A Syntactic Study of African-American Vernacular English in "Middletown": Evidence of Convergence
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1. Introduction. Recent discussion on African-American vernacular English (AAVE) has lead to a heated debate over the late development of AAVE: is it diverging from or converging with White vernacular English (WVE) (*American Speech* 62)? While some linguists (Ash and Myhill 1986; Bailey and Maynor 1987, 1989; Graff, Labov, and Harris 1986; Labov 1983, 1987; Labov and Harris 1986; Myhill and Harris 1986) claim that AAVE is diverging from WVE, other linguists (Butters 1987, 1988, 1989; Vaughn-Cooke 1986, 1987; and Wolfram 1987, 1991a) believe otherwise.

Labov (1987), who supports the divergence hypothesis, has observed that the meanings of some linguistic features in AAVE have become so different from their original meanings that the widening of the gap between AAVE and WVE is evident. For instance, Labov (1983) finds that *be done* in an AAVE sentence, such as (1), originally had the same function of denoting the future perfect as in WVE, but has now acquired a different meaning. Thus, (1) in AAVE is now equivalent to (2) in WVE instead of (3) which is nonsensical.

(1) *I'll be done killed that dude if he lays a hand on my child again* (Baugh 1979:154).
(2) *I'll really and truly have to kill that dude if he lays a hand on my child again* (Labov 1983:37).
(3) *I'll have killed that dude if he lays a hand on my child again.*

On the basis of their Philadelphia study, Labov and Harris (1986:5) claim that "We also believe that Philadelphia reflects a national trend in the black community towards continued linguistic divergence."

Other linguists, however, challenge this diverging hypothesis, criticizing it on the basis that the data used to support the divergence hypothesis manifests insufficiency, incomparability, and age-grading. They have also presented evidence of AAVE-WVE convergence rather than divergence. Most importantly, they point out that the data supporting the divergence hypothesis did not manifest time-depth--a crucial requirement to investigate language change (Vaughn-Cooke 1987; Wolfram 1987). This paper reports the results from a linguistic study on AAVE with time-depth data to test the divergence hypothesis.

2. Design of the Study. The location of this study is Muncie, Indiana, known as America's "Middletown," after Robert and Helen Lynd (1929, 1937) did the

pioneering socioeconomic community study in the United States some sixty years ago. Presently, 6,800 African-Americans, about ten percent of the total population, reside in Muncie. They interact with whites daily at workplaces, and their neighborhoods are not as segregated as those in big urban cities. Since the studies supporting the divergence hypothesis were mainly conducted in big northern cities (Ash and Myhill 1986; Graff, Labov, and Harris 1986; Labov and Harris 1986; and Myhill and Harris 1986), the demographic structure of Muncie may shed some light on the divergence hypothesis: if we want to make a generalization, such as Labov and Harris' "national trend" (1986:5), we should not ignore AAVE speakers who also dwell in mid-size cities like Muncie in the north.

Thirty-two African-American subjects of blue-collar background were involved in this study. The speech samples of sixteen subjects, equally divided into elderly and young, were collected in 1980 and the samples of the other half of the subjects, also equally divided into elderly and young, were collected in 1993. A thirteen-year lapse provides time-depth data for this study. To avoid age-grading, the elderly subjects involved were 55-70 years old, while young subjects were aged 17-19. Except the young subjects of 1980, the rest of the groups were equally divided into males and females. The data were collected during natural conversations at locations comfortable to the subjects with family members or friends present. The samples were more than 30 minutes long, taped after the first half hour of the conversation.

Although linguists have discussed numerous linguistic features of AAVE (Smitherman 1977), Fasold (1981) has identified eight linguistic features unique only to AAVE. By "unique" features, Fasold (1981:190) means those "that are not found in the speech of white Southerners even of lower social classes." Six of such features are syntactic ones. An examination of these six unique syntactic features in the speech of Muncie AAVE subjects may be more relevant and more likely to shed light on the divergence hypothesis.

3. Analysis and Discussion. In the following analysis, both the actual and potential environments for the occurrence of a linguistic feature will be defined and calculated. However, the determination of the potential environments for some syntactic features is difficult, if not impossible; as Labov (1982:87) has noted "there are a number of variables that can be studied now by noting only each occurrence, but not each non-occurrence, since it has not yet been possible to close the possible set of variants." In this case, only the actual occurrences will be counted and discussed.

3.1 Invariant *Be* not from Absence of *Will* or *Would*

Invariant *be* not resulting from the absence of *will* or *would* is known to be used to indicate habitual aspect or distributive aspect (Fasold 1972; Wolfram 1974), as in *He always be around here* (Fasold 1981).

