

“You don’t know nothin’ bout no Earth, Wind, and Fire”: Reexamining negative concord and definiteness in African American English

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Abstract. AAE is described as exhibiting negative concord, similar to other varieties of English, in which negation licenses c-commanded *n-words* as well as Negative Polarity Items (NPIs). Crucially, these are thought to be licensed only when the noun phrase they modify is indefinite. Here, our object of study is an under-described phenomenon in AAE: under certain discourse conditions, AAE licenses *no* before a definite noun phrase (as in “You don’t know nothin’ bout **no** Kendrick Lamar”). We argue that this phenomenon should not be situated in the syntax (as a previously unattested definite *n-word*), but rather in pragmatics, as speakers “demote” definite NPs to indefinite as part of a discourse strategy of signaling disagreement with, and rejection of, listener assumptions. This has implications for existing analyses of AAE negation, and for cross-dialect comprehension, camouflage constructions, and linguistic ideologies and discrimination. We also revisit existing canonical examples of AAE negation in light of this new analysis (eg., “it ain’t no cat can’t get in no coop” in Labov 1972).

Keywords. African American English; negation; negative concord; definiteness; pragmatics

1. Introduction. African American English (AAE) is described as exhibiting negative concord (alternatively referred to as negative agreement, or multiple negation). Negative concord is a phenomenon in which multiple negatives in the same clause do not cancel each other out, but are instead in an agreement relationship. That is, one negation does not logically take scope over another. Multiple negation is cross-linguistically common:

- (1) a. Italian
 Maria non ha visto nessuno
 Maria NEG has seen nobody
- b. Russian
 Maria nekogo ne vidila
 Maria nobody NEG saw
- c. Hebrew
 Maria lo ra’ta af-exad
 Maria NEG saw nobody
 ‘Maria did not see anyone’

Multiple negation is grammatical in AAE, although not obligatory. Indeed, AAE is described as allowing complete negative concord, a mix of negative concord and Negative

* The authors would like to thank Lisa Green, Jessi Grieser, William Labov, Sonja Lanehart, Hiram Smith, and Walt Wolfram. Authors: Christopher Hall, CulturePoint, LLC (cshall@culturepoint.org) & Taylor Jones, CulturePoint, LLC (tjones@culturepoint.org).

Polarity Items (NPIs) like *any* and *ever* (2), or negation with only NPIs (Martin & Wolfram 1998).¹

- (2) Mixed negation in AAE (Martin & Wolfram 1998: 19)
Ain't nobody ever thought about picking up *nothing*
'Nobody has every thought about picking up anything'

Words like *nobody* and *nothing* in these contexts have generally been referred to as *n-words* since Laka (1990) coined the term, to distinguish them from NPIs. A wide range of negative phenomena have been described in AAE, including multiple negation, negative auxiliary inversion (Green 2002), and negative concord across clausal boundaries, as in example (3):

- (3) (Labov 1972: 130)
It ain't no cat **can't** get in no coop
'There isn't any cat that can get into any (pigeon) coop' (Labov's translation)

For the moment, it may be easiest to treat multiple negation as behaving like negative polarity items with explicit negative agreement, so the sentences in example (4), below, are approximately equivalent structures (although see Giannakidou 2002 for a more nuanced treatment). Crucially, both NPIs and *n-words* are thought to require the noun phrase they modify to be indefinite (5).

- (4) a. I don't see **any** man
b. I don't see **no** man
- (5) I don't see the man
I don't see any man
* I don't see any the man

The object of study of the present paper is an understudied feature of AAE,² in which semantically definite noun phrases are preceded by the word *no*, licensed by c-commanding negation (6).³

- (6) a. I don't give a shit about **no** Drake
b. Don't nobody care about **no** Taylor Swift⁴
c. Yall Dont Know Shit Bout No Earth Wind And Fire. Thats That Classic Music.⁵
d. These kids don't know nothing bout **no** [Gatorade in a glass bottle]

¹ Because AAE allows only NPIs, only negative concord, or a mix of both, we conceive of the negative concord items as largely equivalent to NPIs, with overt negative morphology.

