered as members of the upper social class (Gilbert, 1998), I will focus on social status of the interviewees and its relation to the degree of speech formality.

We can assume that all ten interviewees are financially well situated. Referring to Table (6), I broadly categorize the ten informants into three general groups according to their usage of copula deletion: Prodigy, Redman, and Chuck D represent the first group which produced a notable frequency of dialectal forms. An extensive use of Black English copula reaches its peak particularly with Prodigy and Redman. The second group produced a rather small amount of vernacular variants (BB King, Winfrey, MC Lyte, Latifah, and Goldberg) while the third group (Powell, Obama) exhibited practically no African-American linguistic variants except for one instance of copula omission in Powell's case.

Whether in their interviews or in their lyrics, Redman and Prodigy emphasize their street credibility, i.e., "the approval of the streets" (Redman, *The Vibe*, June 2001: 102). Loyalty to a particular ethnic or social group may be expressed by the use of non-prestigious, non-standard language varieties. This is known as covert prestige. Prodigy's extensive use of Black dialect may among other factors be affiliated with his social status which accordingly appears less prestigious than those of other interviewees. To some extent, his reality and reputation reflect the explicit criminal attitude found in his lyrics: he has been involved with certain illegal activities such as gun possession and is currently serving a sentence; his rather successful music career has not brought him superstar status (Birchmeier, 2008).

Reading Redman and Prodigy's transcripts, I noticed a specific type of verbal expression on part of the interviewees who, by any account, employ a great number of what can be perceived to be obscene words, especially when dealing with media and public presentations. Nevertheless, words such as *shit*, *fuck*, *muthafucka*, *bitch*, or even *nigga* are a constant and permanent phenomenon in the slang of African-American Vernacular English, as well as in the African-American oral tradition, all the way from toasting to rapping. Most of the swearwords listed above may also have a neutral meaning in AAVE with their approximate SAE counterparts, such as, for example: *shit* - *stuff*; *muthafucka* - *guy*, *buddy*, *a person*; *bitch* - *a girl*, *a female*; *nigga* - *a friend*, *buddy*. Accordingly, the consistency of Redman and Prodigy's linguistic behaviour exceeds their rap register with by inclusion of expressive vocabulary and AAVE features into many contexts and situations of verbal interaction.

Covert prestige expressed through vernacular linguistic variety may also be attributed to particular grammatical features in Chuck D's interviews. Despite the university lectures, book writing, TV appearances, and political commentary (Huey, 2007; Erlewine, 2007), which normally all favour the standard variety and enable to associate with respected personas, Chuck D in this case uses a relatively high absence of copula.

Nevertheless, covert prestige may not be the primary linguistic motive of BB King. The interviewee grew up in a poor family of sharecroppers and left school as a teenager. According to assumedly low income in his early years, and the degree of education, we could then consider him a member of the lower social class. Despite his reputation as one of the major influences on rock music of the 1960s, and despite the

honorary awards and achievements (Kerekes and O'Neill, 1996; <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/kin2bio-1>, 2007), there probably has not been much normative pressure to accommodate his language variety since his most influential means of communication, globally, has been the music. BB King has indeed crossed over to the wider audience musically, but apparently there has been no need to do so language-wise. By relying solely on the outcome of this analysis and on the proposed sociolinguistic patterns, I might presume that BB King's social status ranks lower than those of Obama, Powell, Winfrey, MC Lyte and arguably Latifah and Goldberg, if applying Labov's calculation. However, more factors contribute to a well rounded definition and perception of what social position is. Concretely, social components such as income, wealth, and popularity may be ranked highly with BB King, and accordingly, he may be attributed a high status. On the other hand, the degree of education affiliates him with lower social status, and this last factor might be prevailing in correlation with the degree of speech formality. The demands of the working place, in this case the music business, have apparently not impelled BB King "away from distinctively Black patterns of language" (Rickford, 1999: 274). The entertainment business, especially the music industry, seems to be less strict in its demands about the linguistic behaviour of musicians and other artists.

