

African American Vernacular English in the Lyrics of African
American Popular Music

Matthew Feldman

1.0 Introduction

This thesis¹ investigates the use of grammatical features of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in African American popular music from three different periods of the 20th century. Since the late 1960s there have been numerous studies of the language of African Americans, but none has attempted to use song lyrics as a major source of data. This is not entirely surprising. It would be a mistake to blindly equate song lyrics with other forms of language, for musical performance is a distinctive genre of language use. Nonetheless, as will be demonstrated below, the lyrics of songs produced by African Americans are a valuable source of information about AAVE.

No source of linguistic data is free of limitations, so no potential source should be ignored. Studies of AAVE have been based on a variety of sources, including slavery-era literary texts (e.g. Dillard 1972), letters written by freed slaves (Montgomery, Fuller, and DeMarse 1993), transcripts of Depression-era interviews with former slaves (e.g. Schneider 1989), audio recordings of interviews with former slaves (Bailey, Maynor, and Cukor-Avila 1991), exam essays written by African American high school students (Smitherman 1992, 1994), and sociolinguistic interviews (e.g. Wolfram 1969, Labov 1972, Rickford 1992). Each of these sources is useful within certain contexts, yet their validity could still be challenged. The same is true of song lyrics. As with other potential sources, it is important that African American song lyrics are examined and that their strengths and weaknesses as sources of information about AAVE are recognized.

¹ Thanks to my advisor Kari Swingle for her support and faith; to Eric Raimy, who agreed to serve as my second reader and gave me some reassuring advice; to Dan Belsky, Dara Bloom, and Laura Louison for entertaining me, looking out for me, and putting up with me; and, especially, to Cambria Matlow for encouraging me, listening to me, talking to me, and loving me (and turning me on to Hip Hop).

The lyrics of African American popular music are useful to those interested in AAVE in at least two different ways. First, it is important to have an understanding of how AAVE is used in forms of artistic expression. AAVE, like all human language varieties, is more than simply a means of everyday communication; it is also a means of artistic expression. In linguistics so much attention is paid to trying to capture “ordinary” speech that linguists sometimes forget that language is used for so many other purposes. In addition to being the means by which people converse with each other, AAVE is the medium that Robert Johnson and Tupac Shakur used to tell their stories. Since lyrical music has always been an important part of African American culture, song lyrics are a particularly appropriate source of information about the artistic use of language by African Americans.

African American song lyrics are also relevant to diachronic questions about AAVE speech. While song lyrics are not the same as speech, the two are related. Lyrical musical performance is different from any other genre of language use, but it does not exist in a vacuum. The lyrics to songs written and performed by African Americans are to some degree reflective of other forms of African American language. Thus, a comparison of the lyrics of Soul music from the 1960s to those of Hip Hop from the 1990s, for example, might contribute to an understanding of how 1960s AAVE is related to 1990s AAVE.

In this study the frequency of occurrence of two grammatical features of AAVE—copula absence and verbal *-s* absence—are examined in the lyrics of three different forms of African American popular music—Blues, Soul/Funk, and Hip Hop. Three artists in each genre are studied: Blind Lemon Jefferson, Robert Johnson, and

Little Walter (Blues); James Brown, Curtis Mayfield, and Parliament (Soul/Funk); and 2Pac, OutKast, and Lauryn Hill (Hip Hop). The results are analyzed and discussed with respect to both the use of AAVE in forms of artistic expression and the history of AAVE in the twentieth century.

2.0 Background to the Study

2.1 African American Vernacular English

AAVE is a variety of English that evolved from the language spoken by the descendants of Africans who were brought to the North American colonies as slaves. The speech of African slaves in North America, the first of whom arrived in 1619, likely included creole elements with substantial influence from the various languages spoken in West Africa in addition to features of the dialectal speech of British settlers (Rickford 1986, 1999:ch. 10, Winford 1997, 1998). The exclusion of African Americans from almost all elements of European-American culture throughout over three hundred years of slavery assured that African American speech would be linguistically and stylistically distinct from other varieties of English. After slavery was abolished, African American speech retained its distinctiveness as a result of continued segregation and the existence of a vibrant African American culture.

Today there still exists a distinctive African American variety of English. While it is obviously not the case that all African Americans speak alike, African Americans of all walks of life share a common linguistic heritage. AAVE can be said to be the language of African America because it is “available in some degree to most if not all African Americans and. . . there are grammatical and stylistic features of this language

which are constant over space” (Lippi-Green 1997:178). Most of these features, however, occur with different frequencies in different social situations and for different speakers. Most features of AAVE alternate with mainstream variants, sometimes even in the course of a single utterance or interaction (Rickford 1998).

It is necessary at this point to take a step back and define what is meant by the phrase “feature of AAVE.” Fasold (1998) divides AAVE phonological and grammatical features into three categories: “(1) unmarked features in the sense that they do not differ from the corresponding structures in standard English, (2) nonstandard features shared with other nonstandard varieties, and (3) unique, also nonstandard, features” (479). It is the second two types that people generally have in mind when they refer to features of AAVE. The distinctiveness of AAVE results from the existence of features of the third category, the existence of a distinctly African American communicative style (see Smitherman 1973), and the fact that many of the features that AAVE shares with other stigmatized English dialects occur with greater frequency in AAVE than in other varieties (Rickford 1998).

2.1.1 Copula Absence

Copula absence refers to the absence of an overt form of *be* in sentences that would have *are/’re* or *is/’s* in mainstream English. Copula absence can occur in any sentence with a plural, third person, or second person subject where contraction of the copula is possible.² Copula absence following first person singular subjects is not attested. Copula absence in the past tense has occasionally been claimed to be possible (see Bender 2000 for two possible examples), but it is at best a very infrequently occurring phenomenon. As the

examples below demonstrate, copula absence is never mandatory in AAVE; indeed every speaker sometimes uses overt forms of the copula:

- (1) a. You my pet.
 b. He's a greedy man.
 (James Brown, "I'm a Greedy Man")
- (2) a. My mama dead.
 b. She's up the country.
 (Robert Johnson, "Come on in My Kitchen")
- (3) a. Niggas from the block on the boat now.
 b. My mom is on the shit.
 (2Pac, "Soulja's Story")
- (4) a. Now you losin friends.
 (OutKast, "Liberation")
 b. IFOs are landin in Decatur.³
 (OutKast, "Da Art of Storytellig (Part 2)")

These sentences demonstrate that overt copula forms (both full and contracted) and null copula forms alternate, sometimes in the same song.

Various syntactic constraints affect the appearance or absence of an overt copula. One has to do with the subject of the sentence. In studies of the AAVE copula, *are* environments (copula sentences with plural or second person subjects) are often distinguished from *is* environments (copula environments with third person singular

² This a slight oversimplification. Bender (2000) gives an example of an environment where contraction is possible but the copula absence is not.

subjects). Copula absence occurs more frequently in *are* environments than in *is* environments. A second constraint is based on the grammatical environment following the copula. Following grammatical environments are divided into five categories, listed here from most favorable to least favorable to copula absence: *gonna* (often shortened to *gon*), *-ing* verbs, locatives, adjective phrases, and noun phrases (Rickford et al. 1991).

Copula absence is one of the most identifiable and most frequently studied features of AAVE. Although other American dialects do exhibit copula absence, especially Southern white varieties, none has nearly as high a rate of *is* absence as AAVE (Fasold 1998, Rickford et al. 1991).

2.1.2 Verbal *-s* Absence

Verbal *-s* absence refers to the absence of the *-s* suffix on present tense verbs with third person singular subjects. In mainstream varieties of American English this suffix is mandatory. In AAVE the suffix appears variably.⁴ In (5) there are two sentences from the same song, both with the same subject, *it*; the *-s* suffix does not appear on *go* in (a) but it does appear on *make* in (b). In (6) one sentence has two different verbs with third person singular subjects. The first, *get*, does not have the *-s* suffix and the second, *throws*, does.