In order to distinguish invariant *be* with a distributive function, contextual clues are utilized. Determining the potential environment for this feature is difficult, as Wolfram (1991b:1) asks, "Does one then count habitual contexts for non-auxed verbs (e.g., *We do this all the time*) as potential occurrences for habitual *be*?" Because of the indeterminacy involved, no potential environment is specified for this feature, and only actual occurrence is counted. The three-point scale of time reference from Bailey and Bassett's (1986) study is used here to observe the distribution of this feature in Muncie AAVE. Tables 1 and 2 display the distribution of invariant *be* and its following environments in the speech of Muncie AAVE subjects.

Because of the small number of the total occurrences of this feature, discussions on the following environments for its occurrence in Muncie AAVE can neither be conclusive nor accurate. The information may suggest that when invariant *be* with a distributive function occurs in Muncie AAVE, it is usually used to express a habitual aspect and it is frequently followed by *verb + ing* structure. This finding echoes what Bailey and Bassett (1986:166) observed in their study "more examples of be [are] used for continuous actions and permanent conditions than for intermittent actions."

Table 1 Distribution of Use of Invariant *Be* not from Absence of *Will* or *Would*

Subjects	Definite	Intermittent	Continuous/Stative
1980 Young	(-)	(-)	1
1980 Elderly	1	(-)	(-)
1993 Young	1	(-)	4
1993 Elderly	(-)	(-)	1
Total	2	(-)	6

Table 2 Following Environments of Invariant *Be* not from Absence of *Will* or *Would*

Invariant *Be*	NP	Adj.	Adv.	V+*ing*
Definite	(-)	1	1	(-)
Intermittent	(-)	(-)	(-)	(-)
Continuous/Stative	(-)	1	(-)	5

Table 3 presents the actual occurrence of invariant *be* in the speech of Muncie AAVE subjects. It shows that although each group used this feature, they did it very infrequently. Because of the indeterminacy involved in defining the potential environment for this feature, it is impossible to determine which group had more occurrence according to the principle of accountability (Sankoff and Thibault 1980; Weiner and Labov 1983).

Table 3 Use of Invariant *Be* not from Absence of *Will* or *Would*

Subjects	Invariant *Be* not from Absence of *Will* or *Would*
1980 Young	1
1980 Elderly	1
1993 Young	5
1993 Elderly	1

3.2 Absence of Copula/Auxiliary *Be*

Much research has been conducted on the absence of copula/auxiliary *be* in AAVE (Bailey 1965; Baugh 1980; Fasold 1969; Labov 1969; Steward 1967; and Wolfram 1974). Following Labov's (1969:716-7) and Baugh's (1980) studies, this study defines two preceding and six following syntactic environments for this feature. Tables 4 and 5 display the percentages of this feature according to its preceding and following syntactic environments respectively.

Table 4 Percentages of Absence of Copula/Auxiliary *Be* According to Preceding Environments

Subjects	NP		Pron.	
	Is	*Are*	*Is*	*Are*
1980 Young	16.7 (2/12)	0 (0/1)	0 (0/34)	62.5 (10/16)
1980 Elderly	2.9 (2/68)	27.3 (3/11)	0 (0/374)	10.1 (9/89)
1993 Young	3.8 (3/79)	5.6 (1/18)	< 0.01 (3/435)	7.5 (6/79)
1993 Elderly	1.8 (1/56)	7.7 (1/13)	0 (0/246)	3.8 (3/80)

We can see from Table 4 that when *are* follows both noun phrases and pronouns, the number of absence of copula/auxiliary *be* in the speech of Muncie AAVE subjects is generally greater than it is in other environments. Table 5 shows that this

feature, while quite infrequent, appears more often in the following syntactic environments of adjective, locative, *verb + ing*, and *gonna*.

Table 5 Percentages of Absence of Copula/Auxiliary *Be* According to Following Environments

Subjects	NP	Adj.	Loc.	V+*ing*	Gonna	Det+NP	Misc.
1980 Young	5.0 (1/20)	18.7 (3/16)	100 (1/1)	33.3 (3/9)	44.4 (4/9)	0 (0/5)	0 (0/6)
1980 Elderly	1.6 (3/194)	2.6 (3/117)	11.1 (7/63)	9.5 (7/74)	0 (0/4)	0 (0/96)	0 (0/35)
1993 Young	0 (0/188)	1.6 (3/185)	2.7 (3/112)	4.5 (3/67)	22.2 (2/9)	0 (0/60)	0 (0/63)
1993 Elderly	0 (0/188)	2.7 (3/112)	0 (0/42)	3.9 (1/26)	50 (1/2)	0 (0/71)	0 (0/57)

Table 6 Percentages of Absence of Copula/Auxiliary *Be*

Subjects	Absence of Copula/Auxiliary *Be*	
1980 Young	19.0	(12/63)
1980 Elderly	2.6	(14/542)
1993 Young	2.2	(13/611)
1993 Elderly	1.1	(5/437)

The overall percentages of the absence of copula/auxiliary *be* in the speech of Muncie AAVE speakers are presented in Table 6. It shows apparently that except for the young subjects of 1980, the other three groups of subjects had a very low percentage: less than 3%. In addition, the difference between the percentages for these three groups is less than 1.5%. This low occurrence of copula/auxiliary *be* may indicate that this feature occurred only sparsely in the speech of Muncie AAVE speakers, especially in that of the 1993 subjects.