Winfrey's verbal interaction in the transcripts is, grammatically, several levels closer to Standard American English (SAE) than with the informants described so far. Incidentally, her social status ranges higher as well, considering her reputation as a well-respected talk show host and humanitarian, her acquaintances with prestigious circles, and her publicly exposed financial status (A&E Television Networks, 2007). Very likely born as an AAVE speaker, Winfrey exemplifies an African-American female who is aware of the "normative pressure" on television broadcasting in terms of overt prestige, however, according to her relatively distinguished position in the public eye of the American society, I had anticipated even fewer dialectal forms of copula. On the other hand, the AAVE variants in her speech data are based on the small number of vernacular tokens, two.

Similar external characteristics may be attributed to the only informant in this study who used none of the dialectal copula variants at all. Such results had been rather expected from a highly educated graduate of Princeton University and Harvard Law School, who associates with political magnates. Being the First Lady of the United States and working at distinguished positions in the community relations and external affairs (Lowen, 2008; A&E Television Networks, 2009) probably certify Michelle Obama, alongside Colin Powell, as the one with the highest social status of all interviewees, which undisputedly parallels Labov's (1966) elementary findings on the correlation between speech and social class since the latter is associated with status. Obama's linguistic behaviour in public suffices the normative demands of the media and of her social role. The social and the economic components are obviously highly fulfilled which categorizes Michelle Obama as a representative of a higher social class. Apparently, a standard language variety free of salient dialectal grammatical features is generally expected from an educated woman on such position.

Colin Powell is another informant in the study who represents the top of the social hierarchy as a former US general, a statesman, and a member of prestigious political circles. The highest military positions and numerous distinctions and awards affiliate Powell with the highest positions in society. Consequently, his linguistic expression also conforms to the proposed sociolinguistic pattern by being practically free of Black vernacular variants, except for one case of zero copula.

I now turn to the remaining interviewees who produced a relatively small quantity of deletion. Certain parallels can be drawn between the aspects of entertainment of Queen Latifah and Whoopi Goldberg: they are both successful African-American actresses ranging from comedy to drama; they have both hosted several talk shows and have received many honoree awards, e.g., a Grammy (Buchanan, 2008; <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/gol0bio-1>, 2007). Incidentally, they both scored almost equally in the absence of copula. Since their Black vernacular usage was higher than Powell and Obama's but nowhere near as extensive as Prodigy and Redman's, we may position the two interviewees in the golden mean of the sample. MC Lyte might as well be ascribed to this intermediate status according to her frequencies of dialectal variants and external characteristics that show many similarities with Queen Latifah. Besides being a pioneer female rap artist, song writer, and an actress, she is also a supporter of charitable organizations and anti-violence campaigns (<http://www.yuddy.com/celebrity/mc-lyte/bio>, 2008). Such gatherings and formal events give opportunity to keep company with people from upper social circles.

Members of the upper social class are positioned at the top of the social ladder and are considered to be those with great wealth and influence. According to contemporary sociologist, Gilbert (1998), American celebrities belong to this particular class as well. The ten selected public figures in this study rank from urban musicians to Hollywood actresses and politicians, and it would be difficult and somewhat groundless to draw the exact dividing lines between different levels of their social positions since we lack the information on each interviewee's specific social components. However, there probably are differences in public perception of these ten interviewees, and one aspect has to do with their reputation, respect, and esteem, generally known as prestige. I did present certain patterns and correlations between the interviewees' amount of AAVE copula and the level of their position in society, however, leaving aside the sociolinguistic definitions of covert and overt prestige for a moment, vernacular language varieties generally appear less prestigious than standard linguistic behaviour. Therefore, Redman and Prodigy's extensive use of Black English variants is undoubtedly considered less prestigious to the general public than the Standard English copula forms of Powell and Obama on the other hand. Consequently, this perception is often extended to the level of the speaker's social status.

Finally, I conclude that the level of social status and the degree of formality regarding copula absence in spoken interaction correlate with the informants for the most part, especially at the end (Obama, Powell) and at the beginning of the overall sequence (Redman, Prodigy) of copula deletion (see Tables (7) and (9)): the higher the social position and the status of an interviewee, the more Standard English variants employed.

