Internal Grammatical Conditioning in African-American Vernacular English

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Abstract

African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) has been defined as a social dialect or a non-standard variety of American English, which contains specific phonological and grammatical features. Some of these features are unique to AAVE, while others may be shared with other informal varieties of American English. Speakers of AAVE usually alternate between the use of AAVE features and their Standard English (SE) equivalents, which may be influenced by external identity constraints and internal grammatical restrictions.

This article examines grammatical variability of the selected AAVE features in interviews with ten African-American public figures. The selected features include the third person singular –s absence, the possessive –s absence, the plural –s absence, and the generalization of *is* and *was* to plural and second person pronouns. I highlight favorable grammatical environments in which the features occur at the highest rate and search for particular patterns in the variability of AAVE features according to subject type and verb type. My results are then compared with the outcomes of previous linguistic findings on internal conditioning in AAVE. The main objective of this study is to statistically present the frequencies of AAVE features in the interviews with the chosen celebrities in order to explore the influence of internal grammatical mechanisms. Linguistic patterns and restrictions in the use of AAVE demonstrate that AAVE is a systematic means of communication and an ordered language variety.

Keywords: sociolinguistics, spoken language, African-American Vernacular English, grammatical features, internal constraints.

Introduction

African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) is spoken by the majority of African Americans, mostly in the inner-city areas of New York, Boston, Detroit, Philadelphia, Washington, Cleveland, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, but it is also spoken in rural areas in the casual speech of adults (Labov, 1972). Labeling this linguistic variety has corresponded to the changing terminology for naming African Americans throughout history. Accordingly, other labels used have included Negro English, Black English, Black English Vernacular (BEV), and Ebonics; however, contemporary linguists prefer to call it AAVE. The speech of African Americans carries specific grammatical and phonological features which demonstrate that it is a structured and systematic language variety rather than mere careless speech (Mufwene et al., 1998). Because of these features, there is a need among linguists to recognize AAVE as an ethnically-based communication system, and not slang or broken language. While some Black language does consist of Black slang, 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. African-American language, however, is used by all groups in the Black community, and its words and phrases are stable over time (Smitherman, 2000).

Many speakers of AAVE use a relatively large number of AAVE features; however, the entire African-American population does not use the respective features in every context and speech situation. Moreover, African-American speakers generally alternate between the use of Black English variants and Standard English (SE) variants, e.g., "He speak" versus "He speaks." The number of Black English variants within certain speech data may be measured relatively precisely and calculated into percentages which represent the frequency of AAVE usage. The variation between Standard English and AAVE may be affected by internal grammatical restrictions and by external identity characteristics, such as gender, age, social status, or ethnic identity.

In this article, I focus on internal grammatical conditioning in AAVE. The selected features of AAVE are found in interviews with ten African-American celebrities and officials from the world of entertainment, music, film, and politics, including rap artists Redman, Chuck D, Prodigy, and MC Lyte, a talk-show host, Oprah Winfrey, actresses Queen Latifah and Whoopi Goldberg, former US general and Secretary of State Colin Powell, blues musician B.B. King, and the current First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama.

Most of the features in this study are considered to be "classic ones" in the research of Black English Vernacular (Rickford, 1999: 263). They include the absence of third person singular –s on present tense singular verb forms (e.g., *She talk* for SE "She talks"), the absence of possessive –s in Noun-Noun possessive constructions (*Jack Money* for SE "Jack's money"), and the absence of plural –s suffix on semantically plural nouns (*Fifty cent* for SE "Fifty cents"). One of the most salient features of AAVE is the absence of copula, the absence of *is* and *are* as in *He tall* for SE "He is tall" or *They working* for SE "They are working." The results and findings on copula variation in this speech data have been presented in Ezgeta (2010). Another noticeable feature of Black English is invariant *be* (or habitual be) which is used for habitual or durative aspect, as in *He be walkin'*, (usually, regularly) (Rickford, 1999: 263). However, after finding only two cases of habitual *be* in the entire data set, I decided not to include the results in the analysis because these cases were not statistically significant.

The selected features have been typically associated with AAVE with the exception of two additional ones: generalization of *is* and *was* to plural and second person pronouns are used primarily by the African-American speech community, but can be observed in everyday informal speech of White Americans as well, *There's a lot of books* for SE "There are a lot of books" or *We was there* for SE "We were there." Generalizations of *is* and *was* have also been subjected to internal analysis since they appear to be robust characteristics of contemporary AAVE.

The video interviews with the selected celebrities were carefully transcribed off the Internet, mostly from Youtube. I intended to capture sets of similar speech situations and conversations of approximately the same length.[1]

Next, I searched for the selected features of AAVE in the transcripts and marked their presence. I calculated each feature's frequency of occurrence for individual speaker separately by means of quantitative measurement. Subsequently, I presented the frequencies of Standard English variants ("John's house") versus AAVE variants ("John house") according to the preceding and the following grammatical environment within the speech data of each interviewee.

