The African American Vernacular English of Professional Athletes of Color in the USA

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Akademický rok: 2022/2023

ZADÁNÍ BAKALÁŘSKÉ PRÁCE
(projektu, uměleckého díla, uměleckého výkonu)

Jméno a příjmení: **Tadeáš Gajdušek**
Osobní číslo: **H190222**
Studijní program: **B7310 Filologie**
Studijní obor: **Anglický jazyk pro manažerskou praxi**
Forma studia: **Prezenční**
Téma práce: **Afroamerická angličtina profesionálních sportovců tmavé pleti v USA**

Zásady pro vypracování

Shromáždění a studium odborné literatury
Vytvoření korpusu podkladů pro analýzu
Stanovení cílů práce a specifikace analýzy
Analýza podkladů dle definovaných kritérií
Shrnutí výsledků analýzy, formulace závěrů

Forma zpracování bakalářské práce: **tištěná/elektronická**
Jazyk zpracování: **Angličtina**

Seznam doporučené literatury:

Green, Lisa J. 2002. *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Lanehart, Sonja, ed. 2015. *The Oxford Handbook of African American Language*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Mufwene, Saliloko, John R. Rickford, Guy Bailey, and John Baugh, eds. 2021. *African-American English: Structure, History, and Use*. Abingdon: Routledge.
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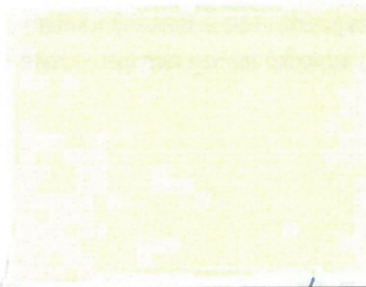
Vedoucí bakalářské práce: **Mgr. Lenka Drábková, Ph.D.**
Ústav moderních jazyků a literatur

Datum zadání bakalářské práce: **7. listopadu 2022**
Termín odevzdání bakalářské práce: **9. května 2023**

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ABSTRAKT

Tato bakalářská práce zkoumá rysy a použití afro-americké angličtiny u profesionálních sportovců tmavé pleti v USA. Práce je rozdělena na dvě částí, teoretickou a praktickou. Teoretická část se zabývá hlavními rysy tohoto jazyka, a také teoriemi o tom, jak ke vzniku afro-americké angličtiny došlo. Jedna pasáž teoretické části je také věnována profesionálním sportovcům tmavé pleti a sportu. Praktická část skýtá analýzu příspěvků přidaných sportovci na sociální síti Twitter, zkoumaných za účelem prokázat, že obsahují rysy afro-americké angličtiny.

Klíčová slova: afro-americká angličtina, AAVE, standardní americká angličtina, profesionální sportovci, Twitter

ABSTRACT

This bachelor thesis examines features and usage of African American Vernacular English amongst professional athletes of color in the USA. The thesis is divided into two parts, theoretical and analytical. The theoretical part deals with the key features of the language as well as theories on how African American Vernacular English originated. A portion of the theoretical part is also devoted to professional athletes of color and sports. The analytical part provides an analysis of athletes' Twitter posts, examined to prove that they comprise features of African American Vernacular English.

Keywords: African American Vernacular English, AAVE, Standard American English, professional athletes, Twitter

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I hereby declare that the print version of my Bachelor's thesis and the electronic version of my thesis deposited in the IS/STAG system are identical.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

African American Vernacular English is a dialect of the English language, spoken by the majority of African Americans in the United States of America. Linguists and scholars have long been fascinated by this variety of language, as it has a distinctive set of grammatical and phonological features, as well as its lexicon.

The aim of this thesis is to examine African American professional athletes and find out whether they use this language variety. An additional objective of this thesis is to prove that African American Vernacular English is a systematic and rule-governed language.

The theoretical part provides a brief introduction to the dialect, presents the main hypotheses on the origin of AAVE, and introduces the lexicon along with grammatical and phonological features of the language. Furthermore, it delves into the history of African Americans and sports, what sports mean to the community, and also their involvement in the major professional sports leagues in the USA.

The analytical part of this thesis focuses on the linguistic analysis of social media profiles, particularly Twitter profiles, of selected athletes. This part also includes a short introduction to each of the selected athletes. The main objective of this analysis is to find out whether professional athletes of color employ features of African American Vernacular English on the social media platform Twitter.

I. THEORY

1   AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH

A variety of English language, spoken predominantly by African Americans (Lanehart 2001, 21). This definition of African American Vernacular English is acceptable only if taken into consideration that not all African Americans speak this vernacular and that with its rising popularity in recent years, it has its users all over the world, no matter the ethnic background (Green 2002, 1). In fact, according to Wolfram and Thomas (2002, 1), AAVE has been studied by experts more than any other variety of American English, indicating the interest to know more about this vernacular variety of English.

First and foremost, it is important to mention that AAVE is not an incorrect, but simply a different version of the English language that has its phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and lexical patterns. The use of AAVE differs in regard to the region where the speaker was born or currently resides. For instance, AAVE speakers living in areas in Pennsylvania share similar syntactic patterns with speakers in Texas and Louisiana. However, it is unlikely that these speakers in areas in Pennsylvania share any syntactic patterns with speakers living in Southern regions (Green 2002, 1).

The label African American Vernacular English is only one of many labels that are tied to this particular variety of language, as throughout the years, there have been multiple terms used. These labels have been based, both on the current social climate in the USA, and the name related to the speakers of the variety. For instance, at one point in time, African Americans were referred to as Negroes – old fashioned label for dark-skinned people who come from Africa, hence, AAVE was called Negro English (Lanehart 2015, 3).