For many people, ethnic background is a major indicator of who they are, and they tend to have a strong ethnic identity. If they live among other people with strong ethnic identity, we can expect an ethnic dialect; however, not every member of an ethnic group speaks that dialect. Ethnic dialect is a result of identification with the group and interaction with its members. The link between language and (ethnic) identity can be so strong that a single language feature can reveal one's membership in a group (Tabouret-Keller, 1997) as is the case in the interviews with Colin Powell (see Table (6)) who grammatically indicated appurtenance to the African-American speech community by the use of zero copula. In general, in-group solidarity may be promoted by ethnicity and nationalism, which encourage people's desire to nurture

and maintain their cultural heritage (Linn, 1998). The connection between ethnic dialect and ethnicity is not equally strong in different speech communities, and perhaps it is even more differentiated between the individual members of a speech community; for some, language may be the main indicator of their ethnic identity (Redman, Prodigy), while for others, it may only play the side role (Powell, Obama).

Smitherman (1977) describes African-American social relations as a “push-pull” syndrome, stating that Black Americans are “pushing toward White American culture while simultaneously pulling away from it” (Smitherman, 1977: 10, 11). Ethnicity encourages the use of AAVE as a marker of in-group solidarity, which would be the “pull”. However, Black Americans are “pushed” toward SAE for economic reasons. Keeping a good job usually demands the use of standard variety (Rodby, 1998).

Apparently, the use of copula absence in Prodigy’s interviews indicates his pertinence to the Black American community, as well as to the Hip Hop culture that has been known for crossing the boundaries between races and nationalities. Moreover, Prodigy is followed by Redman and Chuck D in terms of decreasing zero copula use, which shows that male Hip Hop artists produced the highest rates of the respective AAVE feature in this study. Regarding ethnicity, quantitative data on the deletion of *is* and *are* show a relatively strong expression of African-American identity through language with the interviewees from “the first group” (Prodigy, Redman, and Chuck D). However, I will attempt to consider and implement other external parameters that might potentially affect the speech of those informants who exhibited less or no vernacular variants.

According to the data (see Table (6)), one might conclude that Winfrey’s use of zero copula may not be an important indicator of her ethnic identity, at least not within the linguistic variety she uses on television. Although there is some evidence of Winfrey’s style shifting from Standard American English to smaller fragments and comments in Black English (Brown, 2002), with which she usually delivers humorous remarks during her daytime talk show, her speech acts in the transcripts contain a small amount of deletion. Nevertheless, Winfrey’s television appearances, especially in interviews on hugely popular talk shows (such as *Late Night with David Letterman*), provide opportunities to maintain or broaden the number of her viewers and to appeal to the masses that expect a certain degree of formality in linguistic behaviour. Possessing Standard American English skills enables Winfrey to pragmatically manipulate and to please the selected audience, which is a skill that a talk show host of her format should attain. There is no evidence that would demonstrate the potential basilectal density of Winfrey’s assumed AAVE in the privacy of her home; however, her Standard American English is a consistent part of her professional life and her collective social identity. Similarly, MC Lyte’s transcripts show minimum use of zero copula while Queen Latifah and Whoopi Goldberg scored approximately the same frequencies. Although the amount of deletion is not outstanding, the feature does occur with these informants and is a salient one. Therefore, copula absence in BB King, Latifah, Lyte, and Goldberg’s interviews marks their ethnic identity and indicates membership in the African-American community through their linguistic expression.

I will now focus on the remaining candidates who used standard grammatical variants in almost all cases. Powell and Obama’s speech acts in the transcripts are practically clear of AAVE copula deletion. However, their appearances in the media and their dealings with public relations demand a high degree of standard language forms. SAE serves as a necessary tool to appeal to the audience and political associates. In other words, Standard English represents a ticket to the world of

politics, and not having this language variety at one's disposal may even result in an unsuccessful career. As with Oprah Winfrey, standard variety has played a central role of these informants' professional spheres which shape their social identity. Powell had experienced the societal crisis by living in times of political and mental segregation and oppression of African-American people in the United States. By fighting against those injustices and by rising to the utmost respected senior functions in the US military, he has become an important figure for African Americans and Americans in general, by showing the significance of skill and performance and thus equality of human kind. Similarly, Michelle Obama represents an inspiring female role-model for the Black American community by putting strong emphasis on her education and professional career, by reaching the top positions in the community relations and external affairs, and by becoming the First African-American Lady of the USA.