² Similar phenomena—if not the same—are attested in other 'nonstandard' dialects in historical and geographic contact with AAE. We do not make claims about the appropriate analysis for these phenomena in other dialects, as we cannot state with certainty whether the full range of negative phenomena in these other dialects is the same as in AAE.

³ Note that this phenomenon is common in AAE, but low-frequency. For this reason, there are not sufficient tokens present in corpora like the Philadelphia Neighborhood Corpus or the Corpus of Regional African American Language for analysis. The present study makes use of a variety of modalities, including film, television, and social media, for maximum transparency.

⁴ <https://twitter.com/uoemie/status/1123792923575898112>

⁵ <https://twitter.com/MsAshleyAllison/status/89545575267176449>

In example (6), *Drake* refers to the Canadian rapper, *Taylor Swift* refers to the singer-songwriter, *Earth, Wind & Fire* refers to the R&B group formed by Maurice White and famous for songs like “September,” and *Gatorade in a glass bottle* refers to the phenomenon of Gatorade having been historically sold in glass bottles, whereas it is now sold in plastic. Example (6a) is from a Key & Peele sketch, in which the speaker and a friend are asked “you guys like Drake?” after their interlocutor notices them bobbing their heads to the music, and (6a) occurs after it has been explicitly stated by the other speaker that he is talking about the Canadian rapper.⁶ Example (6b) is in response to someone posting a video of the singer-songwriter Taylor Swift, claiming she imitated Beyoncé. Examples (6c) and (6d) supply their own context (it is clear, for instance, that the author of (6c) is not discussing the elements from an astrological perspective). The modified noun phrases in such a construction need not be proper nouns, but may have definiteness implied either from anaphoric or bridging contexts (Lyons 1999:4-5) as in examples (7) and (8):

(7) (Martin & Wolfram 1998: 20)
He ain’t say nobody was eating with **no** college president

(8) (Labov 1972:130)
CR: Do cats ... ever get in your cage?
...
Junior: No; they scree—unless they got th—one of them *jive* coops (laughter)
Speedy: (chuckle) It ain’t no cat can’t get in **no** coop

In the above example, Speedy is responding to CR’s question about his pigeon coop. The reported discourse context makes it unlikely that he is making a blanket statement about all coops (although see below, section 3.3), especially in light of the fact that Junior has just volunteered an example of coops that cats *can* get into, and it is general world knowledge we should expect the speakers to possess that it is possible for some cats, in some places, to gain entry into some coops. Rather, from the context, Speedy is discussing *his* coop in response to CR asking him specifically about his coop.

This phenomenon is widely known among AAE speakers. So much so, in fact, that “you don’t know nothin’ ‘bout **no** [musical group]” is a frame within a cultural script (Goddard 2011) situating the speaker as older, more familiar with R&B music and “throwbacks,” and dismissive of their younger interlocutor’s implicit claims to full enjoyment of the music.⁷ The phenomenon poses a challenge for existing descriptions of AAE negation, and for existing theories of negation cross-linguistically. In section two, we demonstrate that AAE *no* cannot be a definite n-word – a heretofore unattested phenomenon. In section three, we argue that the best analysis for this phenomenon is situated in pragmatics, not syntax, demonstrating that an analysis in which the NP is treated as a quoted topic can parsimoniously explain the full range of phenomena. The crux of the argument is that the speaker is using this syntactic pattern to implicitly reject the frame of shared conversational assumptions by effectively “demoting” the NP from definite to indefinite, signaling an implicit refusal to agree on common background assumptions. In section four, we discuss implications regarding miscomprehension and mistranslation of AAE both within and outside of academia. We conclude with section five.

