African American Vernacular English (AAVE) Grammar[1]

1.0 General

As with the outline of AAVE phonology, this guide describes some of the main features of AAVE grammar but is not exhaustive. I again note that all the features discussed here are variable. No AAVE speaker uses all these features on all occasions.

1.1 Tense and Aspect System.

AAVE, like the Caribbean Creoles, has an elaborate system for indicating verbal aspect. In this section I outline in very basic terms what is meant be tense and aspect and use SE sentence to do this. I feel this is necessary before moving to discuss AAVE since SE is the variety in which we are all competent. The discussion of SE tense and aspect is included only to help clarify the issues and NOT as a norm by which AAVE may be judged.

Aspect refers to the way in which the internal organization of an event or action is described by a verb and other elements in a sentence. Tense refers to the way in which an event, state or action is located in time (usually in relation to the time of speaking). Typically a language uses a variety of means for expressing these relations. Consider the following sentence:

I was walking through Hyde Park yesterday.

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[1] This summary draws on the following work on AAVE (examples from Guyanese Creole are from my own data collected 1994-1996). I have also incorporated the extensive comments of Don Winford.

Bailey, G. (1993) 'A perspective on African American English.' In D. Preston ed. *American Dialect Research*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Baugh, J. (1980) 'A reexamination of the Black English Copula.' in W. Labov ed. *Locating Language in Time and Space*. New York: Academic Press.

Baugh, J. (1983) *Black Street Speech: Its history, structure and survival*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Fasold, R. (1981) 'The relation between Black and White speech in the South.' *American Speech*.

Fasold, R and W. Wolfram (1970) 'Some linguistic features of Negro Dialect.' in Fasold and Shuy eds. *Teaching Standard English in the Inner City*. Center for Applied Linguistics.

Howe, D. (1997) 'Negation and the history of African American English.' *Language Variation and Change*.

Labov, W. (1972) *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Mitchell-Kernan, C (1971) *Language Behavior in a Black Urban Community*. Monographs of the Language-Behavior Research Lab, Berkeley.

Rickford, J. (1975) 'Carrying the new wave into syntax: The case of Black English BIN. In Fasold and Shuy eds. *Studies in Language Variation*, Washington DC: Georgetown University Press.

Rickford, J. (1977) 'The question of prior creolization in Black English.' In A Valdman (ed.) *Pidgin and Creole Linguistics.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Rickford, J (1995) 'Regional and Social Variation in Language.' in Hornberger and McKay eds. *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching*, Cambridge: C.U.P..

Sells, Peter, Rickford, John, & Wasow, Thomas (1995) 'An Optimality Theoretic Approach to Variation in negative inversion in AAVE.' In J. Arnold, R. Blake, B. Davidson, J. Solomon, and S. Schwenter (eds.) *Proceedings of the twenty-third annual meeting on new ways of analyzing variation* (NWAV-23). Stanford: Center for the Study of Language and Information.

Spears, A. (1982) 'The Black English semi-auxiliary come.' *Language*, 58(4), 850-872.

Note first of all that the walking through Hyde Park seems to have occurred prior to the event of speaking. The form of the auxiliary verb BE (was) indicates the past nature of the action. The adverbial "yesterday" also signals information about when the event took place. What about aspect. Basically there are two ways in which aspect is regularly expressed. In the first case, a given verb has its own inherent kind of aspect. This is sometimes called lexicalized aspect or Aktionsart. We won't be too concerned with this but it is good to have some sense of the way it works. Basically, the actions and events that verbs refer to have their own distinctive qualities. Consider the following verbs for instance:

Walk
Know
Decide
Arrive

These verbs belong to different classes in terms of their Aktionsart or inherent lexicalized aspect. Let's call them action, state, accomplishment and achievement verbs respectively. You'll notice that they have different properties which can be distinguished through various kinds of tests which we won't get into here (the interested reader is directed to Bernard Comrie's book Aspect or to Lyons' Semantics, V.2 pp. 711-718). We will be primarily concerned with the distinction between dynamic (which includes accomplishment and achievement verbs in the discussion of creole verb forms) and stative verbs. In our example sentence we note the verb "walk" is dynamic rather than stative.

Unlike stative verbs, dynamic verbs, as in our example sentence above, can occur with progressive aspect. This aspectual form is not included in the verb itself but it is expressed, in English, by the combination of preverbal auxiliary Be and the verbal inflection -ing.

I **was** walk**ing**

The progressive aspect indicates, as it names suggests, that the action or event is 'in progress.' Although, because our example sentence is in the past tense progressive, this may seem somewhat confusing, it is clearly illustrated by adding a complement such as the following to the example sentence:

I was walking through Hyde Park yesterday when I happened to see Al.

In order to the "progressive" sense of the verb we have to put ourselves in the narrative time. It was while he was in the process of walking that he saw Al. I hope this helps clarify the issue of tense vs. aspect. If you are still not sure let me know and I will give you something to read.

In SE and other English dialects, besides the progressive, verbs may also be in the "perfect." which is usually indicated with the auxiliary **have**. The perfect locates a situation within a period of time beginning in the past and extending forward to the present. Thus consider the following:

I have walked three miles and now I'm hungry.