[1] Transcripts of the interviews may be obtained from the author.

Finally, I interpreted the internal grammatical constraints in the entire data set as well, in order to highlight favorable grammatical environments in which a particular feature occurred at the highest rate. Those linguistic surroundings that evoked the occurrence of a particular AAVE feature at a notably high percentage were then compared to the results of previous studies in order to asses their relevance.[2]

According to the previous linguistic research dealing with internal grammatical conditioning in AAVE (Labov et al., 1968; Wolfram, 1969; Kessler, 1972; Feagin, 1979; Christian et al., 1988; Montgomery, 1989; Eisikovits, 1991; Rickford and McNair-Knox, 1994; Schilling-Estes and Wolfram, 1994; Rickford, 1999; Poplack, 2000; Alim, 2004), I expected the following results: personal pronouns, *don't*, and *say* should favor the absence of third person singular –s; I anticipated low frequencies of possessive –s and plural –s absence which may be the reason for inconsistent findings on grammatical constraints; generalization of *was* should occur more often with plural noun phrases than with pronouns, and it should be frequently used with plural existentials.

The Features of AAVE

One of the most "striking" examples of pre-verbal tense, mood, and aspect markers in AAVE is probably the absence of copula, which appears to be the most common feature of Black English and cannot be found in other American varieties (Burling, 1973). Similarly, habitual *be* cannot be found in other American vernaculars, but it occurs in other languages, such as African, Creole, or Irish English (Fromkin and Rodman 1998: 415). In a broad sense, these languages represent the core from which AAVE could have evolved.

Sometimes, a grammatical feature can result from the phonological rule, such as the deletion of *'ll*, as in *He be here* for SE "He'll be here," the abbreviation of future *going to,* as in *I'ma* go for "I'm going to go," *finna* or *fitna* derived from "fixin to," or a quasi modal *poseta*, abbreviated from "supposed to" (Burling, 1973).

One of many AAVE particularities which is shared with Southern White Vernaculars is the use of double modals, e.g., *may can, might could,* and quasi modals, e.g., *liketa* meaning "nearly." Many combinations of double modals are possible, but not all, e.g., *should could, may would* do not occur. More research and further analysis is necessary to set the clear rules on the behavior of double modals (Labov et al., 1968, Vol. I, p. 262; Burling, 1973).

A few interesting observations connected to verbal tense marking should be mentioned. Black speakers omit the third person singular –s and occasionally add it to where it does not belong, e.g., *We gots to do that* (Burling, 1973). *Is* and *was* are used with plural and second person subjects, e.g., *They is crazy, We was there* (Wolfram, 1993: 14). AAVE uses past tense ending –ed instead of past participle –en, e.g., *He had bit* for "He had bitten," and vice-versa, e.g., *She seen him yesterday* for "She saw him yesterday" (Wolfram, 1993:12). At first glance, this might look as an intentional systematic transposition of certain tense markers. In fact, these tense markers are positioned exactly where they are not allowed in Standard English and absent where

[2] The chapters presented in this article are a part of a Ph.D. dissertation (Ezgeta, 2012), defended at the University of Maribor, February 2012.

required. Nevertheless, this "systematic reversibility" is used only occasionally and is, according to Burling (1973), the result of hypercorrection.

AAVE nouns may lack possessive –s, e.g., *John house*, sometimes plural –s is deleted, e.g., *five cent, two boy*, irregular plurals may be regularized, e.g., *childrens, mens* (Burling, 1973), relative pronouns may be omitted, e.g., *That's the man come here* for SE "That's the man who came here" (Mufwene et al., 1998: 77), and object pronouns may be used as personal datives, e.g., *me* for SE "myself" (Gumperz, 1982: 31).

The speech of Black Americans carries specific negation types. The use of *ain't* can be found in Southern White Vernacular English (SWVE) and in AAVE, however, the contraction of *did not* to *ain't* is more common in Black English (Martin and Wolfram, 1998). AAVE's negative concord or multiple negation, e.g., *I can't do nothing for ya*, should not be confused with the "logical" double negation found in Standard English and in non-standard varieties. "Logical" double negation rarely if ever involves more than two negative morphemes undoing one another. However, negative concord can also be found in American colloquial speech, among the working class, and in the speech of other American ethnic groups (Martin and Wolfram, 1998).

Black English differs in question formation as well, with peculiarities such as omitting the auxiliary in yes-no questions, e.g., *You going?* for "Are you going?" (Burling, 1973), forming direct questions without inversion, e.g., *Why I can't play?* (Burling, 1973), auxiliary verb inversion in embedded yes-no questions omitting *if* or *whether,* e.g., *I asked him could he go with me*, and indirect or embedded wh-questions, e.g., *I wonder where is he going* (Labov et al., 1968).

Finally, like most language varieties, AAVE includes variability which can be accommodated to the situation or the setting, the participants of interaction, the degree of formality, the function, the topic etc. In the case of AAVE too, the language or the dialect choice is determined by the social context.

