

## Features of African American English (AAE)

-condensed from Geneva Smitherman, Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America. Detroit: Wayne State Press, 1977. Chapter Two, pp. 16-34.

NOTE: Not all African Americans are native speakers of AAE. Also, although the features listed below can be found in all Black social classes and in all regions of the country, not all occur in all varieties of AAE... which is highly variable and distinctive to specific communities.

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### Part I. Phonology

Initial /th/ = /d/

*them = dem; then = den*

When initial /th/ is voiceless, then pronounced the same way as in SAE

*thought = thought (not dough)*

*thing = thing (more like thang), (not dang)*

Final /th/ = /f/

*south = souf; mouth = mouf*

Deletion of middle and final /r/

*during = doing; more = mow; Paris = pass; star = stah*

Deletion of middle and final /l/

*help = hep; will = wi*

When the contracted form of *will* is used, you get a kind of /ah/ sound, as: *Iah be there in a minute* (I'll be there in a minute).

Deletion of most final consonants

*hood = hoo; bed = be; test = tes; wasp = was.*

Pluralized forms ending in such double consonants add /es/, thus: *tests = testes; wasps = wasses*. (One important exception to this rule involves words ending in /s/, such as the proper name *Wes*. Here the /s/ is not deleted.

Vowel plus /ng/ in *thing, ring, sing* rendered as /ang/

*thing = thang; ring = rang; sing = sang*

Contraction of *going to* rendered as *gon*. Here the *to* is omitted altogether, and the nasal sound at the end is shortened, producing a sound that is somewhat like an abbreviated form of *gone*.

*He was gon tell his momma good-bye.*

Primary stress on first syllable and front shifting

*police = PO-lice; Detroit = DEE-troit*

Simple vowels

*nice = nahc; boy = boah*

Some snippets of AAE:

"*Dem dudes always be doin day thang.*" 8<sup>th</sup> grade student

"*Hur'up, the bell ranging,*" 4<sup>th</sup> grade student

"*Sang good, now y'all.*" Female adult in Baptist church

"*Doin the civil rights crisis, we work hard.*" College student  
from Smitherman, pp. 17-18.

## Exercise on phonology

Write the words below in correct AAE, using phonetic spelling.

ex. 1. tooth - /toof/

2. sore

3. desks

4. this

5. dead

6. self

7. insurance

8. king

9. rest

10. tore

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## Part 2. Grammar - *be*

The most distinctive feature is patterns using *be* (sometimes written and pronounced as /*bees*/).

Habitual *be* = happens repeatedly/ shows habitual aspect

*They be slow all the time.*

*She be late every day.*

*I see her when I bees on my way to school.*

*By the time I go get my momma, it be dark.*

*The kid always be messing up and everything.*

*The coffee bees cold* = Every day the coffee is cold.

Non-*be* = *be* is omitted when referring to events or realities that do not repeat ...

*The coffee cold* = Today the coffee is cold.

*My father, he work at Ford. He tired.* (Although he is tired today, this is generally not the case.)

...or conditions that are fixed in time:

Non-*be* before nouns (*He a hippie now*); before adjectives (*He too tall for me*); before adverbs (*They shoes right there*); before prepositional phrases (*My momma in the hospital*); and in auxiliary constructions (*They talking about school now*).

Some more examples of non-*be* to indicate nonrecurring events or a fixed, static condition:

*He sick today.*

*This my mother.*

*That man too tall for her little short self.*

*They daddy in the house.*

*The mens playing baseball and the womens cooking today.*

*Man, your ride really bad.*

Be used to convey future time

*The boy be here soon.*

*They family be gone Friday.*

Notice the importance of context in decoding which aspect of *be* is being used:

*She be there later.* (future *be*)

*She be there everyday.* (habitual *be*)

*I be going home tomorrow.* (future *be*)

*I be going home all the time.* (habitual *be*).