3.3 *Been* Used to Express Past Action That Has Recently Been Completed

When expressing a past action that has recently been completed, AAVE speakers may use *been* instead of *have been*, as in *They been there before* for *They have been there before* (Smitherman 1977:22). However, some linguists (Fasold 1981; Rickford 1975) maintain that the structure of *have been* in WVE is not exactly equivalent in meaning to AAVE *been*. Because of this discrepancy, it is

unlikely to define the potential environment for this feature accurately. Thus, only the actual occurrences of this feature are counted and presented in Table 7.

Table 7 Use of *Been* for Expressing Past Action

Subjects	*Been*
1980 Young	0
1980 Elderly	1
1993 Young	0
1993 Elderly	1

It is obvious that the occurrence of this feature was very low in the speech of Muncie AAVE subjects. There is only one actual occurrence in the speech of elderly subjects of 1980 and 1993, respectively. Neither the young subjects of 1980 nor those of 1993 used this feature. The information may indicate that Muncie AAVE speakers, young and elderly alike, hardly used this feature in their speech.

3.4 Absence of Plural Suffix

Previous studies (Labov, Cohen, Robins, and Lewis 1968; Rickford and McNair-Knox 1991; Wolfram 1969) show that the absence of plural suffix in AAVE tends to be less frequent than other AAVE syntactic features.

In order to see under which environment the suffix is more likely to be absent, this study identifies three preceding phonological environments: a preceding vowel, a preceding voiced consonant, or a preceding voiceless consonant.

Table 8 Percentages of Plural Suffix Absence in Three Preceding Phonological Environments

Subjects	Vowel	Voiced Consonant	Voiceless Consonant
1980 Young	0 (0/11)	4.7 (1/21)	7.6 (1/13)
1980 Elderly	3.8 (5/131)	1.9 (10/510)	2.8 (8/282)
1993 Young	7.8 (3/38)	4.0 (8/199)	4.5 (5/110)
1993 Elderly	1.6 (1/60)	2.7 (8/293)	1.1 (1/89)

McDavid and McDavid (1964:287) observe that the occurrence of the uninflected plurals of nouns of measure, such as *My husband left me three month ago*, is more related to the historical and geographical distribution of the plurals than to the social distribution, and the consistent use of uninflected plurals is not necessarily found in

the speech of AAVE speakers. As a result, this study excludes occurrences of uninflected plurals of nouns of measure, such as *I was gone in the service for four years; four years, nine month and twenty-six days to be exact.* Table 8 displays the percentages of the occurrences of plural suffix absence in the three preceding phonological environments. We can see that this feature occurred regardless of the preceding phonological environments, and that no particular environment is more favorable for the occurrence of this feature.

Table 9 Percentages of Plural Suffix Absence

Subjects	Plural Suffix Absence
1980 Young	4.4 (2/45)
1980 Elderly	2.4 (23/923)
1993 Young	4.6 (16/347)
1993 Elderly	2.2 (10/442)

Table 9 summarizes the percentages of plural suffix absence for the four groups of Muncie AAVE subjects, regardless of the preceding phonological environments. The figures in Table 9 agree with the previous findings by Wolfram and Fasold (1974:173) that "[AAVE] plural suffix absence is rather infrequent in occurrence...." None of the groups in this study had more than 5% absence of plural suffix in their speech. The data also show that the elderly subjects of both 1980 and 1993 tended to have less absence of plural suffix than did their young counterparts, although the difference is small (less than 3%).

3.5 Absence of Possessive Suffix

Linguists have dealt with this feature from different perspectives. Some have studied it simply as an AAVE syntactic feature (Ash and Myhill 1986; Labov et al. 1968; Labov and Harris 1986); whereas others have studied it in regard to style (Baugh 1979; Rickford and McNair-Knox 1991). Nevertheless, they all agree that AAVE speakers generally do not use possessive suffix when conveying the concept of possession. In AAVE, according to Wolfram and Fasold (1974:173), "possession is indicated by the order of the words." The potential environments for this feature are defined as when a noun, a proper noun, or a noun phrase showing possession is not affixed by the possessive suffix. Table 10 displays the percentages of the absence of possessive suffix for Muncie AAVE subjects.