- (5) a. But that's how it go.
 b. And it makes me furious.

³ The sentences in (4) technically include the auxiliary *be*, not the copula. However, in studies of AAVE both copula and auxiliary uses of *be* are generally referred to together as the copula.

⁴ The *-s* suffix also occurs variably in AAVE on verbs with subjects that are not third person singular. Some researchers, including Schneider (1983), Brewer (1986), and Montgomery, Fuller, and DeMarse (1993), have attempted to formulate a unified account of verbal *-s* occurrence in AAVE. However, since there are so many competing accounts in the literature, third person verbal *-s* absence is studied as a separate phenomenon here, following Wolfram (1969), Rickford and McNair-Knox (1994), and others.

(Curtis Mayfield, “Freddie’s Dead”)

(6) When a woman get in trouble everybody throws her down.

(Robert Johnson, “Come on in My Kitchen”)

Verbal *-s* absence has been attested in white speech, but at much lower rates than in AAVE (Fasold 1998).

2.2 Blues, Soul and Funk, and Hip Hop

Music has always been an important part of African American culture. Since the slave era music has been a part of African American activities ranging from work to parties to worship. In the twentieth century African American music (and all music) was changed forever, as African Americans began to make and purchase commercial recordings.

Blues was the dominant form of African American music in the 1920s and 1930s and remained popular until the 1950s when it was eclipsed by Rhythm and Blues and the beginnings of what would become known as Soul music. Throughout the 1960s, Soul dominated the airwaves of Black radio stations and the auditoriums and clubs of Northern cities. In the late 1960s, Funk, a more rhythm-heavy offshoot of Soul, became popular as well. By the late 1970s a new form of African American music, known as Hip Hop, was emerging from the underground. Hip Hop became extraordinarily popular in the 1980s and is still popular today.

2.2.1 Blues

No one knows exactly when Blues began, nor is there a simple definition of Blues music agreed upon by everyone. For present purposes, it is sufficient to say that Blues as it was first recorded began sometime in the late nineteenth century in the rural South. Blues became the primary form of music performed and listened to by poor rural African

Americans. While Blues was often marked by distinctive musical features, the words were of utmost importance: Blues “is primarily a verse form and secondarily a way of making music” (Jones 1963:50). Blues lyrics were based on two main sources: the performers’ observations of their world and the African American oral tradition (Barlow 1989:4).

Blues was the primary form of musical entertainment in the rural South. Blues singers performed at roadhouses, juke joints, and weekly outdoor parties. This style of Blues, which was most fully developed in eastern Texas and the Mississippi Delta region, became known as “country” or “downhome” Blues. In the 1920s, Downhome Blues artists began to make commercial recordings of their music, and African Americans began to buy records. The first Downhome Blues recording star, singer and guitarist Blind Lemon Jefferson, emerged in the mid-1920s. By the end of the decade 10-20% of Southern African American families had phonographs and even more owned records (Titon 1994).

When African Americans began to migrate to Northern cities in large numbers after World War I and in even greater numbers after World War II, they brought the Blues with them. In the years immediately after World War II, Blues artists began performing and recording on electric instruments, and new styles of Blues emerged. One style developed in Chicago and was more or less a plugged-in version of Delta Blues. Chicago Blues stars included Muddy Waters and harmonica player Little Walter. Another new style of Blues developed in Memphis in the late 1940s. This style was less directly based on Downhome Blues. Memphis Blues involved a synthesis of Delta and

West Coast styles of guitar playing and generally sounded smoother and more polished than Downhome and Chicago Blues (Haralambos 1979).

By the late 1950s the popularity of Blues, especially Downhome and Chicago Blues, was waning. The audience for these styles was disappearing. By 1960 the majority of African Americans in the South lived in cities, and there were no longer large numbers of uneducated farmers arriving in Northern cities (Haralambos 1979:37). Urban African Americans began to express disdain for these styles of Blues, describing them as “dirty,” “nasty,” and “alley music” (Haralambos 1979:33).

2.2.2 Soul and Funk

Soul music emerged when African American singers, such as Ray Charles, began to combine the musical tradition of Blues with the vocal styles of Gospel music and the African American church. The soul singer played a role similar to the preacher, leading back-up singers and the audience in call-and-response exchanges. The style became more polished by the mid-1960s, no longer relying on the harmonic structure of Blues (Haralambos 1979).

By the mid-1960s, Soul was the most popular form of African American music. It was primarily a vocal music, reflecting its roots in the music of the church. The lyrics of Soul songs were very different from those of Blues. Soul lyrics expressed optimism and togetherness instead of lonely sorrow. The Impressions, with lead vocalist Curtis Mayfield, had several hit songs that exemplified the hopeful nature of Soul music, including “We’re a Winner” and “Keep on Pushing.”

The most popular soul singer was undoubtedly James Brown, known as Soul Brother Number One. James Brown was a master of the vocal style of Soul music. He

used a whole array of emotional vocal sounds to reach his audience. Brown was a musical innovator as well. After almost a decade of stardom, in the late 1960s Brown's music began to develop into what would later be called Funk. Rhythm was pushed to the forefront, and harmonic variation was de-emphasized. The music consisted largely of Brown's vocals over complex polyrhythms played on drums, bass, guitar, and horns.

Funk was developed further by George Clinton and his bands Funkadelic and Parliament. Influenced by the funk of James Brown and the musical explorations of psychedelic rock, Parliament arrived on the scene in the 1970s, sounding like nothing that had come before. Here is one listener's description of the song "P. Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)," released in 1976:

Horns and keyboards were high in the mix, looming bright and shiny behind the blues event horizon evoked by the announcer who identified himself as Star Child. The guitar was ticklishly deft. . . the bass was another animal entirely, moving the groove along with fat gulps of syncopation that slithered and rumbled around your pelvis region until they punched erotic hotspots you never knew existed. A strange and sexy record that blew spaced-out hipster lyrics through your brain and made you want to dance the nasty, the shape of things to come (Tate 1993).

2.2.3 Hip Hop

Hip Hop refers both to a style of music and the culture that surrounds this style of music.

Hip Hop developed in the 1970s primarily in the South Bronx, a primarily African American and Latino part of New York City. The youth culture that emerged included

graffiti, breakdancing, and rap music. Rose (1994) provides a definition of rap, which for our purposes can be thought of as more or less synonymous with Hip Hop music:

Rap music is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America. Rap music is a form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically based music. . . . From the outset, rap music has articulated the pleasures and problems of black urban life in contemporary America. Rappers speak with the voice of personal experience, taking on the identity of the observer or narrator (2).

Since its beginnings, a fundamental part of Hip Hop has been the use of previously recorded music. In the early years a track might have consisted entirely of the music from a Soul or Funk song played underneath a rapper (or MC). Since then the technology has improved, and a single song now might “sample” several different previously recorded songs. The music of James Brown and Parliament have been an especially rich source of beats, horn riffs, and other sampled material.

Hip Hop remained a largely underground phenomenon in its early years, but by the mid-1980s several rap songs had become hits. Around the same time, Run DMC became one of the first rap groups to achieve success with a white audience. Since then whites have made up a substantial part of the Hip Hop audience. Nonetheless, Hip Hop has retained its focus on the lives and concerns of urban African Americans.

Perhaps the most well-known rap artist is Tupac Shakur (known as 2Pac), who has been viewed as a martyr by some since his murder in 1996. 2Pac told straightforward stories set among the African American urban underclass. His raps depict issues such as teenage pregnancy and police brutality. George (1998), speaking of 2Pac and another

rapper-turned-martyr, Biggie Smalls, explains, “Tupac and Biggie were artists who looked at the worst things in their world and reveled in describing their meanest dreams and grossest nightmares” (48).