⁶ Video can be found here, as of the time of writing: https://youtu.be/HuPVymle_6U

⁷ The authors have heard this frame used with mention of Earth Wind & Fire, the Gap Band, Kool and the Gang, and the song “Funkin’ for Jamaica” by Tom Browne, among others.

2. AAE ‘no’ cannot be a definite *n-word*. The *no* under discussion here appears in the same environments as NPI *any* and negative concord *no*, licensed by negation in the same clause. The only immediately apparent difference is that the *no* discussed here modifies definite NPs.

- (9) a. We *don't* know anything about any doctor(s)
 b. We *don't* know *nothing* about *no* doctor(s)
 c. We *dont* kno *nun* bout **no** Dr. Phil [...]⁸

Therefore, it may be tempting to posit that some varieties of AAE could have developed a negative definite article – a form of “the” that exhibits overt negative morphological agreement, and fills the same syntactic slot as the definite article, similar to *any/no*. Definiteness is generally discussed in terms of familiarity or identifiability, and uniqueness or inclusivity, following Lyons (1999). A useful approach for our purposes is to assume that a definite NP is expected by the speaker to be uniquely identifiable to the hearer from shared discourse context and cultural assumptions, whereas an indefinite NP may be new information a speaker is introducing, and is not expected to be uniquely identifiable to the hearer. Examples of definite NPs include NPs marked by definite articles (‘the man’), possessives (‘my man’), some qualification (‘every man’), and proper nouns (‘Kendrick Lamar’). This form of *no* in occurs in definite environments; However, there are three reasons to reject this proposal. First, a definite negative polarity item is, to our knowledge, unattested in any language. Second, because such an item is unattested, it poses serious challenges for existing theories of negation, which posit that NPIs and *n-words* must be indefinite. Third, this seemingly definite *no* cooccurs with other items that should occupy the same syntactic slot (10).

- (10) a. [...] Ian talkin bout **no my** stimi and taxes⁹
 ‘I ain’t talking about **no my** stimulus and tax (refund)’
 b. Idk bout **no everybody** but I fasho got it¹⁰
 ‘I don’t know about **no everybody**, but I for sure got it’

Treating *no* in these contexts as a definite NPI does not sufficiently explain the data, and creates its own problems, chief among them how to now explain two definite markers as in (10a), where *no* is modifying the possessive phrase “my stim(ulus check).” Similarly, this proposal does not address how to explain simultaneous definite and indefinite marking as in (11) where *no* modifies *anybody*.

- (11) a. I’m not just talking about **no anybody**¹¹
 b. I’m not just **no anybody**¹²
 c. ain't **no anybody** touching my hair, I need to see a hair license¹³

In these examples, not only does it not make sense for *no* to be definite, as it is preceding a clearly indefinite item, but it also does not make sense for it to be merely redundant multiple negation, equivalent to NPI “any.”

⁸ <https://twitter.com/PooPoobottomboi/status/175704178948194308>

⁹ https://twitter.com/_KingJohnDope/status/1372565031322230786

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/niqueemck/status/1399757870657323011>

¹¹ <https://twitter.com/loveartesia/status/1290688281739497472>

¹² <https://twitter.com/JayStitt4/status/1503169002771730432>

¹³ https://twitter.com/loveee_Choc/status/731026334575661058

In the next section, we propose a solution that reinterprets the syntax in light of pragmatic factors, allowing for *no* to remain indefinite.

3. The pragmatics Proposal. We propose an approach in which *no* is assumed to be truly indefinite, and that speakers choose to mark semantically definite items with an indefinite for emphasis or to challenge the assumptions of shared background knowledge and discourse context. This works through downward entailment and through treating the noun phrase as naming a topic of discussion. The speaker is intentionally signaling that they are negating something about either the category or its attributes, or otherwise rejecting their interlocutor's suggestion of shared assumptions. That is, the speaker indirectly, but forcefully, rejects the assumption of common ground.