Nevertheless, AAVE does not simply consist of enumerated features. A skillful AAVE speaker uses these features together with distinctive vocabulary for many different functions:

> …to inform, persuade, attract, praise, celebrate, chastise, entertain, educate, get over, set apart, mark identity, reflect, refute, brag, and do all the various things for which human beings use language. It is because AAVE serves those purposes and serves them well that it continues to exist despite all the condemnations it receives from the larger society (Rickford, 1999: 12).

I now focus on the theoretical background by presenting the selected features of AAVE in more detail as a result of previous sociolinguistic research. The following chapters introduce the findings on internal linguistic constraints which tend to influence the variability of AAVE's showcase variables.

The Third Person Singular –s Absence

Absence of third person singular present tense is a feature of AAVE which may appear in examples such as "He talk" for SE "He talks," in the use of *don't* instead of "doesn't," as in "She *don't* cry," or *have* instead of "has," as in "She *have* it." *Don't*

and *have* as used in these examples are feature related, since "doesn't" and "hasn't" include third person singular suffix (Fasold, 1972: 121-49). Irregular verbs may be regularized, so the first person and second person verb forms are generalized onto the third person singular as well: *I see it, he see it, they see it; I was, he was, they was; I have, he have, they have* (Burling, 1973). The deletion of third person singular –s may occur in other varieties of English as well. Studies show absence in some White American dialects (Ash and Myhill, 1986) and in the United Kingdom (Trudgill, 1998), while some authors (Poplack and Tagliamonte, 1989) claim that this particular feature originates in British dialects.

Occasionally, Black Americans may use sentences such as *We gots to do that; I hates this place; They likes beer*; Alim (2004) terms this phenomenon *durative verbal –s.* A casual observer might conclude that Black speakers intentionally leave out the third person –s and add it where it does not belong as a form of protest against Standard English and therefore against standard norms. However, according to Burling (1973), it is rather the other way around, meaning that African Americans have been taught that "good" English requires the third person –s. Their natural speech does not have the basis for third person –s, therefore, they overgeneralize it and add it to where it does not belong. A possible explanation might be *hypercorrection*, which occurs when a speaker tries to correct his linguistic behavior but goes too far in terms of overdoing it.

Rickford and McNair-Knox (1994) noticed that most studies on third person singular –s do not include internal grammatical constraints because the latter tend to be quite insignificant due to their irregularity. In his study carried out among Los Angeles speakers and the *Sunnysidaz* (an African-American speech community), Baugh (1979) showed that the following, as well as the preceding phonological environments surrounding third person singular –s did not follow any particular rules, thus emphasizing the importance of social factors, especially familiarity and Black street culture membership. The significance of familiarity among Black speakers was confirmed by a study carried out by Alim (2004) as well. Nevertheless, Rickford and McNair-Knox (1994) and Alim (2004) examined and found possible internal grammatical constraints that turned out to be of some significance. Rickford and McNair-Knox's (1994) study showed that the verb type (regular verbs, *have, do, don't* and *say*) was the most important grammatical constraint. Rickford's (1999: 128) analysis of *Foxy's interviews* exposed the effect of verb type, showing that *don't* and *say* attracted the third person –s absence more than regular verbs and *have* (Rickford, 1999: 128). Alim (2004) examined subject type and pointed to a parallelism between grammatical constraints on copula absence and the third person singular –s absence. Personal pronouns seem to favor absence of both features more than noun phrases and other pronouns. Alim (2004) concludes that subject and verb type need to be examined more thoroughly and that in general, internal grammatical constraints do not appear to be significant for the third person singular –s absence at this point, however, they remain a challenge open to future studies.

The Possessive –s Absence

The possessive –s may also be deleted, as in "Jack money" for SE "Jack's money." Possessive –s varies between the standard and dialectal variant, which means that speakers of Black English omit possessive –s only part of the time. Possession may also be indicated by *–of,* however, AAVE speakers also express it by placing the

name of the possessor in front of the possessed, e.g., *Take me to John crib*. However, Burling (1973: 50) points out that the loss of possessive –s in Black English does not leave a Standard English speaker in ambiguity because possession can be easily identified in other ways.

This particular feature is unique to Black English and cannot be found in any other White American dialects. It is predominantly used by working-class African Americans. Taking this into account, the feature may be perceived as a potential indicator of race and class in American speech community (Alim, 2004).

Linguists have not found any significant internal grammatical constraints because of the small number of the feature's occurrences which makes it difficult to determine linguistic patterns in the behavior of this variable.

The Plural –s Absence

Contemporary AAVE sometimes allows the absence of plural –s, as in "two dog" for SE "two dogs," or "them chair" for SE "them chairs." The numerals and quantifiers already mark the plural, however, this feature is rarely used. Unlike the possessive –s, the plural suffix might affect the meaning of the word and sentence if it is not accompanied by a numeral (Burling, 1973).