Here the walking started sometime in the past and extended up until the present moment. Note of course that it also possible to have a past perfect just as it is possible to have a past progressive.

I had walked three miles and I was hungry.

1.2.0 Tense and Aspect in AAVE

AAVE makes the same general distinctions of tense and aspect as does SE in addition to a few that are pretty much unique to AAVE. The following table compares the verb paradigms for progressive and perfect in AAVE and SE.

	SE	AAVE
present	He walks	He walk
past	He walked	He walk(ed)
present progressive	He is walking	He (is) walking
past progressive	He was walking	He was walking
perfect	He has walked	He done walked
past perfect	He had walked	He had done walked

Notice that SE and AAVE make the same distinctions here but they have different means for doing so. AAVE uses **done** to express prefect and had done to express past perfect.

1.2.1 A note about *done*

Done is used in similar ways as above in other dialects of non-standard English. People do not fully agree on the status of **done** in AAVE. Although in a majority of cases it seems to serve as a "perfect of result" similar to SE have, it is also used to express completion. It seems in these cases to have perfective meanings (see Green 1998). Green offers the following sentence to show the way in which **done** is associated specifically with completion:

Look, I done cooked a turkey!
"Look, I just cooked a turkey."

(For more discussion of **done** see, Green 1998:47-48 and Edwards 1991)

1.2.2 Deletion of *have*

In SE, in some contexts, **have** can be contracted becoming /v/. Thus "I have been here " becomes "I've been here." In AAVE, the contracted form can be deleted so that "I've been here" becomes "I __ been here."

1.2.3 Past Participle

In MUSE, the past participle is usually formed by the addition of the suffix /-ed/. Past participles are thus often identical with past forms (e.g. "I had walked" and "I walked"). In the case of some irregular verbs, however, the participle and simple past forms are distinguished. For example, the simple past for the verb *to take* is *took* as in "They took it," the participle is *taken* as in "They have taken it." In AAVE, one form is often used for both functions. Thus, AAVE allows "They taken it" and "They have taken it." In this example, the participle form is used for the simple past. In other cases, it is the simple past form which is generalized to serve both functions: thus "They came" and "They have came." In the case of some verbs, there is significant variation across different speakers. For example, some AAVE speakers use *done* (the participle) and some use *did* (the simple past) for both functions. So all of the following are possible AAVE sentences: "They done it," "They have done it," "They did it," "They have did it."

1.2.4 Stressed *bin*

This is a unique item in AAVE. It does not occur in other dialects of English in the United States and is probably often misinterpreted by non-AAVE speakers. For some older speakers, the meaning of *bin* (been) depends on whether the verb it accompanies is dynamic or stative. Dynamic verbs describe actions or events which have beginnings and endings (for example, *run*, *eat*, *sleep*). Stative verbs describe states such as *know*, *believe*. With dynamic verbs, *bin* indicates a remote time in which the event or action took place. For example, in "She *bin* tell me that" the speaker indicates that he was told "that" a long time ago. With statives, *bin* indicates that a distantly initiated state is still in force or is relevant. So the now rare, AAVE "I *bin* know you, you know" is roughly translated as "I have known you for a long time and still do" in MUSE. This use of BIN with stem forms of stative verbs is now rare but is not uncommon in Gullah.

Stressed BIN occur with a range of different complements. Consider the following sentences:

BIN with verbal complements

(a.) He BIN eating
"He has been eating for a long time."

(b.) He have BIN eating
"He has been eating for a long time."

(c.) He BIN ate
"He ate a long time ago."

(d.) He have BIN ate
"He ate a long time ago.'

(e.) He had BIN ate
"He had eaten a long time ago."

(f.) He BIN done ate
"He finished eating a long time ago."
(g.) He have BIN done ate
"He finished eating a long time ago."
(h.) He had BIN done ate
"He had already eaten a long time ago."

<u>BIN with non-verbal complements</u>
(i.) He BIN a preacher
"He has been a preacher for a long time."
(j.) That house BIN white
"That house has been white for a long time."
(k.) That dress BIN in the closet.
"That dress has been in the closet for a long time."
(l.) His mail BIN here.
"His mail has been here for a long time."

In many cases the AAVE stressed BIN is misinterpreted by non-AAVE speakers. This happens it seems because AAVE sentences with BIN superficially resemble rather different SE sentences. This is most clearly the case for sentences such as the following:

m. He BIN a preacher
n. That house BIN white.
o. He BIN here.
p. He BIN married.

For non-AAVE speakers, such sentences may appear to be derived from,

m'. He has been a preacher (but now he is not).
n'. That house has been white (now it's red).
o'. He has been here before (but not continuously)
p'. He has been married (and now he is getting married again).

through common phonological processes of contraction (38-39), and the sibilant deletion, (39-37).

has --> s --> 0

(see Labov 1969). But this derivational analysis cannot account for all instance of bin in AAVE. For instance the following.

The man [$_{vp}$ been married [$_{np}$ the woman]]
* The man [$_{Infl}$ has [$_{vp}$ been married [$_{np}$ the woman]]]

Despite this impossibility, the point is that non-AAVE speakers often hear BIN as part of a "has been" construction, often the only kind that are allowed in their dialect. Very often this reverses the meaning of sentence entirely.