3.1. DOWNWARD ENTAILMENT. One way this discourse strategy works is through downward entailment. For instance, discussing a rare visit to the south side of St. Louis, as in example (12)

- (12) Idk shit bout **no** South Side , i get over here straight lost asf¹⁴
'I don't know shit about no South Side; I get over here straight lost as fuck'

The author is discussing the south side of St. Louis, and continues *I'm out here seeing shit i ain't know stl had* 'I'm out here seeing shit I ain't know St. Louis had.'¹⁵ In this instance, the discourse context makes it clear that the topic of discussion is the south side of St. Louis; however, to emphasize her unfamiliarity with the area, she doesn't state that she doesn't know about *the* south side, but rather that she doesn't know about *no* south side. By shifting the discussion to a superordinate category, her unfamiliarity with the south side of St. Louis becomes a downward entailment of her statement. Similarly, in example (6a) the speaker can be thought of as denying any knowledge of or care about *anyone* named Drake, and therefore, by downward entailment, of the specific, indeed *only*, Drake under consideration.

Treating this *no* as a marker that the speaker is emphasizing negation by demoting the NP to a downward entailment of a negated superordinate category works especially well for proper nouns like Drake, Taylor Swift, Dr. Phil, and the band Earth, Wind, and Fire. It also works well in so-called bridging contexts, as in example (7) where there is likely one specific college president under discussion. If nobody was eating with *any* college president, then clearly nobody was eating with the president of *this* college. However, this approach alone does not sufficiently explain the full range of phenomena above, especially when *no* precedes quantifying words like *any*, *every*, *no*, and possessives like *my*. To capture these phenomena, we need to treat the NP under discussion as a quoted topic.

3.2. TREATMENT OF THE NP AS A QUOTED TOPIC. There is evidence that direct and indirect quotation in AAE can be modified by *some*, *any*, and *no*, especially when cooccurring with quotative *talkin' 'bout* (Jones 2016), as in (13):

- (13) (Jones 2016:95)
a. Don't chu come talmbout **any** "ion wan do it"
'don't you come talkin' 'bout any "I don't want to do it"'
b. LMAO don't be talmbout **no** "Chris"
c. don't be talkin bout **no** do you a favor
d. quit lying, you know she aint say **no** sorry

¹⁴ https://twitter.com/_luhart/status/1195156041463402496

¹⁵ https://twitter.com/_luhart/status/1195156099214786560

While Jones (2016) floats the possibility that these may be complementizers in a camouflage construction (Spears 1982), we suggest that this analysis is incorrect, and that *no* and *any* here function as normal multiple negation or NPIs. Instead, the quoted or paraphrased material is treated as a topic of discussion, or as an exemplar of a topic or speech act. For instance, in (13a) the speaker is not warning against saying the specific phrase “I don’t want to do it,” but, rather, is warning against saying any similar sentiment (for instance, “I don’t feel like it.”). Similarly, in (13d), the speaker is not denying that “she” said any token of the word “sorry” (that is, she didn’t say it with an American accent, she didn’t say it with a Canadian accent, and so on) but rather that she did not offer any apology.

This strategy can still make use of downward entailment, but it does not have to. Making the noun phrase into topic, the speaker is now negating something about the category or its attributes. This allows us to make sense of examples like (14):

(14) I don’t care about **no** tonight, I’m talking about tomorrow¹⁶

In this example, the author is not waxing poetic about the nature of time, comparing all the tonights of a life, but is rather emphasizing that they are not talking about *tonight*—using *tonight* in its usual deictic sense—and they are dismissing any discussion of tonight, and indeed refusing to entertain further discussion in that vein. This approach, treating the material following *no* as a (possibly quoted) subject of discussion, is all that is necessary to account for the rest of the data, including sports reporter Myron Medcalf’s statement in (6d) that kids these days don’t know anything about the subject of “Gatorade in a glass bottle” or any similar topic; or Key and Peele’s *oldtimers*’ assertion that they don’t know nothing about no Drake. They refuse to accept the interlocutor’s assertion of the existence of such a person, and any information about him. They either reject knowledge of Drake and people like Drake (an entailment of not knowing any Drake), or they broaden negation to include attributes of the thing discussed, such as details about Drake: his personal life, his professional life, and so on. They don’t know where he started from; they don’t know where he’s at now. In either instance, the speaker is rejecting common ground.