There are cases in which the use of plurals by Black American speakers differs respectively from SE. Irregular plurals may be regularized, as in "foots" for SE "feet," plural –s may be added to an irregular plural, as in "childrens," "mens." Dropping of final consonants in singular, which is otherwise a phonological feature of AAVE, may affect the plural forms: if *desk*, *test,* and *ghost* are pronounced as "dess," "tess," and "ghoss," their plural forms become "desses," "tesses," and "ghosses." Words that are frequently used with numbers occasionally delete the plural suffix, e.g., "five cent," "six year" (Burling, 1973).

In contemporary vernaculars, including AAVE, the plural –s suffix is almost always realized (Kessler, 1972; Labov et al., 1968; Wolfram, 1969). However, in Early African-American English (Early AAE), the plural –s marker was far more variable and thus absent more frequently. The phenomenon might be perceived as a "case of structural convergence" of contemporary AAVE to Standard English, as suggested by Poplack (2000: 74). Previous studies on this variable in contemporary AAVE have proposed three types of linguistic factors affecting its variability: 1) the principle of "nun-redundant pluralization" suggests that the plural –s marker is lost in grammatical environments where a numeral or any other plural determiner is present (Dillard, 1972, Stewart, 1966); 2) the plural suffix may be dropped or retained according to phonetic conditioning (Labov et al., 1968); 3) individual lexical preferences might reanalyze certain English count nouns into mass nouns (Labov et al., 1968; Wolfram, 1969). Semantic classification has been acknowledged to affect the plural –s variability. In early and modern English, the zero plural has been expressed by the process of *collectivization* which applies to particular noun classes: wild animals or animals hunted for food or sport (*lion, bear, giraffe*), nouns of weight (*pound, ton*), measure (*year, mile day*), and currency (*dollar, pound, cent*) (Poplack, 2000: 80). Relying on sources quoted by Poplack (2000: 86), the plural –s is almost exclusively omitted with the following lexical items: *foot, mile, year, gallon, pound, bushel,* and *month*. *Inch, ton, hour, week,* and *dollar* are treated inconsistently.

The three factors listed above affected the plural –s variability in Early AAE as well, however, the studies do not support these findings sufficiently. Wolfram (1969)

analyzed the AAVE plural –s absence in Detroit. The results of his study supported the nun-redundant pluralization principle, however, Kessler's (1972) study in Washington DC could not confirm Wolfram's findings. Labov et al. (1968) showed that a following consonantal environment elicited the plural –s absence in New York City, while Wolfram (1969) found a different phonological environment operating in Detroit. Possible internal constraints are still being analyzed, however, some results indicate that a following vowel does not allow plural –s absence (Rickford, 1999: 273). Various studies (Labov et al. 1968; Wolfram, 1969; Kessler 1972) have presented specific lexical items preferring the absence of plural marker, but again, they show lack of consistency (Poplack, 2000).

Rickford (1999: 273) sums up the results of previous studies among African-American speakers and concludes that the plural –s absence appears in relatively low frequency. According to Poplack (2000: 76), the plural –s absence ranges from 2 to 11 percent depending on the variety. Low frequency of the variable may be the reason for inconsistent findings, however, the same three linguistic factors presented above have been treated as affecting variability of plural –s suffix in contemporary AAVE.

Generalization of *Is* and *Was*

Speakers of Black English frequently employ the use of *is* and *was* which, in contrast to Standard English grammar, may be generalized to plural and second person subjects, thus producing examples such as "They *is* wicked" for SE "They are wicked," or "We *was* here" for SE "We were here" (Wolfram, 1993: 14).

Generalization of *is* and especially *was* appears to be a robust linguistic characteristic of contemporary AAVE. Possible variations of the form *be* include *you is, they is, we is*. The *was/were* variation does not collocate with personal pronouns only, but may also be used with full noun phrases and the existential *there,* e.g., "The books *was* different from the slates that we use," "Them people *was* good to me," and "There *was* nine years between me and my brother"[3] (Tagliamonte and Smith, 2000: 143).

Variation of *was* and *were* can be observed in English-based creoles, as well as in the earlier phases in the history of English, which might contribute to the future research on AAVE's origin. In fact, the use of *was* instead of *were* was a British English dialectal feature from the Middle English (Tagliamonte and Smith, 2000: 143, 155).

There are many reports of *was/were* variation in Great Britain and the United States. According to contemporary research, the use of *was* instead of *were* predominates in relatively isolated insular dialects (Tagliamonte and Smith, 2000).

Reports show that *was* can occur with all plural pronouns (Cheshire, 1982; Eisikovits, 1991; Feagin, 1979; Milroy and Milroy, 1993). The following examples demonstrate the use in first and third person plural and in second person singular. These uses may appear in contemporary dialects and in Early AAE.

a) We *was* in an ideal place for it (Southern United States, Alabama; Feagin, 1979: 204).
b) They *was* really friendly (Australia; Eisikovits, 1991: 250).