Rickford (1975) researched the way in which white and black Americans interpreted the sentence "She *bin* married" and found a striking difference. While black Americans understood the sentence to mean "She got married along time ago, and still is," white speakers interpreted it as "she has been married but now she's not." Thus, when Rickford asked, "Do you get the idea that she's married now?"

Blacks: 23 of 25 said yes
Whites: 8 of 25 said yes

It should also be noted that although the dynamic-stative distinction (which we saw above has an important effect on the interpretation of sentences with BIN in AAVE) does not control the grammar of MUSE, it is of central importance to Caribbean Creoles. This said, there is no comparable usage of *bin* in Caribbean creoles. Thus, consider the following from Guyanese Creole:

mi *bin* gat wan dog, "I had a dog (but may not still have it)"
mi *don* gat wan dog, "I already have a dog (still has the dog but not remote)"

compare the possible AAVE sentence

I *bin* have a dog, "I have a dog and have had it for a long time."

1.3 Third singular present tense marker

In MUSE, third singular present tense verbs take a suffix /-s/. This suffix marks person (third person), number (singular), and tense (present), although all this information is available from other parts of the sentence. It is thus a somewhat odd grammatical form. The paradigm for MUSE is as follows:

Singular	**Plural**
I walk	We walk
You walk	You walk
He walk**s**; The man walk**s**	They walk; The men walk

SE paradigm for present tense verbs (person/number inflection)

AAVE does not have this grammatical irregularity. Thus the third singular form is usually "He walk." It is important to note that this is a grammatical difference between two varieties and is not the result of leaving something off.

1.3.1 auxiliary *don't*

The absence of the /-s/ suffix in third person present forms (see above) affects the realization the negative form *do + not*. In MUSE, this is realized as *doesn't* in third singular present tense context (e.g. "He doesn't go to church") In AAVE, because there is no /-s/ suffix for third person singular forms *do + not*, this sentence would be "He don't go to church"). While in AAVE the absence of *doesn't* is part of a more general pattern (the absence of third person present tense suffix /-s/ generally), in other non-MUSE varieties *don't* occurs without the more general patterns (e.g. one find sentences like "He walks" but also "He don't walk").

1.3.2 *have* and *do*

Similarly, the absence of /-s/ suffix affects *have* and *do*. Because there is no /-s/ suffix in AAVE, MUSE forms like *has* and *does* do not often occur. Thus, in AAVE, sentences like "He have a new car" and "He always do the right thing" are acceptable.

1.4 Future

1.4.1 *gonna*

AAVE often indicates a future tense with the form *gonna*. In MUSE, it is usual for *is* or *are* to precede *gonna*. However, in AAVE, there is a rule which deletes this *is* or *are* (called a copula - see below) and this rule operates very often when these elements precede *gonna*. The result is sentences such as "He gonna go." The fact that *is* and *are* are almost always absent before *gonna* might lead one to believe that the AAVE form *gonna* is fundamentally different from the MUSE form *is/are going to* and is, in fact, a single auxiliary like *can* in MUSE or AAVE. But AAVE *gonna* does not behave like auxiliaries in general. In this area, AAVE is more like MUSE than it is like the Caribbean Creoles in which the future marker *go* or *gon* is an auxiliary which operates independently of *is* and *are*.

In AAVE, *gonna* is pronounced in a number of different ways. When *gonna* appears with the subject *I* there are three ways in which it can be pronounced:

1. *mana* "I'mana see you."
2. *mon* "I'mon see you."
3. *ma* "I'ma see you."

When the subject is something other than *I,* the usual form is *gon,* as in "he gon see you."

1.4.2 *will*

Will is also used in AAVE to indicate future tense. As in other varieties, *will* can be contracted in AAVE to '*ll*. In AAVE, it can also be deleted, most often if the following word starts with a labial consonant (a labial consonant is one produced with the lips, such as *m, b, p*). Since the verb *be* starts with a *b*, forms such as "he be here pretty soon" where the *will* has been contracted and then deleted are quite possible. Such cases where *be* occurs in future contexts need

to be distinguished from the use of *be* to indicate a habitual meaning. Usually the context (the "pretty soon") is sufficient to distinguish the two.

1.5 Other markers of tense and aspect

1.5.1 Invariant *be*

A very different explanation is required for sentences like "He be there everyday." Here, *be* does not indicate a future event and nothing (like "will" etc.) has been deleted. Rather, *be* in such sentences is used to indicate a habitual event or action or an "event distributed intermittently in time." This kind of *be* used to be called "distributive *be,*" but it is now more usual to call it "invariant or habitual *be*." It is a very important and interesting part of AAVE. For one thing, this *be* does not occur in MUSE although it does seem to parallel, to some extent, similar constructions in Northern Hiberno English (varieties of English in Ireland). The use of *be* in AAVE thus provides evidence of contact between speakers of these two dialects (as we will see later in the course). Furthermore, there is some evidence that the specific use of *be* has changed over time. It appears that *be* is gradually acquiring a more and more specialized meaning. Thus some older AAVE speakers and some speakers of Southern White non-standard English use be/bes as a copula (equivalent to is/are in SE). But younger speakers tend to use *be* not as a copula but as marker of aspect indicating habituality. Also, the use of habitual *be* seems to be increasing and it has therefore been used as evidence to support claims of divergence. Finally, *be* is an item of AAVE grammar that people are very much aware of and therefore it tends to get discussed a lot and is one of things that non-native speakers of AAVE pick up on and use when they are consciously trying to use AAVE