3.3. REJECTION OF COMMON GROUND. The thing both flavors of the pragmatics approach have in common is an indirect, but forceful, rejection of assumed common ground, where *common ground*, following Blutner (1998) is “an information state that contains all the propositions that are shared by several participants.” However, this rejection of common ground should not be taken at face value. This is a social strategy. This is a construction that allows us to appear to violate the grammar in such a way that we can include proper nouns and direct quotations in a DP headed by an indefinite NPI. Normally, we’d expect that we can’t use definite noun phrases here, but when speakers bend the rules in this way it’s specifically to suggest “wait a minute, your premise is wrong; we ain’t on the same page.” When a speaker demands “what you know about no Earth, Wind, and Fire?” they are not suggesting that there are multiple Earths, Wind, and Fire; but they are instead challenging listener knowledge of any aspects of Earth, Wind, and Fire as a topic: you don’t know their discography, you have never seen them live, etc. You lack the necessary experience to speak authoritatively on the topic or adjacent topics. Indeed, this particular construction is usually followed by “you don’t know nothing ‘bout that.” When a speaker says “ain’t **no** *anybody* touching my hair,” the meaning is that no anybody (i.e., someone

¹⁶ <https://twitter.com/khallidmays/status/1435998862813106181>

who could be considered to be a member of the set described by the term “anybody”) can touch the speaker’s hair. By implication, only specific people can, and someone specific is not a default interpretation of “anybody.” This particular example highlights the function of treating the material as a quoted topic, since a specific person with specific qualifications – say, Larry Sims – is one possible subset of *anybody*, however Larry Sims, by virtue of being a specific entity (and Mary J. Blige’s hairdresser), isn’t “(just) anybody.” That is, in example (11) above, *anybody* is a category of person.

In light of the above, it is informative to revisit classic examples of multiple negation in the literature on AAE. Labov (1972) quotes a 15 year-old participant in a group session in Harlem as saying:

(15) it ain’t no cat can’t get in no coop

Labov and subsequent researchers were primarily interested in describing the rules underlying multiple negation and in explaining how the negation in the matrix clause could license negative agreement on the subordinate verb (that is, why it isn’t “it ain’t no cat that **can** get in no coop,” when this is clearly the intended meaning). Since the publication of *Language in the Inner City*, researchers have reproduced this sentence with their own translations, as in (16):

- (16) a. There isn’t any cat that can get into any (pigeon) coop (Labov 1972:130)
 b. There’s no cat that can get into any coop (Martin & Wolfram 1998:23)
 c. No cat can get into any coop (Horn 2009:403)

While this is a perfectly reasonable gloss of the sentence in isolation, from the discourse context reported by Labov (1972:130-131), this is *not* an appropriate translation of the sentence in context, a fact that Labov appeared sensitive to, but which has been lost in years of reproducing the example in discussions of multiple negation. Speedy is asked by the interviewer whether a cat has ever gotten into *his* coop, and before he answers Junior interjects that a cat could get into a *jive* (that is, substandard) coop, and thereby seemingly inadvertently implies that Speedy could possibly engage in substandard craftsmanship.

Speedy’s response challenges Junior’s insinuation – to Speedy, a *jive* coop isn’t a coop at all – but importantly he is doing this while replying to the interviewer’s question about *his* coop. If a cat can’t get into any coop of mine, then the fact that no cat has ever gotten into this specific coop is an obvious entailment. In the discourse context, the intended meaning of the utterance is (17) and Junior’s assumption is shown in Figure 1.