[3] Quotations come from varieties of Early African American English (Early AAE) which have been isolated from the contemporary inner city AAVE and have been spoken in North Preston Enclave, Guysborough enclave, and Guysborough Village in Nova Scotia.

c) You *was* with me, *wasn't* you? (Southern Britain, Reading; Cheshire, 1982: 44).

Plural noun phrases can appear with *was* as well.

a) Logs, sticks and rocks *was* rolling (Ozark and Appalachian English; Christian et al., 1988: 114).
b) The doors *was* closed and everything (Hyde County, North Carolina; Wolfram and Sellers (forthcoming)).

Contemporary literature reports about the frequent use of *was* in plural existential constructions, which does not depend on the location, urban, rural, or social status of the speaker (Atwood, 1953; Feagin, 1979; Meechan and Foley, 1994; Tagliamonte, 1998).

a) There *was* about twenty somethin' boys (Feagin, 1979: 207).
b) …to see if there *was* any inhabitants (Christian et al., 1988: 114).

According to Tagliamonte and Smith's (2000) analysis, negative contexts elicited a stronger realization of *was,* when compared to affirmative contexts. The authors suggest that negation might have been an internal grammatical constraint on *was,* however, this has not been discussed in the literature.

a) You *wasn't* allowed to use their toilets.
b) They *wasn't* in no comas (Tagliamonte and Smith, 2000: 157).

In sum, two internal grammatical factors affecting *was/were* variation have been put forward: *was* occurs more often with plural noun phrases than with pronouns (Feagin, 1979; Schilling-Estes and Wolfram, 1994; Wolfram and Sellers); *was* is favored in plural existentials (Christian et al., 1988; Eisikovits, 1991; Feagin, 1979; Montgomery, 1989).

Favorable Grammatical Environments: The Results of Analysis

I now explore internal constraints with each of the selected AAVE features. I first focus on quantitative variation of individual variables by introducing their frequencies of occurrences within the entire database: I report the number of standard and vernacular variants across the interviews of all ten interlocutors who have been dealt with in this study. Before analyzing the effects of preceding and following grammatical surroundings, it seems reasonable to asses the quantitative relevance of a particular variable. Accordingly, I exclude informants who produced an insignificant amount of tokens or who did not employ any cases of vernacular variants. Those linguistic environments which seem likely to stimulate the occurrence of a particular AAVE variant are then compared and related to previous research.

Table (1) compares the frequencies of third person singular –s deletion between the selected interviewees and shows that only Redman, Chuck D, Prodigy, B.B. King, and Winfrey displayed variation and are therefore to be included in the analysis of environmental conditioning.

Table (1): The overall frequencies of third person singular –s absence with individual interviewees

	Tokens absent/present	**Absence of third person singular -s** %
Redman	28/9	75.6
Chuck D	1/31	3.1
Oprah Winfrey	3/27	10
Prodigy	14/13	51.8
Queen Latifah	0/16	0
Colin Powell	0/22	0
Whoopi Goldberg	0/22	0
B.B. King	8/29	27.5
MC Lyte	0/36	0
Michelle Obama	0/50	0

Before interpreting the data in more detail, let me briefly revise the grammatical factors that supposedly affect the absence of third person singular –s and have been proposed by the previous studies. Alim (2004) claims that personal pronouns play the most notable role among subject types in third person –s variation while Rickford and McNair-Knox (1994) showed that the verb type (regular verbs*, have, do, don't,* and *say*) was the most important grammatical restriction. Moreover, Alim finds parallels with internal restrictions on copula deletion according to subject type, since both AAVE features tend to be more attracted to personal pronouns than to noun phrases and other pronouns. According to the following grammatical category, *don't* and *say* appear to elicit more absence of the third person suffix than regular verbs and *have* (Rickford, 1999: 128); however, Alim's (2004: 163) research exposed *want/wanna* as the primary internal factor amongst verb types, followed by *say* in second place.

Table (2): Third person singular –s absence with individual interviewees according to subject type

	Redman	**Prodigy**	**B.B. King**	**Winfrey**	**Chuck D**	***Average absence***
Subject type	tokens	tokens	tokens	tokens	tokens	
Personal pronouns	(8/2) 80%	(4/3) 57.1%	(4/9) 30.7%	(2/18) 10%	(0/2) 0%	**34.6%**
Other pronouns	(15/5) 75%	(6/4) 60%	(1/5) 16.6%	(1/2) 33.3%	(0/8) 0%	**48%**
Noun phrases	(5/2) 71.4%	(4/6) 40%	(2/7) 22.2%	(0/7) 0%	(1/11) 8.3%	**26%**
Adverbs	-	-	(1/0) 100*	-	-	-

NOTE: The numbers in parenthesis represent absent/present variants;
** The number of tokens is insignificant.*

The favorability of preceding grammatical environments in Table (2) parallels Alim's (2004: 163) study with Redman and B.B. King in that personal pronouns attract the omission of third person singular –s more than noun phrases or other pronouns. Although the percentage gaps between the categories of subject types with Redman do not appear to be vast, personal pronouns indeed show a slightly higher percentage rank of this feature. A calculation concerning adverbs with B.B. King results from the minimum number of deleted tokens and does not hold much weight statistically.