Invariant *be* is not a deviation of *am* or *are* (that is, conjugated forms of *to be*). In fact, it contrasts with these forms and has a meaning. It should be noted that some West African languages (along with Caribbean Creoles) have a habitual category in their system of aspect marking. Many Caribbean Creoles have a contrast between a "zero" copula and a habitual *doz* + *be*. This is remarkably similar to the pattern in AAVE in which a variably zero copula is contrasted with a *be*. Thus Gullah has constructions such as (Rickford 1975):

She *doz be* sick. "She is usually sick."

Doz often reduces, so that what is pronounced is

She *z be* sick.

or often

She *be* sick.

The arguments for divergence which use invariant *be* as evidence are based on research done in Texas in both rural and urban contexts (Bailey 1993). The researchers found that when they divided the AAVE speaking population into four groups they could detect changes in the

distribution and function of invariant *be*. In their analysis they divided the population into four groups:

1. urban teens and preteens (11-15)
2. elderly rural and urban informants (over 60)
3. a group of former slaves born between 1844-1864
4. rural teens and preteens

While members of all four groups used the same set of forms which included *am, are, be, is, 0*. The researchers found a striking difference in the way these forms were used. The context that was important was the one before *V+ing* (such as *go*+ing, *eat*+ing, *work*+ing etc. as in "She be working.") In the Texas population, children tended to use *be* for durative and habitual actions:

she be working. "She works all the time/regularly."

but used, 0 for actions of limited duration:

she working "She is at work right now."

However, members of the groups classified as adults (group 2 & 3) made no systematic semantic distinction between *be* and 0. Either form could be used in either context. This is one of the most important findings for the "divergence hypothesis" so we'll discuss it in class. However, you might want to think about it for a while. What are some possible problems with such claims?

1.5.2 Future perfect *be done*

Be done can be used to express what is called the future perfect. For example the MUSE sentence "She will have had her baby" can be expressed in AAVE as "She be done had her baby" (see Baugh 1983, pp.77-80). Another common interpretation of *be done* is "be usually already V-ed" as in "She be done finished her homework before it gets dark every day" = "she's usually (already) finished her homework before dark etc.". Here we have a combination of habitual *be* and perfect *done*.

1.5.3 Immediate future *finna*

This item, *finna*, marks an action as imminent or as about to happen. For instance "He finna go" is equivalent to SE "He's just about to go."

1.5.4 Intensified continuative marker *steady*

The item *steady* can be used to mark actions that occur consistently or persistently, as in "Ricky Bell be steady steppin in them number nines" (Baugh 1983: p. 86). Note that this form resembles MUSE *steadily* as in "He is steadily running up a big tab." Linguists have proposed that such forms are camouflaged because while there is an obvious resemblance to MUSE "steadily" and some overlap in meaning, the AAVE form is also distinctive. In AAVE the subject

of the sentence which includes *steady* must be animate and specific. Thus the following sentence is not acceptable in AAVE because the subject (though animate) is nonspecific:

*A boy be steady talkin

Note that, in contrast, MUSE *steadily* can occur with nonanimate, nonspecific subjects as in "Somewhere a pot is steadily boiling." Furthermore while both *steadily* and *steady* imply continuous action, MUSE *steadily* implies calmness and control which contrasts with the use of *steady* is often used to express intense, vigorous and often "out-of-control" actions.

Don Winford expresses some doubt about this interpretation of *steady* in AAVE (which is originally from Baugh's article on the subject and is also presented in his book). In response to an earlier version of this summary Winford wrote:

> I kind of doubt this interpretation of "steady" as expressing "intense ... out-of-control actions". "Steady" is part of my TE (Trinidadian English) dialect, and we often use it to express indignation, but this is only one (discourse-related) use. It is just as often used to refer to persistent or durative situations, without connotations of disapproval. I suspect we need more data from natural AAVE to see whether this isn't true of AAVE as well.

Look for examples of steady in AAVE and try to determine if the "out-of-control" component is really necessary.

1.5.5 modal semi-auxiliary *come*

In AAVE, c*ome* can be used to express the speaker's indignation about an action or event as in:

He come walkin' in here like he own the damn place.

Again the form is camouflaged in so far as it is "phonologically similar or identical to forms in the base language (the source of most of the lexical items), but [ ] (is) used with different semantic values" (Spears 1982). Even very standard varieties of AAVE may include a substantial number of camouflaged grammatical differences from SE. In the case of AAVE *come,* what is distinctive is the use of *come* to express moral indignation as opposed to MOTION. This contrast can be seen in sentences where the modal *come* (expressing moral indignation) combines with a motion verb:

She come going in my room - didn't knock or nothing.

