

African-American Vernacular English (AAVE)

The Writing Center at North Park University

-Tierra Hatcher August 24 2006

While walking around on North Park's campus, you will hear multiple dialects. One of the most common is African American Vernacular English (AAVE), otherwise known as Ebonics. Many people might think this is a rather loose way of speaking but, on the contrary, this dialect has rules and regularities just as Standard American English does. Throughout this paper I will examine the grammar of a few statements that reflect the way the dialect is used.

- **The usage of *ain't***

"It *ain't* my fault; I did everything the right way."

The word *ain't* is common among many dialects. *Ain't* is a contraction for "*am not*," "*is not*," "*are not*," "*has not*," "*have not*", but it's said to be used in the habitual speech of the less educated. In the 18th century, it was acceptable, even in England; those roots have remained a part of AAVE longer than in other dialects of English.

- **The usage of *dem***

"Thomas *an dem* went to the store to buy juice."

"Give me *dem* cups over there."

The word *dem* is used in AAVE as a way of marking plurality. By placing "*an dem*" after a person's name, you are referring to others that are in association with that person. Another way of marking plurality with *dem* is by putting it before the noun. Not only does the *dem* indicate that there are more cups, but it specifies which cups.

- **The usage of *s* endings and the present-tense verb with a third person-singular subject**

"It *seem* like the world has gone to hell in a hand basket."

"She *have* three kids and she is only twenty-one years old."

Unlike the Standard English rule of the *s* ending for a present-tense verb with a third person singular subject, AAVE does not treat the third person-singular subjects as different from verbs with other subjects. As you can see, the *s* that is required on *seem* to have a present-tense verb with a third person-singular subject has been omitted. This is also seen in the second sentence where *she have* is used rather than *she has*.

- **The usage of *be*:**

"Terra *be* takin' the trash out."

"People *be* crazy."

or

"People 0 crazy."

In AAVE, there are two ways to use *be*: (1) invariant, which doesn't vary, and (2) conjugated or inflected, which varies in form. The invariant habitual *be* is most known, but least understood. This form of *be* describes only an event that's performed regularly, the equivalent of Standard American

English continuous form. When “Terra *be* takin’ the trash out” is contrasted with the non-habitual “Terra takin’ the trash out”, an event is being described but the first shows that it happens as a regularity. The conjugated or inflected *be* has the ability to allow the *is* or *are* to disappear, yielding a “zero copula”. When using the zero copula, you are only allowed to leave out *is* and *are*, making it very restrictive. For example, you cannot delete *am* from “*I am*,” however this is often contracted to “*I’m*”.

- **The usage of *Been* and *been*:**

“*I Been* knew him.”

“We had *been* married.”

There are two types of *been*: the stressed (*Been*) and unstressed (*been*). *Been* is used to say something is in existence now and will be in existence later. For example, “*I Been* knew him.” The *Been* implies that he knows the person now and will continue to know him. Whereas, “We had *been* married”, refers to a time that they were married but may not still be married. It’s confusing to those who do not speak the vernacular.

- Toni Morrison’s “five present tenses” of African American Vernacular English

1. **Present progressive:** She *0* talkin’.
2. **Present habitual progressive:** She *be* talkin’.
3. **Present intensive habitual progressive:** She *be* steady talkin’.
4. **Present perfect progressive:** She *been* talkin’.
5. **Present perfect progressive with remote inception:** She *Been* talkin’.

Standard American English

1. She is talking.
2. She is usually talking.
3. She is usually talking in an intensive, sustained manner.
4. She has been talking but isn’t now.
5. She has been talking for a while and is still talking.

Looking at the two sets of ways to say the same thing, you notice that with Standard American English you have to add adverbs and explanations, whereas with AAVE, you know what they are saying.

As you can see, African American Vernacular English is not just something spoken by the uneducated but rather it’s a dialect like any other with its own rules. You may not hear exactly what I have said used on North Park’s campus because my objective has not been to be exhaustive; I wanted to just give a little exposure to the topic. If you would like more information on this, a good book is *Spoken Soul* by John Russell Rickford and Russell John Rickford.

References

1. Rickford, John Russell. *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English*. John Wiley & Son Inc., 2000.
2. Rickford, John R. [Suite for Ebony and Phonics](http://faculty.ed.umuc.edu/~jmatthew/articles/proebonart.html). 1997. 24 August 2006.

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