3.0 A Study of Copula Absence and Verbal *-s* Absence in African American Music

3.1 Methods

3.1.1 Song Selection

As many songs were used as were necessary for there to be at least twenty verbal *-s* tokens and forty-five copula tokens for each artist. For the most part, the songs were chosen randomly from specific albums or compilations. (See the Appendix for a list of all the songs used.) For Little Walter and the Soul/Funk artists, special consideration was given to the Billboard R&B chart success of specific songs. Songs with higher chart positions were used over songs with lower chart positions and songs that did not chart at all because a higher chart position indicates that the song was heard by more people. The Billboard R&B chart was based in part on record sales in African American neighborhoods and airplay on black radio stations. The chart did not exist when Blind Lemon Jefferson and Robert Johnson were recording. In the Hip Hop era the chart has less relevance because it is no longer reflective of specifically African American listening tastes.

3.1.1.1 Blind Lemon Jefferson

The songs were selected randomly from the compilations *Moanin' All Over* (Tradition TCD1011) and *The Best of Blind Lemon Jefferson* (Yazoo 2057). They were recorded and originally released between 1926 and 1929.

3.1.1.2 Robert Johnson

The songs were selected randomly from the tracks on *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings* (Columbia/Legacy C2K 64916) that were released during Johnson's life.

They were recorded in 1936 and 1937.

3.1.1.3 Little Walter

The songs were selected randomly from the compilations *The Best of Little Walter* (Chess CHD-9192) and *Confessin' the Blues* (Chess CHD-9366). Some of the songs were in the top ten of the Billboard R&B chart. With one exception, the songs were recorded between 1952 and 1959; one was recorded in 1963.

3.1.1.4 James Brown

The songs were selected from the compilation *Make It Funky: The Big Payback: 1971-1975* (Polydor 31453 3052-2). Five of the twelve songs were #1 Billboard R&B hits.

The remaining seven all charted at #7 or better. They were recorded between 1971 and 1974.

3.1.1.5 Curtis Mayfield

The songs are from Mayfield's first three solo albums—*Curtis* (Curtom/Rhino R2 79932), *Roots* (Curtom/Rhino R2 75569), and *Superfly* (Curtom/Rhino R2 75803). Five of the songs were chosen at random from *Curtis*, which was on the Billboard R&B Album chart for forty-three weeks, five of them at #1. Another five songs were chosen from *Roots*—the three singles from the album, all of which charted, and two more chosen

randomly. Finally, the two singles from *Superfly*, which charted at #2 and #5, were included. All of the songs were recorded between 1970 and 1972.

3.1.1.6 Parliament

The songs were selected from the compilation *Tear the Roof Off: 1974-1980* (PolyGram 314 514 417-2). Ten of the eleven songs were released as singles, and all of them made the Billboard R&B chart. Three were in the top ten. The songs were recorded between 1975 and 1979.

3.1.1.7 2Pac

The songs were selected randomly from the album *2Pacalypse Now* (Interscope 01241-41633-2), released in 1991.

3.1.1.8 OutKast

The songs were selected randomly from the album *Aquemini* (LaFace ARCD6053), released in 1998.

3.1.1.9 Lauryn Hill

The songs were selected randomly from the album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (Ruffhouse CTDP096034), released in 1998.

3.1.2 Transcription

Each song was listened to and the lyrics were transcribed. When printed lyrics were available, they were consulted for clarification and as a check on the transcriptions.⁵

⁵ The following sources were consulted: Sackheim 1975 and Taft 1983 for Blind Lemon Jefferson, Harry's Blues Lyrics Online (<http://Blueslyrics.tripod.com>) for Blind Lemon Jefferson and Little Walter, <http://www.duke.edu/~tmc/motherpage> for Parliament, and The Original Hip-Hop (Rap) Lyrics Archive (<http://www.ohhla.com>) for 2Pac. The liner notes to *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings, Roots, Superfly, Aquemini, and The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* all included printed lyrics.

When there was a discrepancy, the published lyrics were not considered authoritative. The published transcriptions that are available were not made for the purpose of linguistic analysis and, thus, cannot be expected to be accurate to the necessary level of detail. Moreover, in some cases two different published versions of the same song's lyrics differed. Lyrics that could not be made out satisfactorily were excluded from the analysis.

3.1.3 Tabulation of Data

3.1.3.1 Copula Absence

All sentences in which copula absence is possible were extracted from the song lyrics, yielding a data set that includes full, contracted, and null copula forms. In most studies of the AAVE copula, various cases, known as “don't count” (DC) forms, are excluded from the analysis. Some forms are generally agreed upon as DC forms, while others are counted by some researchers and excluded by others.

The recommendations made by Blake (1997) are followed here, with two exceptions. The following are cases that Blake argues should not be counted and that were considered DC forms in this analysis: (1) *there's* (or *dey's*) because the copula is nearly categorically contracted, (2) forms followed by a sibilant (in *is* environments) or *r* (in *are* environments) because it is impossible to distinguish contraction from copula absence, and (3) copulas with *what*, *it*, or *that* as subjects because the copula is nearly categorically contracted in these cases.

Blake also argues that copulas in questions should not be counted since, if the copula is absent there is no way to determine the site of the null copula form.⁶ Knowing

⁶ In AAVE *wh*-questions the tensed auxiliary can appear before or after the subject.

the location of the null copula form is important in studies that take into account preceding and following environments. In this study, however, the environment of the copula form is not relevant. Moreover, in other studies of the AAVE copula (at least those discussed by Blake), forms in questions are counted.

Finally, Blake recommends that cases of *ain't* and other negatives be counted in analyses of the AAVE copula. However, all of the studies she discusses consider *ain't* a DC form, and one study (Rickford et al. 1991) excludes all negatives. In the present study all negatives are considered DC cases, following Rickford et al. (1991).

Another methodological issue in studying copula absence is how exactly to calculate rates of copula absence. Labov (1972), arguing that the null copula results from a deletion rule that is fed by contraction (i.e. that all null forms have contraction in their history), calculated copula absence percentages by dividing the number of null forms by the number of null and contracted forms. This method is known as Labov Deletion. The alternative is to include all copula forms—full, contracted, and null—in the denominator. This is known as Straight Deletion. The choice of methods could potentially have a significant effect on one's results, especially if there were a lot of full forms in the data set (Rickford et al. 1991). This is generally not the case, though. According to Rickford et al. (1991), most studies of the AAVE copula use Labov Deletion. An exception is Wolfram's (1969) landmark study of African American speech in Detroit, which will be referred to for purposes of comparison in this study. For this reason and because it is seen as more theoretically-neutral, Straight Deletion is used in this study.

-
- (i) Why is he hungry?
 - (ii) Why he's hungry?
 - (iii) Why he hungry? (examples adapted from Blake 1997)

3.1.3.2 Verbal *-s* Absence

All verbs with third person singular subjects were extracted from the song lyrics. Irregular verbs, those that undergo some change when they have third person singular subjects other than simply adding *-s*, were excluded. These verbs are *have*, *do*, and *say*. In other AAVE studies these verbs have been considered separately from regular verbs (Rickford 1992, Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994). Also excluded were verbs that cannot take the *-s* suffix, such as the modal auxiliaries (e.g. *may*, *can*, *will*). Finally, verbs that were followed by a word beginning with a sibilant were excluded because there is no way to determine whether or not the suffix is present in those cases. The remaining verbs were coded for either having or not having the *-s* suffix. The percentage of *-s* absence was then calculated by dividing the number of cases without *-s* by the sum of the number of cases with *-s* and the number of cases without *-s* (i.e. the number of tokens).