Given below is an extensive list of labels provided by Green (2002, 6) which is chronologically listed from the oldest labels to more recent ones:

- Negro dialect
- Nonstandard Negro English
- Negro English
- American Negro Speech
- Black communications
- Black dialect
- Black folk speech
- Black street speech
- Black English
- Black English Vernacular

- ▪ Black Vernacular English
- ▪ Afro American English
- ▪ African American English
- ▪ African American Language
- ▪ African American Vernacular English

Even though the list contains various different names and some more similar than others, they all refer to one language system (Green 2002, 6).

Nevertheless, one term that is often associated with this variety is missing. The term in question is Ebonics, a word coined in 1973 by Robert Williams, who explained that it is a blend of two words, *ebony* which means black or dark, and the word *phonics* which stands for the study of sound. Therefore, Ebonics could be understood as the study of the language spoken by black people (Lanehart 2015, 4). This term was not included in this list for a reason, that being the fact that Williams' idea for the meaning of Ebonics was to create an umbrella term for not only the language spoken by black people in the United States but also the language spoken by black people in North America, West Africa, and the Caribbean (Green 2002, 7).

To this day, a considerable number of individuals view the usage of AAVE as a sign of deprivation, either verbal, intellectual, or cultural. Furthermore, those individuals often believe that AAVE lacks legitimacy since it is not being taught in schools and because it deviates from the standard they are used to. On the other hand, a nonnegligible portion of African Americans also struggle to see AAVE as a legitimate variety, but for a completely different reason. The reason is that it carries a stigma that African Americans cannot learn standard English, and therefore, they use AAVE (Green 2002, 221). Another reason why the acceptance of AAVE remains to be a sensitive and perhaps a controversial topic is that race and ethnicity are in American society controversial subject matters (Wolfram and Schilling 2016, 218).

Nonetheless, African American Vernacular English does not consist solely of special slang terms and grammatical mistakes, as some may think, it is a complex variety of the English language, and that is how it should be perceived (Green 2002, 221).

2 HYPOTHESES ON THE ORIGIN OF AAVE

The origin of AAVE has been a topic of debate for a long time, and although it at times seemed that linguists may have finally come to a common consensus, it never truly happened and each hypothesis still raises a lot of questions. The main obstacle to solving this mystery of origin is the insufficient number of records of the earliest forms of AAVE. There are records of AAVE being spoken in the nineteenth century, however, records from the key periods that would shed more light on this topic, which are the seventeenth century and also the eighteenth century, are basically nonexistent. The seventeenth century is when the first Africans were brought into the New World and the variety began to form (Lanehart 2015, 86). As DeBose (2005, 88) points out, when a group of immigrants arrives in a location where the population speaks a completely different language, these settlers naturally experience a language shift that spans several generations.

According to Wolfram and Schilling (2016, 226), the main hypotheses include the Anglicist Hypothesis, the Creolist Hypothesis, the Neo-Anglicist Hypothesis, and additionally also the Substrate Hypothesis.

2.1 The Anglicist Hypothesis

According to Wolfram and Thomas (2002, 13), this hypothesis claims that the roots of AAVE lead to the same source as the roots of European American dialects, particularly the dialects spoken on the British Isles, which, put very simply, means that African American Vernacular English is a dialect of English. As Wolfram and Schilling (2016, 226) state, Africans that arrived as slaves brought into America a number of different African languages, however as a result of the inevitable acquisition of a new language, regional and social varieties spoken by the whites, only a few characteristics from their native languages survived.

2.2 The Creolist Hypothesis

The Creolist Hypothesis first emerged in the 1960s to challenge the Anglicist Hypothesis. This theory maintains that the roots of AAVE lay in a creole language spoken solely by Africans in colonies. Moreover, creolists argue that this creole was not present only in the antebellum South but, for example, also in parts of Africa and the Caribbean. This creole eventually underwent decreolization, a process that led to a modification of the language and gradual loss of some characteristic features. However, that does not necessarily rule out the

possibility that some vestiges are still present in contemporary AAVE (Wolfram and Schilling 2016, 226).

2.3 The Neo-Anglicist Hypothesis

Much like the Anglicist Hypothesis, this hypothesis revolves around the idea that both, AAVE and European American dialects come from the same source and share quite a few similarities, however, there is one key difference that makes this argument even stronger, and that is the new evidence that came to light. In the 1930s the Works Project Administration collected sets of written records as well as audio recordings of ex-slaves that upon further examination support this theory. Another crucial piece of evidence in favour of this hypothesis was the so-called Hyatt texts, a set of extensive interviews with voodoo practitioners, suggesting that the earlier variety of AAVE in comparison with European American dialects was not as distinctly different as the Creolist Hypothesis maintains (Walt and Schilling 2016, 228-29). Nevertheless, with this theory, it is necessary to keep in mind that the collected data still raise a lot of questions (Wolfram and Thomas 2002, 14).

2.4 The Substrate Hypothesis

According to the substrate hypothesis, the earlier AAVE and its speakers quite possibly adopted certain characteristics of other regional varieties of English, however, the persisting substrate effects have continued to set African American Vernacular English apart from all other varieties of American English that AAVE is compared to. The substrate effect may have happened when the African languages of slaves came into contact with an English of European settlers. Although it is unlikely that creole was spoken amongst Africans who arrived in the New World, it may have left its mark on the development of early AAVE (Wolfram and Schilling 2016, 230-31).