Future *be* may combine with contracted form of *will* (which may sound like /ah/ instead of /ll/)

*He be looking for you next week* (or *He-ah be looking for you next week.*)

### Exercise on *be*

Supply the correct form of *be*, absent *be* (with a crossed-out zero), or *do+be*. HINT: only one sentence has an absent *be*.

11. The principal \_\_\_\_\_ in his office now.

12. He always \_\_\_\_\_ messing with me.

13. They ain't left, \_\_\_\_\_ they?

14. Where \_\_\_\_\_ they \_\_\_\_\_ at every day?

15. Speaker A: He \_\_\_\_\_ blind, but now he see.

16. Speaker B: That's okay. He \_\_\_\_\_ blind again tomorrow when it come to her.

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### Part 3. Grammar - *been*

*Been* used to express past action that has recently been completed.

*She been tardy twice this semester* (which might have been several weeks or months ago as long as it's been 'this semester')

**\*\*NOT CORRECT in AAE:** *She been tardy twice last semester* (although 'last semester' might have just ended).

CORRECT in AAE: *She was tardy twice last semester.*

Compare to SAE: *I have been to New York this year.* **\*\*INCORRECT in SAE:** *I have been to New York last year.*

Generally, when AAE speakers use *been*, SAE speakers would use *have, has, or had* plus *been*.

AAE: *He been there before.*

SAE: *He has been there before.*

AAE: *They been there before.*

SAE: They have been there before.

AAE: *She been there and left before I even got there.*

SAE: *She has been there and left before I even got there.*

*Been* is also used in combination with other verb forms to indicate past action, recently completed or more distantly completed:

*He been gone a year.*

*He been gone a day.*

*Tony been seen at her house today.*

**\*\*INCORRECT AAE:** *Tony been seen at her house yesterday.*

CORRECT AAE: *Tony was seen in her house yesterday.*

Been used for emphasis.

*She BEEN there* (stress on BEEN means the speaker wants to emphasize the fact that she has been wherever she is for a long enough time that's it's an established fact.)

Also *been* can be used in combination with other verbs, again to show emphasis.

*He BEEN gone* (I'm certain of the fact of his leaving—it might have taken place a long time ago, or the leaving might have just occurred; WHEN is not important, just the FACT.)

\*\*INCORRECT AAE: *He BEEN gone a long time.* (If there are other words that indicate time or intensity, then *been* would not be stressed.)

CORRECT AAE: *He been gone a long time.*

**Exercise on *been***

Convert SAE forms into correct AAE. Change only the underlined phrases. HINT: one sentence does not need to be changed.

17. If you had been there, you would really have seen something. \_\_\_\_\_

18. Wow! She has been gone a long time. \_\_\_\_\_

19. Her folks was down South last year. \_\_\_\_\_

20. Tony has been looking at her an hour. \_\_\_\_\_

21. If you haven't been telling the truth, don't even speak to me anymore. \_\_\_\_\_

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## Part 4. Grammar - *done*

Done indicates past action, either recently or distantly completed. Similar to SAE *did* or *already* + past tensed verb.

*I done my homework today.*

*I done my housework yesterday.*

When used with another verb, *done* usually only means 'recently' completed. Similar to SAE *have*, *has*, or *had* + past participle.

*I done finish my work today.*

\*\*INCORRECT AAE: *I done finish my work yesterday.*

AAE: *James done seen the show.*

SAE: *James has seen the show.*

AAE: *I done did my hair.* (notice that AAE *did* here is like SAE *done* in the next sentence).

SAE: *I have done my hair.*

Done used in conjunction with *been*, still functions like SAE *have*.