3.2 Results

3.2.1 Copula Absence

Data on copula absence can be presented separately for *is* and *are* absence or as one overall percentage. Most studies of AAVE copula absence include both overall rates and separate *is* and *are* rates. Overall rates of copula absence and separate rates for *is* and *are* environments are presented here:

(7) Rate of Copula Absence by Genre

	Overall	<i>Is</i>	<i>Are</i>
Blues	37% (52/140)	23% (21/91)	63% (31/49)

Thus, in (iii) there is no way to tell whether the null copula is before or after *he*.

Soul/Funk	23% (46/204)	6% (6/95)	37% (40/109)
Hip Hop	51% (89/176)	25% (23/91)	78% (66/85)

Looking at the overall rates of copula absence first, what is seen is that Hip Hop has the highest rate of copula absence, Soul/Funk has the lowest rate, and the Blues rate is exactly in the middle. The first thing to be noted when *is* and *are* rates are examined separately is that for all three genres copula absence occurs at a substantially higher rate in *are* environments than in *is* environments, as has been reported throughout the AAVE literature. Second, the *is* absence rates for Blues and Hip Hop are quite close; it is the difference between their *are* absence rates that causes their overall rates to differ by so much. The *is* and *are* rates for Soul/Funk are both substantially lower than the Hip Hop and Blues rates.

Following are the results for each artist:

(8) Rate of Copula Absence by Artist – Blues

	Overall	<i>Is</i>	<i>Are</i>
Blind Lemon Jefferson	37% (17/46)	22% (8/36)	90% (9/10)
Robert Johnson	31% (15/48)	26% (10/39)	56% (5/9)
Little Walter	43% (20/46)	19% (3/16)	57% (17/30)

(9) Rate of Copula Absence by Artist – Soul/Funk

	Overall	<i>Is</i>	<i>Are</i>
James Brown	35% (20/57)	6% (2/32)	72% (18/25)
Curtis Mayfield	12% (7/60)	6% (2/32)	18% (5/28)

Parliament	22% (19/87)	6% (2/31)	30% (17/56)
-------------------	-------------	-----------	-------------

(10) Rate of Copula Absence by Artist – Hip Hop

	Overall	<i>Is</i>	<i>Are</i>
2Pac	38% (21/55)	15% (5/33)	73% (16/22)
OutKast	62% (42/68)	35% (11/31)	84% (31/37)
Lauryn Hill	49% (26/53)	26% (7/27)	73% (19/26)

The main issue that will be relevant to the discussion below pertains to the results for James Brown. While the copula absence rates in *is* environments are the same for all the Soul/Funk artists, James Brown's *are* absence rate is four times higher than Curtis Mayfield's and more than twice as high as Parliament's. In addition, *are* absence occurs more often in James Brown's lyrics than it does in two of the Blues artists' (and the third, Blind Lemon Jefferson, only has ten *are* tokens) and as often as in two of the Hip Hop artists' lyrics. Thus, James Brown seems anomalous with respect to the other Soul/Funk artists.

In sum, the Hip Hop and Blues lyrics analyzed here are more vernacular than the Soul/Funk lyrics with respect to copula absence. The Hip Hop and Blues lyrics have very similar *is* absence rates, but the Hip Hop lyrics have a higher rate of *are* absence. As far

as the Soul/Funk data are concerned, James Brown's lyrics are far more vernacular than Curtis Mayfield's or Parliament's with respect to *are* absence.

3.2.2 Verbal *-s* Absence

The rates of verbal *-s* absence for the three genres are given in (11).

(11) Rate of Verbal *-s* Absence by Genre

Blues	37% (25/68)
Soul/Funk	39% (28/72)
Hip Hop	39% (25/64)

The *-s* suffix is absent from verbs with third person singular subjects at more or less equal rates in all three genres. Within each genre, however, there is variation:

(12) Rate of Verbal *-s* Absence by Artist – Blues

Blind Lemon Jefferson	27% (6/22)
Robert Johnson	28% (7/25)
Little Walter	57% (12/21)

(13) Rate of Verbal *-s* Absence by Artist – Soul/Funk

James Brown	48% (12/25)
Curtis Mayfield	30% (6/20)
Parliament	37% (10/27)

(14) Rate of Verbal *-s* Absence by Artist – Hip Hop

2Pac	15% (3/20)
OutKast	61% (14/23)
Lauryn Hill	38% (8/21)

The rates of verbal *-s* absence within each genre show the same general patterns as the rates of copula absence. In Blues, Little Walter's lyrics are more vernacular than Blind Lemon Jefferson's and Robert Johnson's with respect to both variables. In Soul/Funk, James Brown's lyrics are the most vernacular and Curtis Mayfield's are the least vernacular with respect to verbal *-s* absence, as was the case for copula absence. Finally, in Hip Hop, OutKast's lyrics are the most vernacular and 2Pac's are the least vernacular with respect to both variables.

In sum, the rates of verbal *-s* absence are the same for each genre. However, this fact masks the great deal of variation that exists within each genre, especially in Hip Hop and, to a slightly lesser extent, Blues.

4.0 Discussion

We have seen that there are higher rates of copula absence in the Blues and Hip Hop lyrics analyzed here than in the Soul/Funk lyrics but that the overall rates of verbal *-s* absence are the same for all three genres. These data imply that Hip Hop and Blues lyrics are more vernacular than Soul/Funk lyrics with respect to copula absence and that all three genre's lyrics are equally vernacular with respect to verbal *-s* absence. In fact, though, there is a great deal of variation of verbal *-s* absence rates within each genre,

indicating that factors other than musical genre (and recording date) are involved.

Factors that might affect the rate of verbal *-s* absence include grammatical conditioning, semantic conditioning, idiolectal variation, and the need for lyrics to rhyme. An investigation of the role of such factors is beyond the scope of this study.

The remainder of this discussion focuses mainly on the results for copula absence. Why would Blues and Hip Hop lyrics be more vernacular than Soul/Funk lyrics, and why would Hip Hop lyrics be more vernacular than Blues lyrics? Two possible explanations will be explored: (1) The differences among the lyrics reflect differences in AAVE speech over the course of the time periods in which the music was recorded; and (2) the differences among the lyrics result from contextual factors peculiar to each musical genre. These two perspectives on the data should not be viewed as competing explanations, but rather as different contexts in which the data can be discussed. Moreover, the two are obviously related. While the results for copula absence are a richer source for discussion, the verbal *-s* absence results will also be discussed with respect to both avenues of explanation.

4.1 African American Music Lyrics and AAVE Diachrony

This section explores the possibility of using the lyrics of African American popular music as a source of information about AAVE speech. The results of the present study are discussed in relation to studies of AAVE speech. Of particular interest is the question of how AAVE has changed over the time spanned by the lyrics analyzed in this study. First, two problems with using song lyrics as a source of information about speech are addressed.

4.1.1 Problems with Using Song Lyrics as a Source

Two facts about song lyrics call into question their use as a source of information about speech. Neither, however, should prevent us from studying song lyrics in order to try to learn about speech.

First, the fact that lyrics are part of an artistic performance means that they are likely to be more consciously determined than speech. When singers or rappers compose lyrics, their choice of one grammatical variant over another might be made consciously. A performer might, for a variety of reasons, want his or her lyrics to sound more or less vernacular and choose grammatical forms accordingly. Factors like topic and intended audience, which can vary from one song to another or even within a song, are likely to influence a performer's language use. However, these factors also influence ordinary speech (Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994). What is important in any study—whether the source is recorded speech or a musical performance—is to be aware of factors such as topic and audience and to have an understanding of how they might affect the choice of linguistic variants. Moreover, it is important to recognize that language use in lyrics might be different from speech but that the two will differ in constrained ways. For example, given that copula absence occurs more frequently in *are* environments than in *is* environments in speech, it is unlikely that a singer's lyrics would lack the copula more frequently in *is* environments.