As Wolfram and Schilling (2016, 231) point out, even though it may seem like the final answer is near, it is important for researchers to not jump to a conclusion, since that is what the last couple of decades of shifting between different positions regarding the origin of AAVE taught them. The evidence professionals can work with is limited, other factors that would help us get to the bottom of this matter are simply unknown, and therefore, it is safe to say that the speculations on the origin of African American Vernacular English will certainly continue.

3   PHONOLOGY OF AAVE

According to Lanehart (2015, 403), not many studies have been devoted specifically to this part of AAVE, as the two main areas of focus for researchers have primarily been morphology and syntax. Mufwene et al. (2021, 93) claim that this phenomenon has a fairly simple explanation, the grammatical features of AAVE seem way more distinct than they are in other varieties of American English. That, however, does not necessarily mean that phonology is insignificant when it comes to the uniqueness of AAVE, in fact, it is one of the key factors in ethnic identification and even one of the reasons why speakers of AAVE experience discrimination (Mufwene et al. 2021, 93-94). In fact, according to Thomas (2007, 452), the most comprehensive source of data for understanding how AAVE is shifting may be phonological and phonetic factors.

3.1 Consonants

3.1.1   Consonant Cluster Reduction

Mufwene et al. (2021, 94) claim that this process is not unique to AAVE, however the higher frequency of its occurrence and use in various contexts is what distinguishes this variety of English from any other. As Green (2002, 107) states, this is a phenomenon of reducing the final consonant or a group of consonants to create only one consonant sound that is being pronounced. Furthermore, the process is not influenced solely by the sound that comes after the consonant but also by the consonant's morphological status (Mufwene et al. 2021, 94). See the following examples provided by Green (2002, 109):

was	*[wɔs]*	*wasp*
bol	*[bol]*	*bold*
mas	*[mæs]*	*mask*
conduc	*[kandʌk]*	*conduct*
ban	*[bæn]*	*band*

3.1.2 Devoicing

According to Thomas (2007, 457), devoicing is an almost unique phenomenon to AAVE, and could hardly be found in other varieties of English. Green (2002, 116) states that certain voiced consonants at the end of words can become voiceless as a result of this process, resulting in ambiguity that may create confusing situations between AAVE speakers and those who do not speak this variety nor understand the devoicing strategy. See the examples presented by Green (2002, 116):

*ca**b***	→	*ca**p***
*fee**d***	→	*fee**t***
*pi**g***	→	*pic**k***

3.1.3 R-lessness

This process, also known as non-rhoticity is, according to Lanehart (2015, 406), the second most frequently researched of all consonantal variables. It is the removal of the consonant /*r*/ from a word during pronunciation or its replacement with the unstressed vowel known as a schwa (Thomas 2007, 453). As Lanehart (2015, 406) points out, the consonant /*r*/ could be removed from the preconsonantal, final position as well as from between two vowels. Green (2002, 120) presents several examples highlighting the process:

cout	*[kot]*	*court*
bea	*[bœə]*	*bear*
brotha	*[brʌðə]*	*brother*
toe	*[to]*	*tore*

3.1.4 Replacement of *th* with *t/d* or *f/v*

According to Mufwene et al. (2021, 97), this phenomenon cannot be found in standard varieties of English, whereas it is a common feature of AAVE, appearing also in some non-standard dialects. As Green (2002, 108) claims, there are two different phonetic symbols employed to represent the *th* sound, the key difference between them is that in the case of the symbol *θ,* the *th* sound is voiceless (*thin*), while the symbol *ð* represents voiced *th* (*then*). Thomas (2007, 454) states that the consonants *f/v* can only be produced word initially and word finally, while the consonants *t/d* can appear anywhere in the word, regardless of their position. Green (2002, 118) provides the following examples:

wit	*[wɪt]*	*with*
dese	*[diz]*	*these*
bath	*[bæf]*	*bath*
smoove	*[smuv]*	*smooth*
monf	*[mʌnf]*	*month*

3.1.5 Other Consonantal Variables

As Thomas (2007, 452-53) claims, metathesis is a process that is also present in AAVE, its origin, however, can be traced back to Old English. The most commonly known metathesis is that of the word *ask* in which the cluster changes from */sk/* to */ks/*, and the pronunciation of the word is *[æks]*. A less common, additional example is the metathesis of the word *grasp,* produced as *[gɹæpsc]* (Lanehart 2015, 409).

The loss of a final nasal is a process during which the nasal consonant is deleted, leaving nasalization only on the preceding vowel, Thomas (2007, 456) supports this claim by including an example of the word *man* pronounced as *[mæ]*. It is another phonological feature that is unique to AAVE, nonetheless, the contact between whites and AAVE speakers in the early stages of the development of this variety may have influenced this phenomenon. (Lanehart, 2015, 408).

Another consonantal feature that is present in AAVE is the mutation of */skr/* resulting in */str/* (Thomas 2007, 457). According to Lanehart (2015, 408), this process is called consonant shift. Two words that Thomas (2007, 457) uses as examples are *streets* pronounced as */skrit/,* and *strong*, produced as */skrɔŋ/.*

According to Green (2002, 121), some words that end with the suffix *-ing* and are multisyllabic may undergo the process of substitution of *ng* (ŋ) for *n.* This phenomenon could be also found in Standard American English, if the ending syllable of these words is unstressed, and is fairly frequent in other nonstandard varieties of English as well (Green 2002, 122). Green (2002, 122) provides the following examples:

walkin	*walking*
runnin	*running*
thinkin	*thinking*
listnin	*listening*
openin	*opening*

3.2 Vowels

According to Mufwene et al. (2021, 101), the vowel system of AAVE is not very different from the one of Standard American English, however, there is a handful of patterns that are considered characteristic of AAVE. As Lanehart (2015, 410) states, one of them is glide weakening, for instance, the glide of */ai/* which occurs in the word *side* or the merger of the vowels */ɪ/* and */ɛ/*, possible only if there is a nasal consonant in the final position, as in the words *pin* and *pen*. Green (2002, 123) mentions a different pattern focusing on the diphthong */oi/* which is used by the speakers of AAVE in words such as *coach [koɪtʃ]*, *road [roɪd]* and *approach [əproɪtʃ]* instead of the diphthong */oa/*, associated with Standard American English. Furthermore, the vowel system in AAVE and more specifically, preserved recordings of texts where the usage of vowels in the earlier stages of AAVE could be heard, play a crucial role in the reconstruction of the history of this variety (Mufwene et al. 2021, 115).