On the contrary, Prodigy's frequencies of –s dropping could not confirm the proposed pattern of internal restrictions, since other pronouns exhibit the highest rate of deletion. On the other hand, the difference in percentages between personal pronouns and other pronouns was minor, less than 3 percent. While Chuck D's only vernacular token occurred with a noun phrase, Winfrey's outcome showed preference for other pronouns.

The average percentages expose other pronouns (interrogative pronouns, indefinite pronouns, etc.) as a favorable grammatical category, which deviates from Alim's (2004) results. Thus far, I may only confirm the insignificance of internal constraints on third person –s absence according to subject type, as has been suggested by some previous researchers (Baugh, 1979).

I now present the variability of the feature according to the following grammatical category, the verb type.

Table (3): Third person singular –s absence with individual interviewees according to verb type

	Redman	**Prodigy**	**B.B. King**	**Winfrey**	**Chuck D**	***Average absence***
Verb type	tokens	tokens	tokens	tokens	tokens	
Irregular	(9/4)	(7/4)	(5/12)	(0/8)	(0/20)	
verbs	69.2%	63.3%	29.4%	0%	0%	**30%**
Regular	(5/5)	(4/7)	(1/6)	(0/5)	(0/7)	
verbs	50%	36.3%	14.2%	0%	0%	**25%**
do/don't	(11/0)	(3/1)	(1/3)	(0/6)	(0/3)	
	100%	75	25%	0%	0%	**53%**
say	(1/0)	(0/1)	-	(3/8)	-	
	100%*	0%		27.2%		**30%**
want/wanna	(2/0)	-	(1/0)	-	(1/1)	
	100%		100%*		50%	**80%**

The selection of verb types in Table (3) combines Rickford and McNair-Knox's (1994) and Alim's (2004) selections with the environments in which the tokens have occurred in my speech data. Alim's (2004: 163) results present *want/wanna* as the most suitable for omission, which could also be noticed in Table (3) according to the average absence. Regarding the individual informants, however, the results display *do/don't* as the category that favors third person –s absence with Redman and Prodigy. In B.B. King's case, *do/don't* forms fell slightly behind irregular verbs. Alim's (2004: 163) study provides a much lower rate of this AAVE feature with *do/don't*; however, this outcome correlates to Rickford's (1999: 128) analysis which exposed *don't* and *say* as the following environments that attracted the absence of the suffix more than regular verbs and *have*.

Overall, the average frequencies in Table (3) coincide with both Alim (2004) and Rickford's (1999) results, by displaying *want/wanna*, *do/don't,* and arguably *say* as the following environments which elicited higher percentages of third person –s absence than the remaining linguistic categories. Despite the fact that some linguists find environmental constraints on third person singular –s variation rather unimportant or indefinite, I documented relatively parallel outcomes according to the following grammatical environments: the average results generally confirmed the proposed patterns regarding the verb type, however, the data concerning the preceding linguistic category displayed less reliable results and call for further research.

Previous studies and analysis (Labov et al., 1968; Rickford and McNair-Knocks, 1994; Alim, 2004) report that the stylistic variation of possessive –s absence has been more or less insignificant according to both external identity constraints and internal grammatical constraints, mostly because of extreme rarity of the feature's appearances. The latter was also the case in this study since only two out of ten informants exhibited a certain amount of omission, as shown in Table (4).

Table (4): The overall frequencies of possessive –s absence with individual interviewees

	Tokens absent/present	**The possessive –s absence** %
Redman	1/0	100*
Chuck D	0/7	0
Oprah Winfrey	0/3	0
Prodigy	6/4	60
Queen Latifah	0/6	0
Colin Powell	0/1	0
Whoopi Goldberg	0/4	0
B.B. King	0/7	0
MC Lyte	0/2	0
Michelle Obama	0/4	0

I now focus on internal variation in Redman and Prodigy's interviews.

Table (5): Possessive –s variation in Redman and Prodigy's interviews according to the preceding grammatical environment

Possessive –s	**Tokens** absent/present	**Absence**
Other pronouns	4/1	80%
Noun phrases	3/3	50%

Table (6): Possessive –s variation in Redman and Prodigy's interviews according to the following grammatical environment

Possessive –s	**Tokens** absent/present	**Absence**
Other pronouns	0/0	0%
Noun phrases	6/3	66.6%
Adverbs	1/0	100%*
No environment	0/1	0%

The omission of the nominal possessive according to the preceding category shows preference for other pronouns (relative and indefinite pronouns) while noun phrases display most deletion as the following environment. A hundred percent absence with adverbs should not be considered significant since the result is based on a single token. The respective results are merely a demonstration of internal analysis of the variant since these cases are too few for determining environmental constraints.