Second, since lyrics are performed to music, their linguistic content is subject to a set of factors that do not exist for speech. Specifically, lyrics must fit the rhythmic pattern of the music and frequently must rhyme. In either case the choice of grammatical variant might be affected. For example, a performer might want a line to have a certain number of syllables and, thus, choose to use *are* instead of *'re* or *ø*; or a performer might

want two lines to rhyme and use *go* instead of *goes* with a third person singular subject. There is no straightforward way to control for such occurrences, but their effects can be minimized by using large samples.

4.1.2 Song Lyrics and AAVE Speech: Verbal *-s* Absence

If the song lyrics studied here are taken as being reflective of AAVE speech of their respective time periods, then the results for verbal *-s* absence have the following implications: (1) the overall rate of verbal *-s* absence has not changed from the 1920s to the 1990s; and (2) there has always been interspeaker variation but there was more in the 1990s than previously and more in the period from the 1920s to the 1950s than in the 1960s and 1970s. Each of these implications will be addressed in turn.

There is no evidence that bears directly on the question of whether the overall rate of verbal *-s* absence has remained the same. It is difficult to compare the studies that do exist because they all study different populations:

(15) Verbal *-s* Absence in Various Studies of African American Speech

Study	Population	% <i>-s</i> Absence
Schneider 1989	ex-slaves interviewed in the 1930s (written transcripts)	28%
Poplack & Tagliamonte 1991	ex-slaves interviewed in the 1930s and 1940s (audio recordings)	29%
Labov et al. 1968	teenage gang members in Harlem, New York City	68% ⁷
Wolfram 1969	working-class residents of Detroit, average age 22 ⁸	56.9% - 71.4% ⁹

⁷ This figure comes from Rickford 1992.

⁸ The average age was calculated based on information reported in Wolfram 1969:222.

⁹ The first figure is for upper working class subjects and the second is for lower working class subjects.

Rickford 1992	residents of East Palo Alto, average age 46 ¹⁰	69% ¹¹
Rickford 1992	teenagers in East Palo Alto, ages 14 and 15	96% - 97% ¹²

The most crucial difference among the studies is the age of the subjects. The only study that includes a wide range of ages is Rickford 1992. The studies of former slaves only include very old speakers, the New York study only includes teenagers, and the Detroit study has far more children and teenagers than older subjects. It has generally been reported that younger African Americans speak the most vernacular variety of AAVE. Therefore, if all the studies included a wide range of ages, one would expect the 1930s and 1940s *-s* absence rates to be higher (because younger speakers would be included) and the 1960s *-s* absence rates to be lower (because more older speakers would be included). Whether the overall rates would then be the same is, of course, unknown. It does seem, however, that the 1990s rate would still be higher than the 1960s rates. There are two reasons to believe this. First, the average *-s* absence rate for 1990s East Palo Alto speakers of a wide range of ages is about the same as that reported for New York teenagers and within the range of that reported for younger Detroit residents in the 1960s. Second, the *-s* absence rates reported for teenagers in the 1990s are much higher than those reported for teenagers in the 1960s

Complicating the issue further, though, is the fact that in all of the studies except Rickford 1992 the interviewer was white. Subjects interviewed by African Americans are likely to speak a more vernacular variety than subjects interviewed by whites

¹⁰ The average age was calculated based on information reported in Rickford 1992:264.

¹¹ This is the average of the figures reported for the individual subjects.

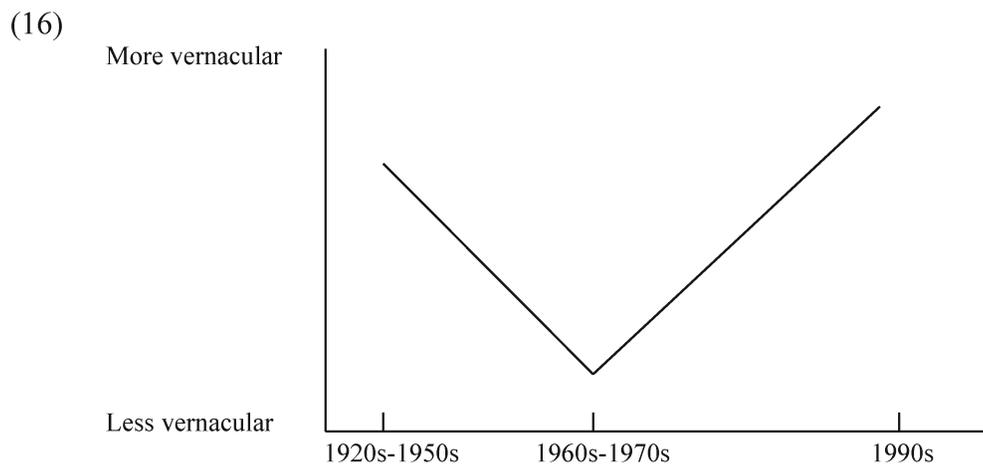
¹² These are the individual rates reported for the two teenagers in the study.

(Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994). If the subjects in the other studies had been interviewed by African Americans, their verbal *-s* absence rates might have been higher. If this is the case, then the overall rates of verbal *-s* absence might indeed be the same across the three time periods.

There is no evidence to support the second implication of the results of the present study, that there was more interspeaker variation with respect to verbal *-s* absence in the 1990s than previously and more between the 1920s and 1950s than in the 1960s and 1970s. It is, of course, true that there has always been interspeaker variation (as Wolfram 1969 and Rickford 1992 demonstrate), so it should not be surprising that there is so much variation of verbal *-s* absence rates within each musical genre.

4.1.3 Song Lyrics and AAVE Speech: Copula Absence

If taken as reflective of AAVE speech, the copula absence results imply the following pattern of linguistic change:



As illustrated in (16), the pattern of change suggested by the copula absence results involves AAVE becoming less vernacular, or more similar to other varieties of American English, between the Blues era and the Soul/Funk era and more vernacular, or more

divergent from other varieties of American English, between the Soul/Funk era and the Hip Hop era, ending up more vernacular in the Hip Hop era than in the Blues era. This pattern embodies two distinct changes, and each will be explored separately.

Did AAVE diverge from other varieties of American English between the late 1960s/1970s and the 1990s? This question has been subject to much debate in the AAVE literature in recent years. Bailey and Maynor (1989) and Rickford (1992) cite evidence that they believe support the divergence claim. Rickford reports apparent-time and real-time data that demonstrate an increase in the occurrence of copula absence and invariant *be*. Bailey and Maynor also discuss invariant *be*, arguing not only that it occurs more frequently but that its function has changed. The present discussion focuses on copula absence.

Rickford (1992) reports copula absence rates for older, middle-aged, and teenage residents of East Palo Alto. Copula absence occurs far more frequently in the speech of the teenagers (86%) than in the speech of the middle-aged (27%) or older subjects (17%).¹³ Arguing that these differences do not result from age-grading alone, Rickford compares the copula absence rates of the East Palo Alto teenagers with those reported for New York teenagers (Labov et al. 1968) and younger Detroit residents (Wolfram 1969) in the late 1960s. The New York study only reports *is* absence rates. The figures range from 36% to 55%, all lower than the average *is* absence rate reported for East Palo Alto teens (73%)¹⁴. Wolfram reports overall copula absence rates for his Detroit speakers

¹³ These figures are averages of the figures reported by Rickford (1992:264) for the two subjects in each age group.

¹⁴ The copula absence rates for New York teenagers were calculated using Labov Deletion, whereas the other two studies used Straight Deletion (see Section 3.1.3.1 for an explanation of the two methods). If

(average age 22) ranging from 37.3% (for upper working class subjects) to 56.9% (for lower working class subjects), substantially lower than those reported for East Palo Alto teenagers twenty years later.