(17) No cat that can get into **my/that** coop

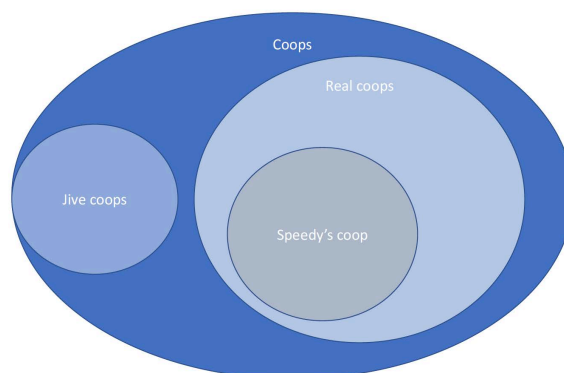


Figure 1. Junior’s assumption

Speedy is challenging those assumptions: Cats can get into jive coops. Cats cannot get into (real) coops. Therefore, a jive coop isn't a coop at all. Speedy said he built a coop. The meaning is still that no cat has ever gotten into *his* coop, but it's now implied by a broader statement. Speedy is rejecting shared assumptions, and forcing Junior to take a step back and reevaluate. Speedy is insisting on a world represented by Figure 2.

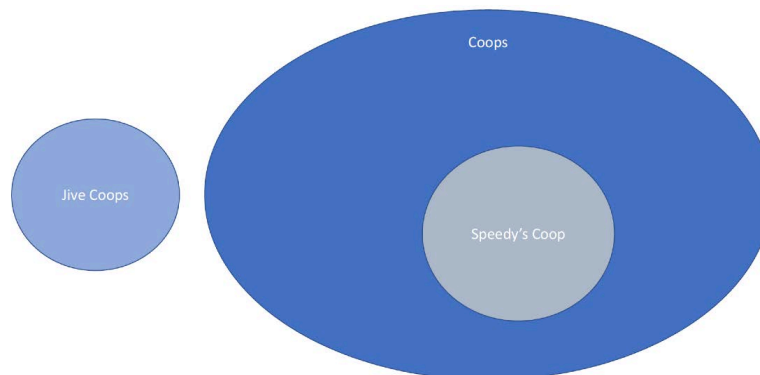


Figure 2. Speedy's rebuke

To be sure, Labov is sensitive to this discourse context, and it is from his careful reporting of it that the present authors can discuss the surrounding discourse. His and later scholars' focus in using Speedy's utterance as an example have historically been on multiple negation and emphasis, especially how *can't* in the sentence emphasizes, rather than logically cancels, the matrix clause negation.

What makes this phenomenon unique is not that speakers can make statements about superordinate categories to respond to their interlocutors through entailment or implicature. This is allowable across dialects of English. Imagine, for instance, a witness response to cross-examination in courtroom procedural:

- (18) Lawyer: Can you tell us how you first met Anthony Soprano?
 Witness: I don't know any Anthony Soprano.

What makes the above phenomenon unique is the ability of speakers to emphasize negation by imagining and instantiating a superordinate category even when there isn't one, with the expectation that it is understood that they are still indirectly referring to the existing topic of discussion. "I don't give a shit about no Drake" does not mean that the speaker is evaluating multiple Drakes, or hasn't heard of anyone with that name. Instead, it means "I *really* don't care about Drake," where it is understood that the speaker is referring to the Canadian rapper already under discussion. Similarly, in (6d), Medcalf was not suggesting that kids these days are unable to evaluate any specific glass bottles of Gatorade, but rather that they are unaware that Gatorade used to be sold in glass.