Finally, the results show that the link between AAVE copula variants and ethnic identity appears to be much stronger in the Black street community than the one in upper social classes or eminent professions which often demand distinguished public appearances that normally require the use of standard linguistic variables as is the case with Powel and Obama. These findings again show how social status and the degree of formality in speech correlate. On the other hand, members of the African-American ethnic group share certain cultural characteristics, history, and racial features which physically distinguish them from other Americans. Therefore, language variety does not appear to be a determining feature of ethnicity for the respective ethnic group, however, it is a significant one in terms of expressing pertinence to a particular social group within the African-American community. The two extreme cases in the sequence of informants, Redman and Prodigy versus Obama and Powell, have probably more to do with the level of respect accorded to a language variety in a form of covert and overt prestige than with a degree of Black consciousness or ethnic identity of these speakers. Nevertheless, linguistic features may be an important factor for ethnic-group membership in general while the term *African-American English* itself determines a strong link between Black Americans and their linguistic heritage.

Preservation of Black English plays an important role in representing Black culture, especially in urban youth Hip Hop subculture. "...the artists and participants in the Hip Hop Nation (HNN), in seeking to present a "street-conscious" identity, are the main preservers and maintainers of Black Language (BL)." (Alim, 2004: 143)

According to Alim, rap artists should exhibit the highest rates of copula absence in the sample. Table (10) shows the relation between Hip Hop affiliation and the amount of copula deletion in a form of a decreasing sequence.

Table (10): Hip Hop; the sequences of copula absence with the selected interviewees in a decreasing order.

COPULA ABSENCE: STRAIGHT DELETION
Prodigy (HH) > Redman (HH) > Chuck D (HH) > Goldberg > Latifah (HH) > BB King > Winfrey > MC Lyte (HH) > Powell > Obama
COPULA ABSENCE: LABOV DELETION
Prodigy (HH) > Redman (HH) > Chuck D (HH) > BB King > Latifah (HH) > Goldberg > MC Lyte (HH) > Winfrey > Powell > Obama

Note: (HH) - Hip Hop affiliation;

The highest average frequencies of copula omission are produced by male Hip Hop artists, Prodigy, Redman, and Chuck D. In fact, the three entertainers are also the only male rappers in the sample of informants. Interestingly, Redman and Prodigy, who claim the approval of the Black inner-city audience, exhibit higher percentages of absence than Chuck D, a Hip Hop intellectual and political activist. Rap artists try to appeal to their target audiences with their music, movies, various media appearances and, sometimes, with overly-hyped publicity stunts that are usually pre-constructed in order to present the artist as, for example, a tough gangster persona promoted on the record. Language is important in each case, although Redman and Prodigy's Hip Hop lingo or Chuck D's Black English do not appear as artificially constructed varieties to raise the number of admirers, but the way they normally speak in an everyday interaction, which expresses the non-convergent linguistic behaviour. Interview 2.3, *Kepler Speakers presents Chuck D*, for instance, is a lecture at the George Washington University where the speaker behind the desk delivers a speech that contains a notable amount of *is* and especially *was* generalization, which appear to be robust linguistic characteristics of contemporary AAVE (Tagliamonte and Smith, 2000: 143). When speaking to a faculty audience, the lecturer normally tends to use the variety closer to Standard English; however, Chuck D employs the dialectal features mentioned, as well as copula deletion. On the other hand, he speaks to a youthful audience that is very likely interested in Hip Hop culture and that therefore appreciates the authenticity of his style, which was best described by the rap icon himself after a session at Westminster College: "I don't do lectures, I do vibe sessions and conversations. Coming here is almost like talking in the living room, and I really like the informal setting" (Waller, 2008).