These data support the claim that AAVE became more vernacular between the 1960s and the 1990s with respect to copula absence. There are two caveats, however. First, since the Detroit sample includes some middle-aged speakers it is possible, though unlikely, that the younger Detroit speakers actually had copula absence rates as high as those of the East Palo Alto teenagers. Second, as discussed in the previous section, the race of the interviewer is relevant. In the 1960s studies the interviewers were white, while in the 1990s study the interviewer was African American. It is quite possible that the difference in the race of the addressee in the three studies could account for the different copula absence rates.¹⁵ The evidence for divergence between the 1960s and the 1990s is, thus, inconclusive; however, the results of the present study, specifically, the much higher rate of copula absence in Hip Hop lyrics than in Soul/Funk lyrics, can be taken as limited support for the divergence claim. Clearly, more research on this question is necessary, particularly research that addresses the limitations of previous studies.

The second part of the pattern of language change implied by the results of the present study is a change in AAVE from more to less vernacular between the Blues era and the Soul/Funk era. Unfortunately, there is no linguistic data that bear directly on this

Labov et al. had used Straight Deletion, the copula absence rates would be even lower (i.e. more different from the East Palo Alto figures).

¹⁵ Wolfram (1987:42-43) makes a similar, but more general point: higher rates of occurrence of vernacular features and the appearance of “new” vernacular features may result from improved elicitation techniques rather than actual language change.

question. The earliest studies of copula absence in AAVE speech are from the late 1960s. Without any linguistic evidence, one can only hypothesize.

Smitherman (2000) offers an account of AAVE language change based on sociohistorical conditions, noting “the interrelationship between the language and the status of . . . African Americans” (34). Specifically, she argues that “in historical moments of racial progress, the language is less Ebonified [i.e. less vernacular and less distinct from other varieties of English]; in times of racial suppression, the language is more Ebonified” (34). For the time period in question here, Smitherman argues that the World War years were a time of great optimism among African Americans, as many believed that their status would improve as a result of America’s wars for democracy. African Americans sought greater cultural integration and renounced their African heritage, including the more distinctive features of their language. This process culminated in the optimism of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and early 1960s. This posited change in African American speech parallels that depicted in (16), AAVE becoming less vernacular between the Blues era and the Soul/Funk era.

Interestingly, Smitherman’s discussion also supports the second stage of language change depicted in (16), an increase in the distinctiveness of AAVE between the Soul/Funk era and the Hip Hop era. Smitherman argues that the rise of the Black Power Movement in the late 1960s launched a process of “recreolization,” defined as “a conscious attempt to accentuate the uniqueness of Ebonics, to recapture and reconfigure earlier forms of Black speech, to carve out a distinctly African-in-America linguistic identity” (Smitherman 2000:38). This process is still occurring, she argues, and is evident in the language used by African American women writers like Alice Walker and

Toni Morrison, the “bilingual consciousness” of middle-class African Americans, and the language of Hip Hop culture.

Smitherman’s claims about African American language are intriguing, and as an African American and a linguist she is more qualified than most to assess the African American language situation. If possible, though, her claims should be compared with the results of rigorous studies of AAVE. The results of the present study (for one of the variables), for example, are consistent with Smitherman’s portrait of AAVE in the twentieth century. This agreement lends credence to both lines of study.

4.2 AAVE and the Performance Context of Blues, Soul and Funk, and Hip Hop

In this section the results of the present study are addressed with respect to contextual facts about the genres and performers investigated. The song lyrics are viewed as parts of artistic performances, and the performers are discussed in relation to factors such as the nature of their audiences and their motivations as artists. Most of the discussion is based on the results for the copula absence variable. The first three sections address each of the genres individually with respect to the copula absence results. The final section is a brief discussion of the verbal *-s* absence results.

To review, the questions raised by the copula absence results and addressed below are these: (1) Why would Hip Hop and Blues lyrics be more vernacular than Soul/Funk lyrics? and (2) Why would Hip Hop lyrics be more vernacular than Blues lyrics?

4.2.1 The Performance Context of Blues

At least one writer has noted the interesting parallel between the rise and fall in the popularity of Blues and the rise and fall of Jim Crow (Haralambos 1979). Blues likely originated in the decades after the end of slavery, when Jim Crow laws were first enacted

in the South. Blues remained the most popular form of African American music until around the 1950s, when the Civil Rights Movement began to gain momentum.

Downhome Blues can, thus, be viewed as the music of a segregated people. While there were no Jim Crow laws in the North, African Americans who moved to Northern cities frequently found themselves in ghettos, where they were once again segregated. The urban Blues of the 1940s and 1950s is, thus, also the music of a segregated people.

Partly as a result of Jim Crow in the South and the de facto segregation of the North, Downhome Blues of the 1920s and 1930s and Chicago Blues of the 1950s were exclusively Black in every way. Downhome Blues performers came from the same communities (or at least the same types of communities) as their audiences. Many Blues performers worked as share-croppers and performed at local parties on the weekends. Others left their home communities, traveling throughout their region performing at parties and juke joints in other share-cropping communities. The relatively few Downhome Blues artists who had the opportunity to record made records known as “race records,” which were marketed exclusively to African Americans. Downhome Blues seems to have existed in relative isolation from non-Black influences.

Chicago Blues is marked by a similar insularity. The performers generally had backgrounds similar to those of their listeners. The members of the audience, like the performers, had generally been born in the South and then migrated to the North. While whites may have become interested in Blues in the North, they were unlikely to have been attracted to the electric blues of Chicago. Blues artists, thus, continued to perform to African Americans and sing about the concerns of African Americans.

How do the facts outlined above relate to the language used in Downhome and Chicago Blues songs? Given that the performers came from the same population as their audience and the lack of significant external influence on the music, it is reasonable to assume that the language used by performers of Downhome and Chicago Blues, the two genres represented in the present study, was fairly similar to the speech of their African American contemporaries. There is no reason to believe that the performers would have intentionally adjusted their language to make it more or less vernacular. They might have wanted their language to be the same as that of their audience, but no adjustment would have been necessary for that to be the case. Their own language would have already been the same as that of their audience.

4.2.2 The Performance Context of Soul and Funk

By the time Soul became the dominant form of African American popular music, the United States was a very different place for African Americans (and all Americans) than it had been during the Blues era. Legal segregation had ended, federal anti-discrimination legislation had been passed, and whites had joined African Americans in the South to fight for voting rights. Young men were being sent to the other side of the world to fight an ill-conceived war, and there was large-scale dissent on American college campuses. Culturally, something unprecedented had occurred. A white, hip youth culture with values and forms of expression all its own had developed and become dominant. In the past, whites who thought of themselves as hip simply latched on to the latest Black hip cultural phenomenon, for example the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s or bebop in the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1960s, though, there was genuine, bidirectional cultural exchange between hippie culture and African American culture.

One of the arenas in which this cultural exchange occurred was popular music. In the past, the white pop music that appealed to white youth largely consisted of rip-offs of African American musical forms. In the 1960s, though, white rock musicians created exciting new music that, while obviously dependent on earlier African American forms, was innovative and artistically legitimate in its own right. The lyrical content of white music also changed. White rock musicians sang songs inspired by their social consciousness and psychedelic explorations. Songs about war and peace and love abounded.

Some Soul musicians were influenced by the developments in white rock music. Three were most prominent. One of the earliest Soul musicians with obvious white influences was Sly Stone, whose integrated band “audaciously fused soulful vocals, latin horns and psychedelic rock flourishes into rousing invocations of both black pride and universal brotherhood” (Ward 1998:358).