3.3 Prosodic Features

As Green (2002, 124) claims, these features are also known as suprasegmental, and they affect the speech of an individual as a whole, as they influence the production of not only syllables and words but also phrases, and sentences. Furthermore, according to Green (2002, 124-25), the research on prosodic features of AAVE is crucial for three reasons, firstly, these features serve as possible indicators of ethnicity in the case of AAVE speakers, secondly, understanding how they are used in this variety will contribute to the preservation of intended meaning and avoidance of misunderstandings, and finally, since some prosodic features of AAVE are employed in general American English, it would help researchers with the identification of this particular phenomenon.

Shifting of word stress is one of the more well-known prosodic processes connected with AAVE (Thomas, 2007, 466-67). In this process, the stress changes its position onto the initial syllable, and as Green (2002, 131) points out, there is only a restricted number of words, such as *police*, *define*, *produce*, *revise*, *polite*, that this phenomenon applies to.

Another prosodic feature is timing. According to Thomas (2007, 467), timing is another aspect that sets AAVE apart from most varieties of English, and while earlier AAVE was, according to ex-slave recordings, more syllable timed, modern AAVE is relatively stress timed.

In terms of intonation, Thomas (2007, 468) states that speakers of AAVE often exhibit a wider pitch range, tend to begin sentences with a high tone, and declarative sentences as

well as *wh*-questions are frequently ended in a low tone. Regarding *yes/no* questions, in formal situations, AAVE speakers use a falling tone while in informal situations, it is the exact opposite and the tone rises (Thomas 2007, 468).

4 LEXICON OF AAVE

The extraordinary lexicon of African American Vernacular English, used by African Americans of all ages but predominantly by younger African Americans, is one of the main reasons why AAVE still struggles to be recognized as a legitimate variety in mainstream America (Green 2002, 12). However, as Mufwene et al. (2021, 224-25) claim, the impact AVVE, and particularly its vocabulary, has had on the American mainstream culture is major. For instance, Mufwene et al. (2021, 245) mention *trash talkin*, a phrase commonly used during basketball games and also several other sports which carries a meaning of bragging and negatively talking about one's opponent with an intent to intimidate them. As Rickford and Rickford (2000, 93) state, the vocabulary is powerful enough to divide blacks from whites and to bring together African Americans of all backgrounds.

According to Green (2002, 13), some of the words in the lexicon of AAVE are indifferent from those used in Standard American English, in terms of their spelling, however, their meaning and usage substantially differ.

As Mufwene et al. (2021, 225-26) state, the meaning of certain words and phrases in AAVE may be rooted deep in the history of the black experience as there is possibly a race-conscious intention behind them. Mufwene et al. (2021, 226) support this idea by explaining the meaning of the word *cool*, when brought from Africa to America, the slaves fought for their lives and faced horrible living conditions, and as a result of that, they were understandably enraged, however, for the sake of their survival, they had to maintain their *cool*. Assigning special meanings to already existing words was the slaves' way to create a system of communication exclusive to their community (Mufwene et al. 2021, 228).

According to Rickford and Rickford (2000, 95), many AAVE speakers are unaware of the fact that their usage of some of these slang words differs from other Americans speaking Standard American English.

Rickford and Rickford (2000, 96) claim that one's slang varies based on their social class, age, gender, the region one lives in, as well as their lifestyle. Furthermore, more research on the lexicon of AAVE will always be required since the vocabulary, particularly slang is constantly evolving (Rickford and Rickford 2000, 93). Thus, according to Green (2002, 27), it is impossible to provide a precise list of all slang terms.

Mufwene et al. (2021, 228) provide several instances of slang terms, all of which originate in Rap Music, for example, the controversial word *ho* which is derived from the way *whore* is pronounced in AAVE, *def* from the AAVE pronunciation of *death*, also *wit*

from *with* and *thang* from *thing*. In fact, as Green (2002, 27) points out, Rap Music or Hip-Hop culture, in general, has been a place of birth for many unique terms for decades. Lanehart (2001, 191) also mentions examples of interesting Hip-Hop slang terms which have found their way into the mainstream American language, such as *to give props* (respect), *wack* (outdated or unacceptable), and *phat tracks* (very good recordings). Money is a fundamental and reoccurring theme in Hip-Hop music, and so there are quite a number of slang terms referring to it as well, for instance, *benjis*, *cabbage*, *cheese*, *paper,* and *scrilla* (Green 2002, 30).

Despite the fact that the majority of slang terms eventually disappear as a result of their low usage, one instance of a word that has been used since the 1800s and also in this day and age is *pad*, a slang used for *home* or *apartment* (Rickford and Rickford 2000, 96).

According to Green (2002, 28), many slang terms are related to labels used for males and females. The following slang terms for females serve simply as labels and females speaking AAVE generally do not address each other in such a way, these include *dime*, *ma*, *shorty* pronounced as *shawty*, and *wifey*. While the following labels for males are often used by males referring to other males, these include *cuz*, *dawg*, *fool*, *hot boy*, and *player/playa* (Green 2002, 28).