On the other hand, the two female interviewees who have actively been a part of the Hip Hop industry for the last two decades did not display a considerable amount of copula deletion. While MC Lyte's professional life is still primarily focused on making rap music, Latifah had started her career in the entertainment business as a rap artist, but proceeded as an actress. Most of her interview topics in this study focus on an acting aspect of her career, however, the oldest interview, *Queen Latifah Interview: Lorna's Corner 93-94*, was conducted when she presented herself as a rapper primarily. Interestingly, that particular interview stands out from the others with the highest frequency of copula deletion which additionally supports Alim's claim above in terms of intraspeaker variation and marks a style-shift in copula usage. This particular case may also be viewed as an implication of the "performance register" where the speaker shows membership in the Hip Hop community by using a codified lingo or markers of Black English grammar.

Overall, male Hip Hop artists used a much greater amount of Black English copula than the other entertainers and public figures in this research. High rates were evident especially with the interviewees who claim street credibility, ghetto mentality, and who stay in touch with the Black inner city circles. I had expected a larger quantity of copula absence with female rap artists, which indicates that participation in Hip Hop culture did not have such strong impact on copula variation with female rap artists as it did with males.

I examined the variability of AAVE copula by analyzing internal linguistic restrictions and by considering potential influences of social factors, and found that personal pronouns functioning as subjects attracted the absence of copula at notably higher rates than noun phrases and other pronouns according to both computing formulae, Straight Deletion and Labov Deletion. This outcome of this study is

consistent with the previous findings on copula variation according to the preceding grammatical category (Rickford, 1999; Alim, 2004). Regarding the following grammatical category, I exposed *gonna* as the most attractive verb type for copula deletion while *Verb + ing* forms took the second place in decreasing order of frequencies, which again coincides with the results of previous studies on internal conditioning (Baugh, 1979; Rickford, 1999; Alim, 2004).

Regarding external identity constraints, the average frequencies of copula deletion with the individual interviewees show a significant effect of gender as an external factor, since the majority of male informants, except one, exhibited higher ranks of AAVE variants than female interlocutors, which parallels the previous studies on gender as a social variable (Holmes, 1992).

However, analyzing the influence of age factor is slightly more complex. While the younger group of interviewees collectively produced higher frequencies of Black English copula than the older group, interspeaker comparison shows that age is not a defining external constraint with four out of ten interviewees. Nevertheless, six speakers confirm the general pattern according to which age as an identity constraint affects the level of vernacular language use.

The level of social status and the degree of speech formality according to Black English copula coincided with the majority of interviewees. This correlation is especially evident at the end (Obama, Powell) and at the beginning (Redman, Prodigy) of the sequence (see Table (7)) displaying overall frequencies of vernacular variants; informants with higher social position produced fewer omissions and vice versa. More precisely, the results indicate that the interviewees' profession plays an important role in their public spoken interaction. Black male urban musicians exhibit the largest number of deleted tokens by far, followed by Hollywood actresses and female musicians with a small number of vernacular variants. The sequence is closed with politicians who produce almost none of the selected dialectal language forms.

The link between ethnicity and ethnic dialect is also much more apparent with speakers of Black English who seek the credibility of urban inner-city areas than with informants of eminent professions which require the use of a standard variety.

Similarly, the involvement in Hip Hop culture stimulates notably higher deletions of copula in comparison to those public figures who do not actively participate in the respective art form; however, this applies specifically to male rap artists who claim street credibility and glorify the Black ghetto lifestyle. On the other hand, participation in the Hip Hop genre does not evoke an extensive vernacular usage with female Hip Hop artists.

Overall, I summarize my findings by highlighting particular combinations of social attributes, namely gender, professional career, and age, which have proven to be the most significant external constraints affecting interspeaker variability of copula usage, thus influencing the degree of linguistic formality within the sample of African-American public figures. While male Hip Hop artists from the younger group of informants employ the highest ranks of Black vernacular variants, the normative demands of the workplace encourages standard copula forms of the candidates from political circles, independent of age factor and gender. The remaining candidates, mostly female, who produce a rather small or insignificant number of Black English copula variants range from Hip Hop artists to professional actresses from the younger and the older group. Accordingly, the female factor facilitates higher frequencies of Standard English variants, which correlates with the previous and general sociolinguistic observations. Finally, diverse combinations of social factors or identity constraints of the informants in this study are manifested through various social roles

and notably contributed to the amounts of copula deletion with the respective speakers.

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