The other two prominent Soul musicians who were genuinely influenced by the culture surrounding white rock music were George Clinton and Curtis Mayfield, two of the three Soul artists whose lyrics have been examined here. George Clinton is an interesting case because, while he did have white influences, his music was undeniably Black. At the same time, though, the music of Parliament was quite different in many respects from any previous Soul or Funk music. His vision was broader and his music was more layered. The near-symphonic nature of some of his music reflected the influence of innovative white rock musicians like Frank Zappa. Lyrically, George Clinton was unique among whites and African Americans. His extraterrestrial lyrics were the product of the brilliant combination of a psychedelic mindset and an African

American perspective on race relations. Evidence of George Clinton's involvement in white hip culture is, thus, evident in both his music and lyrics.

Curtis Mayfield is a more clear-cut case of white cultural influence. When Mayfield launched his solo career, he made a conscious attempt to incorporate white musical elements and lyrics of more universal appeal. Consider the following summary of a 1969 interview with Mayfield by reporter Judith Spiegelman: "His desire is to reach as wide and varied an audience as possible with his message and he is concerned with his inability to do this. . . . He finds himself attempting to alter his music to please the white audience. . ." (Haralambos 1979:172).

Mayfield's first solo album, in addition to including songs like "The Other Side of Town" and "Miss Black America," which were about specifically African American themes, also included songs about more universal concerns. In "(Don't Worry) If There's a Hell Below We're All Going To Go" Mayfield issued an apocalyptic warning to whites and African Americans. On his second album, Mayfield included more songs about topics of universal concern. Some of these songs touched on some of the same themes as hippie music. In "Underground" Mayfield sings of pollution. In "We Got To Have Peace" he decries war and sings about people working together to improve the country.

It has been demonstrated that the music of both Parliament and Curtis Mayfield was created within the context of white hippie culture. To varying degrees, these performers were influenced by the music and values of this culture. Where there is greater cultural interaction, it is reasonable to assume that there will be greater linguistic similarity. Not surprisingly, the lyrics of Parliament and Curtis Mayfield were found to

be less vernacular than any of the other lyrics examined. The fact that Mayfield made a conscious attempt to appeal to a white audience might explain why his lyrics are even less vernacular than Parliament's. It was largely the influence of Mayfield and Parliament that made the Soul/Funk lyrics less vernacular than the Blues and Hip Hop lyrics in the present study. James Brown's lyrics, at least with respect to copula absence in *are* environments, were as vernacular as or more vernacular than those of most of the other artists. Why is James Brown different from the other Soul/Funk artists? Both musically and lyrically, James Brown remained independent of any influence from white culture. His music was the most purely Black popular music of his day. There is, thus, no reason to expect any linguistic accommodation, either conscious or unconscious, on the part of James Brown.

4.2.3 The Performance Context of Hip Hop

Just as Blues began as the music of the oppressed rural underclass, Hip Hop originated as and remains the music of the oppressed urban underclass. Partly as a result of major changes in the power and extensiveness of the mass media, Hip Hop, unlike Blues, has a large white audience. Nonetheless, as was the case for Blues, there is little if any white influence on the creative aspects of Hip Hop. Hip Hop can be considered a segregated form, in that the artists are African American and their lyrics are generally about African American life and cultural themes.

Several scholars have noted the similar paths of development and related lyrical themes of Blues and Hip Hop. Both genres developed in times of great social upheaval (Washington and Shaver 1997). Blues emerged in the context of the end of slavery and the establishment of Jim Crow laws in the rural South. Hip Hop developed in a time of

major changes in urban America. Middle-class African Americans were leaving the inner city, housing conditions were deteriorating, unemployment was increasing, and gang wars fueled by the drug trade were on the rise. The lyrics of both genres provide a documentation of the lives of their performers and listeners.

Dyson (1993) argues that Blues and Hip Hop served similar functions for their performers:

The blues functioned for another generation of blacks much as rap functions for young blacks today: as a source of racial identity, permitting forms of boasting and asserting machismo for devalued black men suffering from social degradation, allowing commentary on social and personal conditions in uncensored language, and fostering the ability to transform hurt and anguish into art and commerce (9).

However, Hip Hop lyrics go even further than Blues lyrics in addressing the social issues relevant to their audience head on. For example, Hip Hop songs about racial violence abound. While racial violence in the form of lynchings was a major part of African American life in the Blues era, Blues lyrics that explicitly address this issue are rare or nonexistent. Moreover, Blues lyrics rarely went beyond description, while Hip Hop lyrics not only describe social conditions but call for change.

Given the lyrical content of Hip Hop, it should come as no surprise that Hip Hop performers rap in the vernacular of the African American urban underclass. Unlike some Soul artists, they are not trying to reach a wider audience, nor do they participate in any significant exchange with white cultures. Hip Hop artists use the vernacular because it is

the language of their intended audience. Furthermore, some have argued that Hip Hop artists intentionally use vernacular forms to express solidarity with other African Americans and resistance to white culture. Smitherman (1997) notes that many Hip Hop artists are college-educated and most can code-switch between AAVE and more mainstream varieties of English, yet the lyrics nonetheless are in the vernacular. Dyson (1993:12) explains that Hip Hop “takes delight in undermining ‘correct’ English usage.” Indeed, the use of AAVE forms in Hip Hop is a fundamental part of the genre:

. . . [rappers] deliberately and consciously employ the ‘antilanguage’ of the Black speech community, thus sociolinguistically constructing themselves as members of the dispossessed. Even when the message in the music does not overtly speak to racial resistance, the use of the Black speech community’s syntax covertly reinforces Black America’s 400-year rejection of Euro-American cultural, racial—and linguistic—domination (Smitherman 1997:274-275).

The very nature of the language used in Hip Hop serves to convey the message of resistance that is so fundamental to the genre.

It should be clear why Hip Hop lyrics are more vernacular than Soul and Funk lyrics (at least those investigated here), but what about the performance contexts of the different genres would make Hip Hop lyrics more vernacular than Blues lyrics? The likely answer to this question is the intentional and conscious use of vernacular forms in Hip Hop, described above.

4.2.4 Verbal –s Absence

The preceding discussion has pertained only to the results for the copula absence variable. Why would there not be any difference in the overall rate of verbal *-s* absence among the three genres, given the relevance of the contextual factors discussed above? One possible explanation is that copula absence is more salient than verbal *-s* absence as a social marker. If this were the case, then verbal *-s* absence rates would be less subject to change resulting from cultural contact or conscious alteration of language. There is presently no evidence in the literature that verbal *-s* absence and copula absence differ with respect to their social significance. This is an area that should be explored further.

5.0 Conclusion

We have seen that the lyrics of African American popular music can be a valuable source of information about AAVE. The occurrence of two different AAVE grammatical features has been analyzed in the lyrics of three genres of African American music. It has been demonstrated that the results of such a study, when viewed in the context of previous literature about AAVE and African American music, can lead to a greater understanding of both AAVE speech and the artistic use of AAVE in forms of musical expression.