Come and *go* imply movement in different directions but this is a perfectly acceptable sentence in AAVE with a well defined meaning.

1.6 Copula deletion

Copula refers to forms of the English verb *to be*. The present tense copula paradigm in MUSE is as follows:

I	am	we	are
you	are	you	are
he/she/it	is	they	are

MUSE paradigm for present tense copula

A well known feature of AAVE is that the copula may be deleted. This has been extensively studied so what I say here is basically a recapitulation of several works on the subject, some of which we will discuss in class. There is still a good deal of disagreement on the subject. For purposes of exposition I have chosen to give the traditional Labovian version here. Fasold, Winford, and others have suggested rather different explanations.

1.6.1 Contraction and deletion

The first thing to note is that, in general, deletion it is possible in AAVE in those, and only those, contexts where contraction is possible in MUSE. Thus, where contraction is not possible in SE, deletion is not possible in AAVE. For instance, in MUSE, while is possible to say in response to the question "where do you want to be in five years?" any of the following:

Where he is at
Where he's at
Where he is

it is not possible in MUSE to say

*Where he's

Contraction is not acceptable when the copula is the final element in the sentence. Deletion in AAVE works in a parallel way. Thus the following are acceptable answers to the same question in AAVE:

Where he is at
Where he's at
Where he at
Where he is

But the following is not acceptable in AAVE;

*Where he ___

Deletion and contraction operate under similar constraints, at least in this case. A couple of things should be mentioned at this point. Notice that I have included the contracted forms under the list of acceptable AAVE responses to the question. This is very important. Basically, the point is that deletion, like the other grammatical features I have discussed here, is not categorical - that is to say, it does not happen every time. As we will see, deletion occurs in some environments more than in others and this turns out to be quite revealing. The fact that deletion in AAVE and contraction in MUSE seem to work in parallel ways was originally discussed by Labov who took it to mean that AAVE and MUSE (at least in the grammar of copula) where related dialects with different pronunciation rules. Basically, Labov suggested that AAVE speakers had an extra rule which deleted the already contracted form (so *he's there* became *he there*). This is only part of the story however.

1.6.2 Environmental constraints on the deletion of the copula in AAVE

Research on the copula has illustrated that AAVE grammar has an extremely complex history. At this point, we have to review a view principles of sociolinguistic study in order to understand this complexity. As we discussed briefly with regard to the phonological distinctiveness of AAVE, linguistic features (like a vowel, a specific vowel, a copula etc.) occur in a range of different environments in speech. Consider, for example, the following sentence:

He is a good friend

Let's consider the full form copula *is* in this sentence. We could describe the environment within which it occurs in a number of ways. The following would be accurate observations of its environment:

1. occurs after a pronoun (preceding pro. form)
2. occurs after a vowel (preceding V)
3. occurs after a high front vowel (the /i/ sound in "he")
4. occurs before a noun phrase (following NP)
5. occurs before a determiner (the "a" in "a good friend.")

All of these factors might be significant when we move to consider the frequency of copula deletion. When considering the copula in AAVE, the environmental factors are important primarily for two reasons:

1. They can be weighted against each other so that we can ask which are more important. When we add up a large number of instances we find that deletion and contraction tend to happen more often in some contexts than in others (for instance, in AAVE, "He going out" is much more common that "He John" see below). When a process such as contraction or deletion occurs frequently in a given context/environment we say that that context/environment FAVORS the application of the rule (e.g. the grammatical environment of V+ing favor application of the rule which deletes and contraction of the copula). We can also

ask if copula deletion is a grammatical or phonological phenomenon in AAVE? That is, is the deletion of the copula in AAVE strictly conditioned by phonology or is it also part of AAVE grammar?

2. Is the deletion of the copula in AAVE related to similar phonological processes of contraction in MUSE? Or is copula deletion in AAVE related to similar grammatical patterns in Caribbean Creoles?

As it turns out, the answers here are as complicated as the questions. Both phonological and grammatical aspects of the environment affect the frequency of copula deletion in AAVE. Similarly there are parallels to both MUSE and Caribbean Creoles in the AAVE copula.

1.6.3 Phonological Conditioning of copula deletion and contraction

The frequency with which contraction and deletion occur is conditioned by the sound which precedes the copula. In very basic terms, the phonological constraints for contraction and deletion of the copula are as follows (adapted from Labov 1972: 105-106):

	contraction	**deletion**	
C_	no	yes	e.g. Stan is here
V_	yes	?	e.g. Joe is here

Phonological environments that favor deletion and contraction
(note: "C_"means after consonants, "_V" means before vowels, etc.)