As we can see, none of the four groups had any possessive suffix absence in their speech. Since three groups had sufficient potential occurrences (Milroy 1989:135), we may say that Muncie AAVE speakers have already acquired the appropriate use of possessive suffix.

Table 10 Percentages of Absence of Possessive Suffix

Subjects	Absence of Possessive Suffix
1980 Young	0 (0/2)
1980 Elderly	0 (0/38)
1993 Young	0 (0/13)
1993 Elderly	0 (0/25)

3.6 Absence of Third Person Singular Suffix

The absence of third person singular suffix in the speech of AAVE speakers has been investigated in different AAVE studies (e.g., Ash and Myhill 1986; Baugh 1979; Fasold 1978; Labov 1983; Labov et al. 1968; Rickford and McNair-Knox 1991; and Wolfram 1969). Because of the high rate of third person singular suffix absence in AAVE, Labov et al. (1968:164) claim that "there is no underlying third singular -s in AAVE."

Four environments are defined for the present study: (1) regular lexical verbs lacking an *-s* suffix, such as *work* or *look*; (2) auxiliary verbs *have* or *haven't*; (3) auxiliary verbs *do* or *don't*; and (4) verbs used in the historical present in a narrative. Since it is not always possible to determine when a speaker intends to use a verb in the historical present, only the actual occurrences of third person singular suffix are counted in this environment.

This study excludes three environments: when speakers quoted from books, such as the Bible; when third person singular suffix was attached to either first person pronouns or nouns in plural forms, as in *they commences to getting money...* and *I has the most homework in...*; and when the syntactic structure of *done* + verb was involved. Table 11 displays the percentages of absence of third person singular suffix in the four environments.

Table 11 Percentages of Absence of Third Person Singular Suffix in the Four Verbal Environments

Subjects	Regular Verb	*Have/Haven't*	*Do/Don't*	Historical
1980 Young	44.4 (8/18)	0 (0/3)	100 (5/5)	(-)
1980 Elderly	15.1 (11/73)	0 (0/54)	31.3 (5/16)	0 (0/5)
1993 Young	15.8 (30/189)	0 (0/13)	85.7 (6/7)	(-)
1993 Elderly	6.6 (6/91)	0 (0/7)	25.0 (1/4)	0 (0/4)

It can be seen that none of the groups exhibited any absence of third person singular suffix in the environment of *have/haven't*. Besides, each group had a higher percentage in the environment of *do/don't* than in the environment of regular verbs. This finding supports Wolfram and Fasold's (1974:155) claim that "The form *don't*, as in *He don't walk*, seems to promote *-s* absence more than other verbs." This high rate of third person singular suffix absence in the environment of *do/don't* has also been observed by Rickford and McNair-Knox (1991). The overall percentages of third person singular suffix absence, shown by combining the environments of lexical verbs and *do/don't*, are illustrated in Table 12.

Table 12 Percentages of Absence of Third Person Singular Suffix in the Environments of Lexical Verbs and *Do/Don't*

Subject	Absence of Third Person Singular Suffix
1980 Young	50 (13/26)
1980 Elderly	10.7 (16/150)
1993 Young	17.2 (36/209)
1993 Elderly	6.5 (7/108)

Based on the information in Table 12, we may suggest that the young subjects of both groups tended to have more third person singular suffix absence than did their elderly counterparts. The information may also indicate that the young and elderly subjects of 1980 tended to have more absence of third person singular suffix than did their counterparts of 1993.

4. Conclusion. This study has examined six syntactic features believed to be unique only to AAVE based on the time-depth data from a "typical" American town with relatively small African-American neighborhoods. The results show that these six unique features occurred infrequently and in small numbers in the speech of Muncie AAVE speakers in the last thirteen years. The occurrences of these features in the speech of 1993 subjects are generally lower than those in the speech of 1980 subjects. This finding certainly does not reflect the "national trend" predicted by Labov and Harris (1986:5), nor does it support the divergence hypothesis.

Harold Allen (1991) suggests that AAVE "itself may not be a monolith." Davis and Huang (1995:142) also point out that AAVE "might exhibit regional and social variation like that found in the dialects of whites." The findings from this study certainly confirm their points. While AAVE in some places might be divergent from WVE, Muncie AAVE is not such a case. And the speech of AAVE speakers in Muncie, as Davis and Huang (1995) put it, "seem[s] quite 'ordinary,' and more indicative of the subjects' working class socioeconomic status than anything

like AVE [AAVE]." Thus, we may say that the findings from this "typical" American town, contrary to Labov and Harris' (1986:5) "national trend" of divergence, could be more representative of the present status of AAVE in the United States, at least in most cities of the same size as Muncie.

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