As Rickford and Rickford (2000, 98) state, many African Americans disagree with the adoption of AAVE slang by American mainstream culture, and as a sign of disapproval and protection of the uniqueness of African American Vernacular English, new slang terms continue to appear.

5   GRAMMAR OF AAVE

The grammar of African American Vernacular English is often presented as the most unique and characteristic part of the variety, and this statement cannot be any closer to the truth. As Rickford and Rickford (2000, 109) point out, since the 1960s, there have been many studies conducted on the grammar of AAVE, and it is the part that easily throws any claims about African American Vernacular English not being a systematic and legitimate dialect of American English out the window. As Green (2002, 34) states, syntactic components, those that allow for sentences to be formed, are among the most recognizable features of AAVE.

5.1 Auxiliary Verbs

According to Green (2002, 35-36) auxiliary verbs such as *have*, *do*, and *be*, as well as modal verbs are in AAVE used very differently in comparison with Standard American English and other varieties. To demonstrate the difference, Green (2002, 36-38) presents examples of these auxiliaries in interaction with corresponding verb forms, see Table 1.

Table 1 Auxiliaries in AAVE

Present tense			
Person, number	*Present*	*Emphatic affirmation*	*Negation*
1st, 2nd, 3rd	run	DO run	don't run
Past tense			
Past		*Emphatic affirmation*	*Negation*
ate		DID run	din (didn't) run
Past tense			
			Negation
			ain ('t) run/ran
Preterite had			
Preterite had (Past)		*Emphatic affirmation*	*Negation*
had ate		-	-
Future tense			
Future		*Emphatic affirmation*	*Negation*
a' eat		WILL eat	won't eat
Future tense			
Person, number	*Future*	*Emphatic affirmation*	*Negation*

| 1st sg. | I'ma eat | - | I ain't gon/I'm not gon |
| 2nd, 3rd sg., pl. | gon eat | | ain't gon/not gon |

Present progressive (auxiliary be)			
Person, number	*Pres. prog.*	*Emphatic affirmation*	*Negative*
1st sg.	I'm eating	I AM eating	I'm not
			I ain('t) eating
1st pl., 2nd sg., pl.	we, you		
3rd sg., pl.	she, they eating	IS eating	ain('t)/not eating
3rd sg. neuter	it's growing	it IS eating	it's not growing
			it ain('t) eating

Present copula be			
Person, number	*Present*	*Emphatic affirmation*	*Negation*
1st sg.	I'm tall	I AM tall	I'm not tall /I ain't tall
1st pl., 2nd sg., pl.	we, you		
3rd sg., pl.	she, they	IS	ain('t)/not tall
3rd sg. neuter	it's tall	it IS	it's not tall/it ain't tall

Past progressive			
Person, number	*Past prog.*	*Emphatic affirmation*	*Negation*
1st, 2nd, 3rd sg., pl.	was eating	WAS eating	wadn't (wasn't) eating

Future progressive			
	Future prog.	*Emphatic affirmation*	*Negation*
	'a be eating	WILL be eating	won('t) be eating

Present perfect			
Person, number	*Present perf.*	*Emphatic affirmation*	*Negation*
1st, 2nd, 3rd sg., pl.	ate	HAVE ate	hadn't ate

Past perfect			
Past perfect		*Emphatic affirmation*	*Negation*
Had ate		HAD ate	hadn't ate

Present perfect progressive			
Person, number	*Pres. perf. pro.*	*Emphatic affirmation*	*Negation*
1st, 2nd, 3rd sg., pl.	been eating	HAVE been eating	ain('t)/haven't been eating

Past perfect progressive			

Past perf. prog.		*Emphatic affirmation*	*Negative*
had been eating		HAD been eating	hadn't been eating
Modal perfect			
Modal perfect		*Emphatic affirmation*	*Negation*
should'a been eating		-	shouldn'a been eating

Source: Verbal paradigms[2] by Green (2002, 36-38)

5.1.1 Copula Be and Zero Copula

As Rickford and Rickford (2000, 113) state, the copula *be* is also referred to as conjugated or inflected, and it changes its form with respect to the subject, the word copula was derived from the verb's function, as it couples a subject. According to Green (2002, 38), the unique usage of this verb is another distinctive feature of AAVE well-known even among lay people. Typically, the copula *be* precedes an adjective, adverb, noun and preposition, however, in African American Vernacular English, the copula *be* is non-obligatory and may be omitted in certain environments, such as the first person plural, and second and third person singular and plural, resulting in a phenomenon known as zero copula (Green, 2002, 38-39). On the other hand, the copulas that cannot be omitted are *was* and *were* in the past tense, *am* as in *I'm* in the present tense, and infinitive *be* that is preceded by certain other elements, for example, *to*, *can*, *may*, *should*, or *would* (Rickford and Rickford 2000, 114-15). As Rickford and Rickford (2000, 115) claim, there is a complexity to this phenomenon, and with that, a number of rules that the speakers of African American Vernacular English must follow in their daily speech.

5.1.2 Invariant Be

As Rickford and Rickford state, the name of this *be* is derived from its form which does not vary, however, invariant *be* can sometimes appear in two additional forms, such as *be's* or *bees*. Rickford and Rickford (2000, 113) furthermore divide invariant *be* into three kinds, the first kind is the one that appears in imperative sentences (*Be good!*), in infinitives (*He tried to be good*), as well as after helping verbs (*He must be good*). The second kind omits the contracted forms of modal verbs *will* and *would,* to create hypothetical reference or future tense (*Wait awhile. She be right around*). And lastly, the invariant habitual *be*, which is used to refer to an action that happens frequently and habitually (*He be talkin' with his lady every day*) (Rickford and Rickford 2000, 113).