Generally, contraction and deletion pattern in opposite ways here. A preceding consonant favors deletion but not contraction. A preceding vowel favors contraction but not deletion. This is, however, probably not evidence that the two process (contraction and deletion) are distinct in terms of their phonological conditioning. The difference here probably results from the fact that contraction and deletion affect a sentence differently. Consider, for example, the following sentences (from Labov 1972:106):

Joe is here	*contraction*>	Joe's here	*deletion*>	Joe here
CV VC CVC		CVC CVC		CV CVC
Stan is here	*contraction*>	Stan's here	*deletion*>	Stan here
CVC VC CVC		CVCC CVC		CVC CVC

When the noun (*Stan* or *Joe*) ends in a vowel (*Joe*), contraction acts to reduce the CVVC pattern to CVC (from *Joe is* to *Joe's*). When contraction operates on a noun that ends with a consonant the result is a consonant cluster (from *Stan is* to *Stan's* -- see last weeks notes on phonology). In AAVE, you'll remember, there are rules which reduce consonant clusters (as in many other language varieties). The differences between contraction and deletion in terms of phonological

conditioning then seem to based on a general preference in language to avoid consonant clusters and to keep a CVC phonological pattern. Generally most languages (especially Pidgins and Creoles!) tend to preserve the CVC pattern where possible and this seems to be why contraction is favored here but deletion is not.

1.6.4 Grammatical conditioning of copula deletion and contraction

Here I'll only consider the following grammatical environment (although preceding grammatical environment has also been shown to have an affect on copula deletion/contraction frequency). This sociolinguistic story goes like this: William Labov and his students studied the speech of two Harlem gangs in the 60's, the Cobras and the Jets. They found that copula deletion was favored by some following grammatical environments and strongly disfavored by others. Basically, the pattern was as follows, with the most favored environments for deletion at the top (the ones where deletion happened most often). All the examples here are from Claudia Mitchell Kernan's Berkeley Dissertation (*Language Behavior in Black Urban Community* - highly recommended reading by the way - P41 M696l). I have included examples of both the deleted and contracted or full forms.

__gonna	1.	I don't care what he say, you ___**gon** laugh.
	2.	She ___**gon** have a natural fit.
	3.	...as long as i's kids around he<u>'s</u> **gon** play rough or however they're playing.[2]
__verb+ing	1.	I tell him to be quiet because he don't know what he ___**talking** about.
	2.	I mean, he may say something's out of place but he ____**cleaning** up behind it and you can't get mad at him.
	3.	They love to be up in grown people face when they<u>'re</u> **talking**.
__adjective or locative	1.	He ____**all right** (Adj)
	2.	And Alvin, he ____**kind of big**, you know? (Adj)
	3.	She <u>is</u> **stubborn.** (Adj)
	4.	She ___**at home**. (Loc)
	5.	The club ___**on one corner**, the Bock <u>is</u> **on the other**. (Loc)
	6.	Everything you do and say, she<u>'s</u> right **there**. (Loc)
__noun phrase	1.	He ___**the one** who had to go try to pick up the peacock.
	2.	I say, you ___**the one** jumping up to leave, not me.
	3.	I think those ____**the two** typical ones.

[2] *i's* in this example is a contracted form of "it's" which is the AAVE equivalent of MUSE "there is" see section on "existential *it*" below.

3. He's **one of those** type of persons.

According to Labov's (and others') analysis, deletion was favored in all those environments where contraction was favored. The hierarchy of favored environments was the same for both processes.

However, this same data was reanalyzed by John Baugh and the results were written up in a very influential paper called "A Reexamination of the Black English Copula." (1980). Baugh, took some of the same data but broke up the categories of locative and adjective. In Labov's study these two environments were calculated as a single group. Baugh found that while adjectives strongly favored deletion, locatives did not. He was able to make two important points on the basis of this reanalysis. First, the pattern was now strikingly different for AAVE and MUSE. Contraction is favored for locatives but not for adjectives. This is illustrated in the following chart:

	Contraction	**Deletion**
___locative	favored	disfavored
___adjective	disfavored	favored

Grammatical environments favoring or disfavoring contraction and deletion of the copula

So, the first point that Baugh made was that contraction and deletion look like quite different processes when the two categories are broken up. The second important point was revealed through a comparison with the Caribbean Creoles. In Caribbean Creoles, like Jamaican Creole (Patois) and Guyanese Creole (Creolese), location is indicated with a separate verb, *de*:

ii de a bak
"he is out back."

di bai fada de hoom
"The boy's father is at home."

A locative verb is almost always present in most varieties of English-based creole. For the basilect (the most creole variety), location is indicated with *de*. For the mesolect and acrolect (the more English-like varieties), it is indicated with *is* or *are*. At the same time, in these same creoles, it is very rare for a copula to be present preceding an adjective. The usual form is as follows:

ii hat
"it's hot"

shi nais
"She's nice (looking)"

Deletion in AAVE seems to parallel the situation in the English-lexified Creole languages of the Caribbean, and perhaps more importantly, in Gullah. Baugh illustrated this with the figure in chapter 8 from Baugh 1983.