Overall, I may unfortunately confirm the issue that has been put forward by the previous researchers: for the most part, the lack of variation and the low frequency of possessive –s omission disabled extended search for favorable grammatical surroundings and therefore prevented considering internal restrictions.

The usage of the plural –s absence in AAVE tends to be low (Rickford, 1999) since this is not a major variable for speakers of contemporary Black English in terms of its frequency of occurrences. Accordingly, I had been expecting a similar outcome which did not allow me to highlight any significant internal constraints. Only three cases of plural suffix omission were found in the entire data set, produced by Winfrey, Prodigy, and B.B. King, as shown in Table (7). The remaining informants did not exhibit any AAVE variants of the plural –s variable.

Table (7): The overall frequencies of possessive –s absence with individual interviewees

Plural –s	**Tokens** absent/present	**Absence**
Winfrey	1/61	1.6%
Prodigy	1/110	0.9%
B.B. King	1/29	3%

The plural marker was deleted in the following cases: "the last two letter," "Infamous Record," and "a lot of the blues singer." The first and the last example follow the principle of non-redundant pluralization where the absence of the plural suffix is preceded by a numeral or other plural determiner (Dillard, 1972; Stewart, 1966). In terms of semantic classification suggested by Poplack (2000: 80, 86), "letters," "records," and "singers" were not listed as lexical preferences for the omission. Nevertheless, certain parallels can be drawn with previous studies analyzing phonetic conditioning of this variable. In their New York City study, Labov et al. (1968) found that a following consonant stimulated the omission of the plural suffix, while some researchers suggest that a following vowel prohibits the plural –s absence (Rickford, 1999: 273). The first example, "the last two letter," is positioned at the end of the sentence and has therefore no following environment; however, the two remaining cases are indeed followed by a consonant, "Infamous Record first…" and "a lot of the blues singer when…"

Unfortunately, this outcome could only confirm the results of the previous findings which show low frequencies of this AAVE feature and its distributional insignificance for the analysis of internal constraints. Apparently, the plural –s suffix is almost always realized in contemporary vernaculars including AAVE (Kessler, 1972; Labov et al., 1968; Wolfram, 1969).

Generalizations of *is* and *was* tend to be salient linguistic characteristics of contemporary AAVE; however, their usage is not exclusively tied to Black English only. The proportions of tokens and related frequencies in Table (8) show that six out of ten interlocutors used *is* instead of *are*. My attention will again be devoted only to the informants who displayed variation in order to present favorable grammatical surroundings for the occurrence of the informal variant.

Table (8): Generalization of is with individual interviewees in the entire data set

	Tokens is/are	**Generalization of *is*** %
Redman	6/11	35.2
Chuck D	5/12	41.6
Oprah Winfrey	2/28	6.6
Prodigy	8/4	66.6
Queen Latifah	0/17	0
Colin Powell	0/38	0
Whoopi Goldberg	0/25	0
B.B. King	4/16	20
MC Lyte	4/19	17.3
Michelle Obama	0/64	0

I have not encountered any studies on internal conditioning of the generalization of *is* and will therefore now presnet the informants' use of the variant according to the preceding grammatical categories.

Table (9): Generalization of is with individual interviewees according to subject type

Generalization of *is*	**Personal pronouns**	**Existentials**	**Relative pronouns**	**Noun phrases**	**Demonstratives**
	is/are	is/are	is/are	is/are	is/are
Redman	(0/9)	(1/0)	(5/0)	(0/1)	(0/1)
	0%	100*	100%	0%	0%
Chuck D	(0/4)	(3/0)	(1/3)	(1/0)	-
	0%	100%	25%	100%*	
Winfrey	(0/22)	(2/5)	(0/1)	-	-
	0%	28.5%	0%		
Prodigy	-	-	-	(6/1)	(2/3)
				85.7%	40%
B.B. King	(0/9)	(1/2)	(1/0)	(2/3)	(1/1)
	0%	33.3%	100%*	40%	50%
MC Lyte	(0/16)	(4/1)	(0/1)	-	(0/1)
	0%	80%	0%		0%
Average	**0%**	**57.8%**	**58%**	**64%**	**33%**

NOTE: The numbers in parenthesis denote the number of tokens for is/are.

Table (9) shows that nominal phrases, relative pronouns, and plural existentials elicited the highest frequencies of generalization of *is*. These subject types deserve attention in future studies on this variable's grammatical constraints. I now turn to a related AAVE feature which exhibits variation of the same auxiliary verb in the past tense, i.e., the generalization of *was*.

Like the usage of *is* instead of *are*, the generalization of *was* is not unique to AAVE but can be observed in English-based creoles, Early English, and as a vernacular characteristic from Middle English (Tagliamonte and Smith, 2000: 143, 155). Interestingly, even fewer interlocutors exhibited *was/were* variation than they did with the previous variable; however, the frequencies of *was* generalization were notably higher with the majority of interviewees as is shown in the table below.