5.2 Verbal Markers

According to Lanehart (2015, 360), verbal markers are in the linguistic field also known as aspectual markers, and they play a pivotal role in the interest in the research of AAVE grammar. This group of markers consists of habitual *be*, remote past been, marked as *BIN*, and unstressed done, marked as *dən* (Lanehart, 2015, 360). Green (2002, 44-45) claims that verbal markers are comparable with auxiliary verbs in Standard American English in their form, which could cause misunderstandings as speakers of SAE may misinterpret them as auxiliaries.

5.2.1   Habitual Be

Rickford and Rickford (2000, 113) claim that although this verbal marker is recognized by many, not all actually understand its function and some non-AAVE speakers believe that habitual *be* is a substitution for *is* and *are* in certain environments, however, that is not the case at all. As Green (2002, 47) states habitual *be* denotes habitual meaning; thus an activity that regularly recurs. While copula *be* can be omitted in some cases, Green (2002, 47) points out that habitual *be* is obligatory, and if left out, the intended meaning of the text may end up being misinterpreted. According to Lanehart (2015, 363), other elements that can appear with habitual *be* and the rest of the verbal markers in a sentence are other verbal markers, predicate phrases, adverbs and adverbial phrases. Lanehart (2015, 363) also mentions that the subject position, preceding the verbal marker *be*, can be occupied by definite nouns, indefinite nouns, and also plural nouns and provides the following examples supporting this statement:

The dog be barking.
A dog be barking.
Dogs be barking.

5.2.2   Been

As previously stated, this verbal marker serves as a way to refer to the remote past (Green, 2002, 55). Rickford and Rickford (2000, 117) distinguish between two types of *been*, the first type is stressed *BEEN*, marked as *BIN*, and the second one is unstressed *been*, moreover, they do not differ solely phonetically, but also semantically; in their meaning. According to Rickford and Rickford (2000, 117), the usage of *been* in AAVE is comparable with the usage

of *has been* or *have been* in Standard American English. Green (2002, 55) provides the following examples that describe the difference between the two types of *been*:

She BIN running.	*She has been running for a long time.*
She been running.	*She has been running.*

5.2.3 Done

Green (2002, 60) claims that this verbal marker, often marked as *dən,* is used to emphasize that a certain action has been completed, moreover, *done* is unstressed and differentiates from the past participle *done* in Standard American English. Nonetheless, according to Rickford and Rickford (2000, 120), Standard American English has its counterpart when it comes to *done*, as the forms of *has* or *have*, and *already* behave quite similarly. Furthermore, Rickford and Rickford (2000, 120) state that it is not possible to use *dən* with negatives. Green (2002, 60) presents the following sentences that demonstrate the usage of the verbal marker in comparison with its counterparts in Standard American English:

I told him you dən changed.	*I told him that you have changed.*
I dən pushed it.	*I have already pushed it.*

5.3 Preverbal Markers

According to Green (2002, 70), despite their common occurrence in African American Vernacular English, forms such as *finna*, *steady*, and *come* have not been discussed and studied as thoroughly as verbal markers mentioned in the previous chapter.

5.3.1 Finna

Green (2002, 70) states that the marker *finna* and its alternative forms *fixina*, *fixna*, *fitna* refer to an event that is inevitably about to happen in the near future. Regarding the marker's position in the sentence, it always appears before a verb in infinitive (Green, 2002, 70). As Rickford and Rickford (2000, 121) claim, *finna* and its other phonological variants were derived from *fixing to*, and both, black speakers of AAVE and whites from the Southern United States of America employ this preverbal marker in their speech. This statement is supported by Green (2002, 71), who states that the marker can be found in other English varieties as well, and the main difference maker is the pronunciation factor. Green (2002, 70) presents the following examples:

Ya'll finna eat?   *Are you getting ready to eat?*

They finna do something.   *They're about to do something.*

5.3.2   Steady

According to Rickford and Rickford (2000, 122), the purpose of *steady* in AAVE is to intensify and stress a certain activity that happens consistently. Green (2002, 71) claims that for the sake of the correct use of this grammatical marker, *steady* must precede a progressive verb that names an activity, there would be a clash in meaning if verbs that name states, for instance, *have*, *own*, and *know* followed *steady,* resulting in a peculiar sentence. Green (2002, 72) provides the following examples which demonstrate the use of *steady*:

They want to do they own thing and you steady talking to them.

People be on them jobs for thirty years just steady working.

Now that you got the new life, Satan steady bothering you.

In addition, Green (2002, 72-73) points out that *steady* can be in some environments preceded by habitual *be*, in this case, the habitual *be* takes on the habitual meaning, while the function of *steady* remains the same, see the following example:

Them students be steady trying to make a buck.

5.3.3   Come

Come is the last preverbal marker in this chapter and it is used by AAVE speakers to express indignation or anger (Green, 2002, 73). Rickford and Rickford (2000, 122) claim that in a sentence, the marker generally precedes a verb ending in *-ing,* and its main purpose is to express an attitude toward an event rather than to explain when and how the event happened. Green (2002, 73) presents the following examples highlighting the process:

You the one come telling me it's hot. I can't believe you got your coat on.

They come walking in here like they was gon' make us change our minds.

Don't come acting like you don't know what happened and you started the whole thing.