1.7 Negation

When people think of AAVE they often think of so called "double negation." This is what is called, in sociolinguistics, a stereotype and it is highly stigmatized. In fact, various forms of multiple negation are very common in non-mainstream varieties of English. AAVE is not alone in allowing multiple negation in a single sentence. It should also be noted that mainstream varieties of French (and many other languages) allow multiple negation. Far from being stigmatized, in French and other languages, multiple negation (or negative concord) it the 'correct' form! For instance in the sentence:

Je **n**'ai fait **rien**

The "ne" is a negative marker and "rien" means nothing. If we were to translate it word for word we would get:

I did**n't** do **no**thing

Which is a classic example of "negative concord" and is perfectly acceptable in AAVE. Multiple negation was in fact quite acceptable in earlier varieties of English:

I can**not** goe **no** further (Early Modern English)

The arguments of school teachers to the effect that double negation is wrong/incorrect because it is illogical, are thus based on one variety of English. There is nothing illogical about multiple negation. Grammar has its own logic. In fact, although negation in AAVE is similar to some other varieties of non-mainstream English, in some ways it is quite distinctive and again seems to show parallels to the Caribbean English Creoles. Negation is also quite complicated AAVE (like the copula but for different reasons) so hold on to your hat one more time.

The most famous linguistic example of multiple negation in AAVE is the one that Labov used to start off his 1972 paper "Negative attraction and negative concord in English grammar:"

It ai**n't no** cat ca**n't** get in **no** coop

If you know what the speaker meant when he said this you already understand how negation works in AAVE. All we have to do here is spell it out and note its similarities or dissimilarities with other varieties of English.

1.7.1 Three negation rules in English

Basically in MUSE, AAVE and other non-mainstream varieties of English, there are three rules for making a sentence negative. All varieties of American English have these rules but they apply differently. Take a sentence like:

Nobody can see anything.

This is already negative because of the *nobody*. Linguists have suggested that all sentences start off as positive statements. We have rules that make these positive sentences into negative ones. Thus the sentence above *Nobody can see anything,* starts as

ANYBODY can see anything (if they try).

This is the way it is first formulated The rule that converts this to a negative adds a *not* to the *anybody*.

Not+anybody can see anything

Another pronunciation rule converts this *not+anybody* to *nobody*:

Nobody sees anything

Let's call this the first negation rule in English. We can describe it as follows:

first negation rule
1. add *not* to the ANYBODY which is the subject of the sentence.

In MUSE, if this rule is applied, no other negative rules can apply. However, there are two other ways to make a sentence negative. Take another, similar, sentence:

He can see anything

In MUSE we make this sentence negative by adding *not* to the auxiliary verb (*can*). So we end up with

He can + not see anything
He can't see anything

Now again if this negative rule applies, no other negative rule can be applied in MUSE. Let's call this the second negation rule in English. We can describe it as follows:

second negation rule
2. add *not* to the auxiliary verb (*can, could, will, would, did, is* etc.)

There is one more negation rule in English. Take the same sentence:

He can see anything

We can make this negative by adding *not* to the final indefinite noun phrase which is the object of the sentence (*anything*). Thus we end up with:

He can see not+anything
He can see nothing

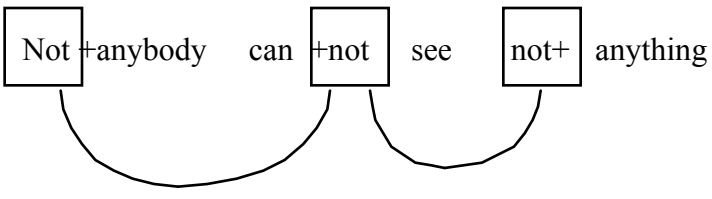
Let's call this the third negation rule in English. It can be described as follows:

third negation rule
3. add not to the indefinite noun phrase which is the object of the sentence

Now, we have seen the three rules for negation in English and we have seen how they apply in MUSE. They are exclusive: if one of them applies the other two cannot. In AAVE and many other non-mainstream varieties of English the rules are exactly the same. However they apply differently. Basically in AAVE more than one rule can be applied and for this reason negation can be expressed at several points in the same sentence. The *NOT* can be copied from one place to another without being deleted in its original position. It's a bit like comparing the cut and paste function on your word processor with the copy and paste function. So in AAVE, taking our invented sentence, it is possible to express negation in the following way:

Nobody can't see nothing

The final sentence is formed by copying the *NOT* to all the possible negative points in the sentence:



'Double' or 'multiple' negation are thus not very accurate terms since it is really the same negative that is expressed at several points in a sentence. The process is similar to what is termed agreement in discussions of grammar. In some languages a verb or adjective has to agree with the gender, person or number of the subject noun phrase. MUSE has an agreement rule for person and number that I discussed above. Thus in MUSE one says "he walks" where the /-s/ suffix agrees with the subject. In AAVE negation works the same way. We can say that an

indefinite object noun phrase has to agree in terms of negation with the subject noun phrase and/or the auxiliary verb . This is called negative concord.

Labov and others who have researched negation in AAVE have claimed that negative concord to indefinite, objects is obligatory in AAVE. According to Labov, then the following is not an acceptable AAVE sentence:

He can't see anything

In AAVE the indefinite object noun phrase *anything* has to agree with the other negatives in the sentence (in this case the *can't*). Thus the sentence would have to be:

He can't see nothing.

This is an important claim for two reasons. First, negative concord is not obligatory in any other variety of American English. Although other varieties have forms of multiple negation they do not require agreement or concord all the time. So in this way AAVE is distinct. However, in the Caribbean Creoles negative concord with indefinites (*anything, anybody* etc.) is obligatory as in AAVE. Consider the following examples

Bahamian Creole English
he ain' answer nothin'

Haitian Creole
li pa repon naye
"he didn't answer anything."