Appendix: The Songs in the Sample

BluesBlind Lemon Jefferson*Moanin' All Over:*

Blind Lemon's Penitentiary Blues

Chock House Blues

Deceitful Brownskin Blues

Long Distance Moan

Bakershop Blues

Balky Mule Blues

That Black Snake Moan, No. 2

The Best of Blind Lemon Jefferson:

Black Horse Blues

Corinna Blues

Bed Spring Blues

Booster Blues

Long Lonesome Blues

Wartime Blues

How Long How Long

Match Box Blues

That Crawlin Baby Blues

Robert Johnson

Terraplane Blues

Stones in My Passway

Little Queen of Spades

Me and the Devil Blues

Milkcow's Calf Blues

Kind Hearted Woman Blues

I Believe I'll Dust My Broom

Sweet Home Chicago

Ramblin on My Mind

Come on in My Kitchen

32-20 Blues

They're Red Hot

Dead Shrimp Blues

Cross Road Blues

Walkin Blues

Last Fair Deal Gone Down

Stop Breakin Down Blues

Love in Vain Blues

Little Walter*The Best of Little Walter:*

Mean Old World

Tell Me Mama

Blues with a Feeling

You're So Fine

You Better Watch Yourself

Last Night

Can't Hold Out Much Longer

Confessin the Blues:

I Got To Go

Confessin the Blues

I Got To Find My Baby

Crazy Mixed Up World

Temperature

Up the Line

Soul/FunkJames Brown

Papa Don't Take No Mess

Hot Pants

The Payback

Get on the Good Foot

Stoned to the Bone

Escape-ism

I'm a Greedy Man

Make It Funky

King Heroin

I Got Ants in My Pants

There It Is

I Got a Bag of My Own

Curtis Mayfield

Curtis:

(Don't Worry) If There's a Hell Below We're All Going To Go

Miss Black America

The Other Side of Town

Wild and Free

Give It Up

Roots:

Get Down

Keep On Keeping On

Underground

We Got To Have Peace

Beautiful Brother of Mine

Superfly:

Freddie's Dead

Superfly

Parliament

Chocolate City

Funkentelechy

Bop Gun (Endangered Species)

Mothership Connection (Star Child)

Give Up the Funk

Aqua Boogie

Theme from the Black Hole

Party People

P. Funk (Wants To Get Funked Up)

Fantasy Is Reality

Mr. Wiggles

Hip Hop2Pac

Violent

Part Time Mutha

Soulja's Story

If My Homie Calls

Brenda's Got a Baby

OutKast

Liberation

West Savannah

Chonkyfire

Slump

Da Art of Storytellig' (Part 2)

Mamacita

Lauryn Hill

Doo Wop (That Thing)

Every Ghetto, Every City

Everything Is Everything

Final Hour

Superstar

References

- Bailey, Guy, and Natalie Maynor. 1989. The divergence controversy. *American Speech* 64: 12-39.
- Bailey, Guy, Natalie Maynor, and Patricia Cukor-Avila, ed. 1991. *The emergence of Black English: Text and commentary*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Barlow, William. 1989. *“Looking up at down”: The emergence of blues culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Bender, Emily. 2000. Syntactic variation and linguistic competence: The case of AAVE copula absence. Doctoral dissertation, Stanford University, Stanford, California.
- Blake, Renée. 1997. Defining the envelope of linguistic variation: The case of “don’t count” forms in the copula analysis of African American Vernacular English. *Language Variation and Change* 9: 57-79.
- Brewer, Jeutonne P. 1986. Durative marker or hypercorrection? The case of –s in the

- WPA Ex-Slave Narratives. In *Language variety in the South: Perspectives in black and white*, ed. Michael B. Montgomery and Guy Bailey, 131-148. University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press.
- Dillard, J. L. 1972. *Black English: Its history and usage in the United States*. New York: Random House.
- Dyson, Michael Eric. 1993. *Reflecting black: African-American cultural criticism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fasold, Ralph W. 1998. The relation between black and white speech in the South. In *Handbook of dialects and language variation*, ed. Michael D. Linn, 475-500. San Diego: Academic Press.
- Fasold, Ralph W., William Labov, Faye Boyd Vaughn-Cooke, Guy Bailey, Walt Wolfram, Arthur K. Spears, and John R. Rickford. 1987. Are black and white vernaculars diverging? Papers from the N.W.A.V.E. XIV panel discussion. *American Speech* 62: 3-80.
- George, Nelson. 1998. *Hip Hop America*. New York: Viking.
- Haralambos, Michael. 1979. *Right on: From blues to soul in black America*. New York: Da Capo.
- Jones, LeRoi (Amiri Baraka). 1963. *Blues people: Negro music in white America*. New York: William Morrow.
- Labov, William. 1972. *Language in the inner city: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Labov, William, Paul Cohen, Clarence Robbins, and John Lewis. 1968. *A study of the Non-Standard English of Negro and Puerto Rican speakers in New York City*.

- Philadelphia: U.S. Regional Survey.
- Lippi-Green, Rosina. 1997. *English with an accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States*. New York: Routledge.
- Montgomery, Michael, Janet M. Fuller, and Sharon DeMarse. 1993. "The black men has wives and Sweet harts [and third person plural –s] Jest like the white men": Evidence for verbal –s from written documents on 19th-century African American speech. *Language Variation and Change* 5: 335-357.
- Poplack, Shana, and Sali Tagliamonte. 1991. There's no tense like the present: Verbal –s inflection in early Black English. In Bailey, Maynor, and Cukor-Avila, 275-324.
- Rickford, John R. 1986. Social contact and linguistic diffusion: Hiberno English and New World Black English. In Rickford 1999, 174-218.
- Rickford, John R. 1992. Grammatical variation and divergence in Vernacular Black English. In Rickford 1999, 261-280.
- Rickford, John R. 1998. Phonological and grammatical features of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). In Rickford 1999, 3-14.
- Rickford, John R. 1999. *African American Vernacular English: Features, evolution, educational implications*. Malden, Mass: Blackwell.
- Rickford, John R., Arnetha Ball, Renée Blake, Raina Jackson, and Nomi Martin. 1991. Rappin on the copula coffin: Theoretical and methodological issues in the analysis of copula variation in African American Vernacular English. In Rickford 1999, 61-89.
- Rickford, John R. and Faye McNair-Knox. 1994. Addressee- and topic-influenced style

- shift. In Rickford 1999, 112-153.
- Rose, Tricia. 1994. *Black noise: Rap music and black culture in contemporary America*. Hanover: University Press of New England.
- Sackheim, Eric. 1975. *The blues line: A collection of blues lyrics*. New York: Schirmer.
- Schneider, Edgar W. 1983. The origin of the verbal –s in Black English. *American Speech* 58: 99-113.
- Schneider, Edgar W. 1989. *American Earlier Black English: Morphological and syntactic variables*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.
- Smitherman, Geneva. 1973. White English in blackface or, who do I be? In Smitherman 2000, 57-66.
- Smitherman, Geneva. 1992. Black English, diverging or converging?: The view from the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In Smitherman 2000, 164-176.
- Smitherman, Geneva. 1994. “The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice”: African American student writers in the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In Smitherman 2000, 176-191.
- Smitherman, Geneva. 1997. “The chain remain the same”: Communicative practices in the Hip Hop Nation. In Smitherman 2000, 268-283.
- Smitherman, Geneva. 2000. *Talkin that talk: Language, culture and education in African America*. New York: Routledge.
- Taft, Michael. 1983. *Blues lyric poetry: An anthology*. New York: Garland.
- Tate, Greg. 1993. Liner notes to *Parliament: Tear the Roof Off: 1974-1980*. PolyGram 314 514 417-2.
- Titon, Jeff Todd. 1994. *Early downhome blues: A musical and cultural analysis*. Chapel

- Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press.
- Ward, Brian. 1998. *Just my soul responding: Rhythm and blues, black consciousness, and race relations*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Washington, Patricia A., and Lynda Dixon Shaver. 1997. The language culture of rap music videos. In *Language, rhythm, and sound: Black popular cultures into the twenty-first century*, ed. Joseph K. Adjaye and Adrienne R. Andrews, 164-177. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Winford, Donald. 1997. On the origins of African American Vernacular English—A creolist perspective, Part I: The sociohistorical background. *Diachronica* 14: 305-344.
- Winford, Donald. 1998. On the origins of African American Vernacular English—A creolist perspective, Part II: Linguistic features. *Diachronica* 15: 99-154.
- Wolfram, Walter A. 1969. *A sociolinguistic description of Detroit Negro speech*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Wolfram, Walt. 1987. Are black and white vernaculars diverging? In Fasold et al., 40-48.