5.4 Absence of the Third Person Singular Present Tense -s

The omission of this particular suffix is another fairly typical phenomenon of African American Vernacular English, and there is a rational explanation for it. According to

Rickford and Rickford (2000, 111), in Standard American English the third person singular subject requires an -*s* suffix, as in *he goes*, however, since the -*s* suffix is not attached to a verb for any of the other subject pronouns (*I go*, *you go*, *we go*, *they go*), it is quite logical for AAVE speakers to omit the suffix in the third person singular present tense as well and make this rule more equal. Rickford and Rickford (2000, 112), provide the following examples of this phenomenon:

She have three kids!	*She has three kids!*
John go.	*John goes.*
John have a car.	*John has a car.*

5.5 Negation

The usage of this fundamental grammatical construction is another distinct feature setting African American Vernacular English apart from Standard American English and its other varieties. Negative elements and constructions such as multiple negation, negative inversion, *ain't*, *nothing*, *nobody*, and others have been the topic of discussion among linguists for many years now (Rickford and Rickford 2000, 123-24).

5.5.1   Multiple Negation

This phenomenon is often referred to as negative concord and is also found in other languages and vernaculars besides African American Vernacular English, for instance, in Czech, Portuguese, Greece, and French, to name a few (Mufwene et al. 2021, 18). As Green (2002, 77) states, negative concord is a construction that contains two or more negative elements within one sentence. The number of negators is thus not restricted to any number and the rule that two negatives make a positive, commonly employed in SAE, does not apply to AAVE (Green 2002, 77-78). Mufwene et al. (2021, 19) provide the following examples, illustrating how the negative concord differs from standard negation:

He ain't got no car. (AAVE)
He doesn't have a car. (SAE)
Nobody round here ain't never heard of him. (AAVE)
Nobody around here has ever heard of him. (SAE)
He went out into that storm without no coat or nothing. (AAVE)
He went out into that storm without a coat or anything. (SAE)

5.5.2 Negative Inversion

Mufwene et al. (2021, 28-29), refer to the sentences resulting from this process as negative existential since they resemble affirmative existential sentences. As Mufwene et al. (2021, 28) state, the negated auxiliary verb inverts with the subject which is a process similar to question formation. Green (2002, 78-79) supports this statement and claims that the formation of yes-no questions and negative inversion are indeed similar processes, but still, cannot be mistaken for one another. In addition, Mufwene et al. (2021, 28) claim that there are clear phonological differences between these two phenomena, while yes-no questions are produced with a rising tone, negative inversion exhibits a falling tone. Green (2002, 78) presents the following examples:

Can't nobody tell you it wasn't meant for you. (AAVE)
Nobody can tell you it wasn't meant for you. (SAE)
Don't nothing come to a sleeper but a dream. (AAVE)
Nothing comes to a sleeper but a dream. (SAE)

5.5.3 Ain't

As Rickford and Rickford (2000, 122) state, *ain't* is possibly the best-known negative form of African American Vernacular English, and it is used by many linguists as a primary feature when it comes to the representation of the variety. Rickford and Rickford (2000, 122) claim that *ain't*, in terms of its use, is the counterpart of *am not, isn't, aren't, don't, hasn't*, and *haven't* in Standard American English. Rickford and Rickford (2000, 122-23) provide the following examples:

I ain't lyin'.   *I am not lying.*

He ain't never had a job in his life.   *He hasn't ever had a job in his life.*

5.6 Questions

The formation of questions in African American Vernacular English is a complex matter that differs substantially from the one of Standard American English. As Rickford and Rickford (2000, 124) state, particularly the formation process of direct and indirect questions is very distinct, in fact, it is completely contrary to the way how direct and indirect questions are formed in Standard American English. Since AAVE speakers tend to not invert the subject with its corresponding verb when forming direct questions, rising intonation is the main factor in recognizing that it is a question. Indirect questions, which are in SAE formed

without the inverted word order, are in AAVE constructed with the help of inversion (Rickford and Rickford 2000, 124). See the following examples of direct and indirect questions, respectively, provided by Rickford and Rickford (2000, 124):

This is a microphone, too?   *Is this a microphone, too?*

I asked him could he come with me.   *I asked him if he could come with me.*

Wh-questions are another type of questions often discussed concerning AAVE. According to Green (2002, 86-87), *wh*-questions can be formed in more than one way, however, the *wh-word* always comes first, then the subject follows, and either auxiliary immediately follows the subject or the position may also be omitted. See the following examples presented by Green (2002, 86-87):

Who you be talking to like that?   *Who are you usually talking to like that?*

Why y'all want to treat me like this?   *Why do y'all want to treat me like this?*

5.7 Associative Plural Dem

According to Rickford and Rickfrod (2000, 110), adding *s* to nouns to form the plural is a common occurrence in Standard American English, and in AAVE, this process of formation of the plural is employed as well. Nevertheless, the speakers of AAVE sometimes tend to either ditch the plural *s* completely, which is quite rare, or use *dem* to mark plurality. There are two possible ways how to use this associative plural, *an dem* can either follow the name of a person/definite noun or *dem* can precede nouns (Rickford and Rickford 2000, 110-11). Rickford and Rickford (2000, 111) present the following examples highlighting this process:

John an dem   *John and his friends*

The judge an dem   *The judge and people like him*

Dem books   *Those books*

5.8 Existential It Is

As Rickford and Rickford (2000, 111) state, this phenomenon is simply an alternative to *there is* and *there are*, structures employed in Standard American English, *it is* can also be

contracted to *it's* or *i's*. Rickford and Rickford (2000, 111) explain this phenomenon on the following example:

i's a lot of girls   *there are a lot of girls*

5.9 Absence of Possessive 's

The possessive suffix *'s* is another obligatory feature of Standard American English that is not employed in African American Vernacular English. In SAE, the speakers attach this suffix to nouns to mark possession, however, in AAVE, the speakers tend to ditch the possessive suffix, and instead, the possession is realized through the juxtaposition of two nouns, meaning that the possessor immediately precedes the possessed thing indicating the connection (Rickford and Rickford 2000, 112). See the following example provided by Rickford and Rickford (2000, 112):