Guyanese
ii kyaan sii notin
"he can't see nothing."

nonbadi (na) gu nowee
"Nobody (didn't) go nowhere."

Here then we see a striking parallel between AAVE and the Caribbean Creoles.

1.7.2 ain't

Many non-standard varieties of English use *ain't* to negate a sentence. The following examples are from a number of non-MUSE white dialects:

What do you expect, you **ain't** been round here, have you?
(British non-standard English)

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

(Alabama White English)

I **ain't** been 'ere.
(Appalachian English)

In these varieties *ain't* is used in those places where MUSE uses *be*+not or *have*+not. In these varieties *ain't* is restricted to present tense contexts. In these non-standard White varieties of English, *ain't* never appears where MUSE has past tense forms of *be*+not or *have*+not or *do* + not (*was*+not, *were*+not, *had*+not, *did*+not). However in AAVE, *ain't* can appear in past tense contexts. Examples of this follow:

I said, "I **ain't run** the stop sign,' and he said, 'you ran it!"
I **ain't believe you that day**, man.
Well, he didn't do nothin' much, and I **ain't neither**.

In these example, *ain't* occurs in clearly past contexts and seems to replace SE *didn't*. This has lead some sociolinguists to claim that, in AAVE, *ain't* is tense neutral. However this is probably not the case. (The following is from Winford's commentary):

> There are three quite distinct *ain't's* in AAVE, each with its own semantics and subcategorization properties (Weldon in LVC: 1994). Each *ain't* has a distinct tense specification. Negative copula *ain't* is present (from Engl. dialectal "bain't) - simply the negative of finite copula "be"). Negative perfect *ain't*" is the counterpart of "haven't/hasn't", and is specified for perfect aspect, and takes a past verb form complement. It comes from English dialectal "hain't" the negative of "have." Negative preterite *ain't* is specified for past tense and takes a verb stem complement. It obviously comes from "didn't". Contrast *ain't* (ent, eh) in intermediate creoles, which is a tense/aspect neutral, monomorphemic marker, which simply means "negative."

See Donald Winford's AAVE origins paper part 2 in Diachronica for some discussion. Thus although AAVE is clearly different from non-mainstream varieties of White English, it is also different from the Caribbean Creoles in which the marker of negation is simply that and nothing else. The following sentences show that in the Caribbean Creoles (*na* or *en*), the item that marks negation is tense neutral:

mi **na** sii di man (Guyanese Creole)
"I didn't see the man"

mi **na** (a) sii di man (Guyanese Creole)
"I don't see the man."

mi **en** sii di man (Guyanese Creole)
"I didn't see the man"

aiyu **na bin** noo di man (Guyanese Creole)
"All-of-you didn't know the man"

The girl **eh** lie (Trinidadian Creole)
"The girl didn't lie."

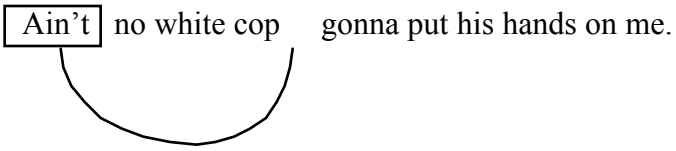
he **ain'** answer notin' (Bahamian Creole)
"He didn't answer anything."

1.7.3 Negative Inversion

One final feature of AAVE negation will be discussed here. An example from Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* follows:

Pilate they remembered as a pretty woods-wild girl "that
couldn't nobody put shoes on."

In this example (the bold part), a negative auxiliary (couldn't) is moved in front of the subject (nobody). This is called negative inversion. Some other examples illustrate this:



Can't nobody beat 'em
Can't nobody say nothin' to dem peoples!
Don' nobody say nothing after that (Ledbetter, born 1861)
Wasn't nobody in there but me an' him (Isom Moseley, born 1856)

As the last two examples indicate, this is a relatively long standing feature of AAVE. However, in this case there is no parallel in Caribbean English Creole. Rather the feature is shared with non-mainstream varieties of White English. The following examples illustrate:

Wouldn't nobody be out there but jus' what would go with us (Southern White English)
Didn't nobody get hurt or nothin' (Ozark English)

AAVE negation thus illustrates the complex history of this variety. While some aspects of negation show clear parallels to the Caribbean Creoles, others are seem more closely related to non-mainstream varieties of White English.

1.8 Some other features of AAVE grammar as yet not included in this grammatical overview

1.8.1 Possessives

Possession is often indicated through word order in AAVE whereas MUSE uses the suffix /-s/. Thus AAVE sentences like “The boy hat” are acceptable although most speakers alternate between this form and “The boy’s hat.”

1.8.2 Plurals

Plural /-s/ is sometimes absent, i.e. “the two boy__.” Rickford (1995) notes that this is infrequent.

1.8.3 Pleonastic pronouns

In AAVE a noun phrase subject is sometimes followed by an agreeing pronoun as in, “That teacher, she yell at the kids.”