4. Cultural context and miscomprehension. Accurate representation of this *no* before a definite noun phrase is important both within and outside of academia. It should go without saying that linguists studying any language should want their glosses and translations to be as accurate as possible. While this is a low-frequency phenomenon, it is a legitimate discourse strategy among AAE speakers. Prior studies have selectively reproduced examples stripped of their discourse context. While this can be useful in studying syntax alone, and is not wrong per

se, one danger is the elimination of culturally informed shades of meaning as linguists focus on syntax at the expense of pragmatics. Some frequently reproduced example sentences in AAE are therefore glossed in a way that is useful for the immediate purposes, but not fully accurate with regards to what the original speaker was communicating.

We suggest that researchers should remain cognizant of the possibility that such rhetorical strategies are at play, and address this possibility in their analyses. For instance, in the Corpus of Regional African American Language (CORAAL, 2021) there are eight sentences including the string “about no,” some of which appear to use this rhetorical strategy, as in (19):

- (19) a. I ain’t know nothing about no Science.
b. My thing was to stay away from 'em cause I didn't know nothing about no prison.
c. I told mama /all of a sudden/, we ain't got to worry about no gas.

Whether the researcher determines that the speakers were talking about *science* as a domain of study or about specific sciences (e.g., physics, biology), *prison* as a topic or specific prisons (e.g., Rikers Island versus Sing Sing), and *gas* as a concern or specific varieties of gas (e.g., Shell, hydrogen, or the gas bill), it is important to differentiate between run-of-the-mill negative agreement, and negative agreement that marks a semantically definite topic with an inherently indefinite n-word. Note that this structure can fit into a broader cultural linguistic pattern around declarative statements that can challenge the other person’s ability, knowledge set, or experiential capital around a particular topic. It can be a challenge to prove that they do in fact know, and such a challenge is consistent with a broader range of culturally informed discourse styles and verbal genres (Morgan 1998), including sounding, the dozens, instigating, and signifying (Labov 1972, Morgan 1998, Rickford & Rickford 2000, *inter alia*).

This becomes all the more important when engaging in academic outreach around language valorization. AAE is widely misunderstood by speakers of other dialects of English (Jones 2019, Labov 1972, Labov 2010, Pullum 1999, Rickford and Rickford 2000, *inter alia*), and in projects of language valorization, how linguists gloss and translate AAE, as with court transcriptionists, becomes the fact of what was said. For instance, analysis of racial disparities in automatic speech recognition (ASR) rely on linguist transcription of naturalistic AAE speech as the metric against which speech-to-text is evaluated (Koenecke et al 2020), and evaluation of ASR responses to naturalistic speech will rely on both accurate transcription *and* understanding of AAE.

5. Conclusion. Speakers of AAE have at their disposal a construct in which an indefinite negative agreement marker, *no*, licensed by c-commanding negation, can precede a definite noun phrase. We argue that this *no* should not be treated as a definite n-word, as this is unattested, and poses significant challenges for existing theories of negation. However, we also argue that this *no* should not be interpreted as equivalent to the ‘standard’ English NPI *any* in negative contexts, because its meaning and discourse function is sometimes dramatically different from *any*. While there is significant overlap (for instance, *I don’t know any science* and *I don’t know no science*), in AAE this *no* can precede definite noun phrases that are clearly known to both speaker and hearer, including items that are obligatorily definite, resulting in sentences that are syntactically anomalous in other dialects, including *no* preceding proper nouns, possessives, and quantifiers.¹⁷ We argue above that this works by implicitly negating a

¹⁷ While it is outside of the scope of this paper, we should also note that this *no* may not be limited to negative contexts alone, but can also appear in questions and other nonveridical contexts, as in *what you know about no Earth Wind and Fire?*

superset (*no south side* entails the south side of St. Louis), by transforming the noun phrase following *no* into a quote or topic (the topic of *Gatorade in a glass bottle*), or both. While such constructions are common in AAE, they are not common in the literature on AAE, and researchers' explicit focus on other aspects of negation in AAE has resulted in this particular construction being overlooked, and in some instances, potentially mistranslated, especially as researchers draw on existing examples in the literature, and paraphrase the translation or supply their own.

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