AAE: *He done been gone all night.*

SAE: *He has been gone all night.*

AAE: *He done been gone all night.*

SAE: *He has been gone all night.*

AAE: *They done been sitting there a hour.*  
SAE: *They have been sitting there an hour.*

NOTE: All of these AAE above would be correct without *done*.  
*He done been gone all night* OR *He been gone all night.*  
*They done been sitting there a hour* OR *They been sitting there a hour.*  
*She done been tardy twice this semester* OR *She been tardy twice this semester.*

Done used for future perfect (uncommon in SAE)

AAE: *He be done left by the time we get there.*  
SAE: *He will have left by the time we get there. OR He will be gone by the time we get there.*

AAE: *I be done left by the time we get there.*  
SAE: *I be done finish before anyone arrive.*

Some more examples (to get the SAE equivalent, simply substitute *will have* plus verb):  
*I be done did this lil spot a hair fo' you know it.* –middle age beautician  
*If you mess wif me, I be done did you in fo' you know it.* –young male  
*The Lord be done call me Home fo' you know it.* –young church deacon  
*If you ain mighty particular, yo' luck be done run out for' you know it.* – senior citizen to young male.  
*Look out, now! Fo' you know it, I be done caught you out there bluffin.* – doctor at poker game

**Exercise on *done***

Using the rules for *done*, translate these AAE sentences into SAE.

22. Duh ca done broke.

23. It be done get fix for you get home from work tomorra.

24. I done my work.

25. Yo comb done been los somewhere round here.

26. I done did that twenty-five time.

27. Qui lyin! If you done done that twenty-five time, it wouldn't still be lookin like dat.

28. I ain seen her in five year.

29. She be done show up here for you know it.

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## Part 5. Meaning in Context

no -ed in either past tense or past participles. Context determines time.. either present or past.

*I look for him last night.*

*This guy I know name Junior...*

*The bus pass me up last week.*

*The bus pass me up every day.*

*The man Jesus, He come here, He die to save you from your sins! He walk the earth, He go among the thieves and try to save the unrighteous. The Master say whosoever will, let him come!*

Most verbs not marked for person; the same verb serves for all subjects, singular or plural. Context is cue to meaning.

*She have us say it.*

*He do the same thang they do.*

Concepts of plurality and possession NOT indicated by -s or apostrophe+s. Again, context is cue to meaning.

*Two boy just left.*

*That was Mr. Johnson store got burn down.*

Double subject for emphasis (although not vocally stressed):

*My son, he have a new car.*

*The boy who left, he my friend.*

Personal pronoun system simplified in AAE:

*they* serves for *they*, *their*, and *themselves*:

*The expressway bought they house.*

*They should do it theyselves.*

For third person singular pronoun, AAE uses both *he* and *him*, etc.

*He gone. She gone.*

*Him cool. Her gone.*

*He did it all by hisself.*

AAE has an additional function for *it*: it can introduce a statement and has no meaning--like SAE's *there is/are* construction:

AAE: *It four boy and two girl in the family.*

SAE: *There are four boys and two girls in the family.*

AAE: *It was a man had died.*

SAE: *There was a man who had died.*

Also AAE uses *it* in question form:

AAE: *Is it a Longfellow street in this city?*

SAE: *Is there a Longfellow street in this city?*

AAE: *Is it anybody home?*

SAE: *Is there anybody home?*

*Here* and *There*, plus *go* = *here/there*, plus *is/are*

AAE: *There go my brother in the first row. OR It's my brother in the first row.*

SAE: *Here go my momma right here.*

Deletion of final –s in adverbs:

*Sometime they do that.*

*He alway be here.*

Double, triple, and quadruple negatives:

*Don't nobody never help me do my work.*

*Can't nobody do nothin in Mr. Smith class.*

*Don't nobody pay no attention to nobody that ain crazy.*

NOTE: The use of negatives in AAE is really quite complicated. For more elaboration, see Smitherman, pp. 30-31.

**Exercise on Meaning in Context**

Translate the following AAE sentences into SAE.

30. My momma look young.

31. He fail me last semestah.

32. Mistah Smith day was kill.

33. Scientist inventin many thang.

34. Dat same boy get kick out of school evah day.

Decide if the statements are correct or incorrect according to the rules of AAE. Correct those that are incorrect.

35. There's five kids in my family.

36. Duh ownuh, he always leave early.

37. Here go duh pencil I los.

38. Is there a new one?

39. Look lak everybody and their momma was dere.

40. Ain nobody wants dis cah.