Table (10): Generalization of was with individual interviewees in the entire data set

	Tokens was/were	**Generalization of *was*** %
Redman	4/0	100
Chuck D	3/1	75
Oprah Winfrey	1/15	6.25
Prodigy	35/1	97.2
Queen Latifah	0/7	0
Colin Powell	0/22	0
Whoopi Goldberg	0/9	0
B.B. King	25/7	78.1
MC Lyte	0/8	0
Michelle Obama	0/24	0

Table (11) presents the arrangements of *was* usage according to the preceding grammatical categories with the informants who employed the respective non-standard variant.

Table (11): Generalization of was with individual interviewees according to subject type

Generalization of *was*	**Personal pronouns** was/were	**Existentials** was/were	**Relative pronouns** was/were	**Noun phrases** was/were	**Possessive pronouns** was/were	**Demonstratives** was/were
Redman	(2/0) 100%	-	-	(2/0) 100%	-	-
Chuck D	(3/0) 100%	-	-	(0/1) 0%	-	-
Winfrey	(0/12) 0%	(1/0) 100%*	(0/2) 0%	-	(0/1) 0%	-
Prodigy	(29/1) 96.6%	(1/0) 100%*	-	(5/0) 100%	-	-
B.B. King	(14/4) 77.7%	(5/1) 83%	(0/1) 0%	(4/1) 80%	-	(2/0) 100%*
Average	**73.8%**	**87.5%**	**0%**	**84.6%**	**0%**	**100%***

NOTE: The numbers in parenthesis denote the number of tokens for was/were.

Previous studies have proposed two internal factors influencing *was/were* variation: *was* prefers plural noun phrases over pronouns (Feagin, 1979; Schilling-Estes and Wolfram, 1994; Wolfram and Sellers; in Tagliamonte and Smith, 2000), and it is generally favored in plural existentials (Christian et al., 1988; Eisikovits, 1991; Feagin, 1979; Montgomery, 1989).

The results in Table (11) clearly show preference of *was* variants with noun phrases, personal pronouns, and existentials. Moreover, noun phrases attract higher percentages of this feature than personal pronouns and relative pronouns, which coincides precisely with the favorable linguistic environments that have been suggested by previous researchers.

Contemporary research also suggests that negative contexts attract a stronger realization of *was,* when compared to affirmative contexts (Tagliamonte and Smith, 2000). This is only loosely supported by this analysis since there were only two such instances of negation, the first occurring in Redman's and the second in Prodigy's transcripts ("You wasn't lying," and "They wasn't in it"). Both negatives had no

counterparts in the form of *weren't*, meaning that negation attracted the use of *was* at a hundred percent, which indicates the suggested direction.

Conclusion

This analysis of internal grammatical constraints on the selected features of AAVE shows the following results: I documented relatively parallel outcomes to the previous research regarding the third person singular –s absence according to verb type. *Want/wanna*, *do/don't,* and *say* (in this particular order) elicited higher percentages of third person –s absence than the remaining linguistic categories, which coincides with Alim (2004) and Rickford's (1999) findings. My results therefore confirm the proposed patterns regarding the following grammatical category; however, the data concerning the preceding linguistic category displayed less reliable results and call for further research.

Some researchers (Labov et al., 1968; Rickford and McNair-Knocks, 1994; Alim, 2004) claim that the stylistic variation of possessive –s absence has been more or less unimportant regarding both external identity factors and internal grammatical constraints because of the extreme rarity of the variant's occurrences. Low frequencies of this feature were reported in this study as well, which prevented an extended search for favorable grammatical surroundings. Nevertheless, I managed to indicate that noun phrases, following the grammatical environment, attracted most cases of possessive –s omission. Similarly, the distributional insignificance of plural –s absence did not allow me to highlight any indicators of internal conditioning since I encountered only three cases of plural suffix omission in the entire data set. Accordingly, I could only confirm that the rate of absence of the plural marker tends to be low (Rickford, 1999).

Nominal phrases, relative pronouns, and plural existentials elicited the highest usage of generalization of *is*. A related feature, the generalization of *was*, showed preference for personal pronouns, noun phrases, and existentials. Furthermore, noun phrases elicited higher ranks of *was* than personal pronouns, which additionally supports the results of previous studies (Feagin, 1979; Schilling-Estes and Wolfram, 1994; Wolfram and Sellers; in Tagliamonte and Smith, 2000). Both related features, generalization of *is* and *was,* have shown a tendency to often collocate with plural noun phrases and existentials.

Finally, the linguistic patterns and environmental constraints in the use of AAVE features contribute to a better understanding and a wider acknowledgement of the fact that African-American English is a regular and systematic form of vernacular language. The results of this study generally confirm the previous findings on grammatical conditioning in AAVE. Internal constraints on the omission of nominal possessive and plural –s suffix remain inconclusive and call for further research. Similarly, a larger amount of data is needed to test my ideas regarding generalization of *is*, where I managed to indicate the preference of the feature's occurrences with plural existentials and nominal phrases. These subject types deserve attention in future studies on this variable's grammatical constraints.

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