Girl house   *Girl's house*

6 AFRICAN AMERICANS AND SPORTS

As Wiggins (2018, 1) states, athletes of color play an important role in the history of American sports and in spite of various constraints and racial discrimination, many of them are now recognized as not only national but also international heroes in the world of sport. As Harris (1997, 311) claims, sports may provide young African Americans with direct and indirect opportunities that can significantly better their lives as well as the lives of their families. Nevertheless, as Schiavone (2016, 2) states, the sports career of a professional athlete typically does not last more than a couple of years, and the risk of a career-ending injury is ever-present. According to Brooks and Blackman (2011, 441), the ambition of becoming a professional athlete is fairly common among youth across all races, however, young African Americans tend to not give up on these dreams easily.

6.1 African Americans and the History of Sports

Sport is undoubtedly an inseparable part of the African American community. In fact, sports were an important part of the lives of African Americans as early as in the slavery days when they served as a survival mechanism against the inhumane institution that slavery was. Athletics was a way for African Americans to strengthen their relationships in the community, as well as to display their athletic skills and enjoy a vital time of recreation. The most talented individuals held a privileged position in the community, had more special opportunities, and competed for material benefits. A handful of chosen ones were even granted freedom for their athletic achievements (Wiggins 2018, 7-8).

Later on, in what Davis (2008, 4-7) describes as the Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction Eras in the United States of America, it became especially difficult for African Americans to compete in professional sports due to exclusion and particularly laws that prohibited them to participate. Despite the racial oppression, African Americans managed to become successful in sports such as boxing, baseball, horse racing, and cycling, and some even played in prestigious baseball leagues. The success, however, only further contributed to their exclusion from competing in professional baseball, football, and basketball teams since many whites feared that African Americans would eventually dominate in all of these sports (Davis 2008, 4-9).

A response to the segregation of African Americans from American society and particularly professional sports competitions and leagues was the formation of African American-owned sports organizations and leagues on all levels, including high school and college (Davis, 2008, 13). According to Carroll (2006, 11), before 1920 there were at least

three attempts to create a black baseball league, however, due to a lack of finances and limited press coverage, these efforts were unsuccessful. Nevertheless, as Davis (2008, 13) states, two professional baseball organizations succeeded and brought attention to black baseball during the 1930s and 1940s, these organizations were the Negro Baseball League and the American Negro League. According to Wiggins (2018, 51), creating such organizations was crucial for talented African American athletes who were allowed to prove themselves, and also for the black audience that longed for entertainment.

After the Second World War, the change in the social climate in the USA and several other factors, for instance, accessible black education, change in attitude towards people of color, and laws against racial discrimination, greatly contributed to the reintegration of organized professional sports. Especially baseball and its segregation policy were highly discussed and controversial topics that started a rain of aggressive campaigns and protest against the exclusion of athletes of color from the Major League. The turning point that broke the baseball color barrier was the Brooklyn Dodgers' signing of Jackie Robinson in 1945. Since then, other Major League Baseball teams followed and became willing to sign other non-white players. This eventually led to the desegregation of other organized sports such as football, basketball, tennis, and bowling, to name a few (Davis 2008, 14-17).

6.2 African Americans in Professional Sports Leagues in the USA

There are four major professional sports leagues in the United States of America, these are the National Basketball Association, the National Football League, the National Hockey League, and Major League Baseball. However, African American athletes are, with exceptions, mainly associated with basketball, football, and baseball, thus NBA, NFL, and MLB.

According to Schiavone (2015, 51), the National Football League, founded in 1920, greatly contributed to the success of football, which is, by many, recognized as the number one sport in the USA. An impressive 56.4 percent of African Americans played in this economic powerhouse in 2022, which means that out of a total of 1960 players, 954 were athletes of African American descent. For comparison, exactly 24.9 percent of players that competed in the NFL in 2022 were white (Lapchick 2022b, 8-46).

As Schiavone (2015, 89-90) states, the National Basketball League, established in 1949, is a giant in the world of sports that managed to succeed at a global level, and some of its current and former players are international icons recognized by millions of people. For instance, Michael Jordan, a former African American NBA athlete, expanded into the world

of sportswear when he signed a deal with Nike and assisted to create a line of basketball shoes called Air Jordan. The racial diversity in NBA is even more apparent than in the previously mentioned NFL, as, in the 2021/22 season, out of a total of 499 players, 359 identified as African American, which makes it 71.8 percent (Lapchick 2022a, 9-47).

Major League Baseball, founded in 1876, is the oldest of the four mentioned major professional leagues in the USA. Baseball, the sport that first broke the color barrier in professional sports in the USA had, out of the three major leagues, the lowest representation of African Americans in 2022. Only 7.2 percent of African Americans played in the MLB in 2022, which is the lowest recorded number since 1991 (Lapchick 2022c, 9). As Wiggins (2018, 173-175) states, baseball is a sport that is culturally significant to African Americans, however, the community is underrepresented at all levels of the sport.

II. ANALYSIS

7 INTRODUCTION TO THE ANALYSIS

The objective of this analytical part is to examine the social media profiles and particularly social media posts of professional athletes of color to find out whether they include features of African American Vernacular English which were introduced in the theoretical part. Social media allow professional athletes to interact with their fans, report on their recent games and happenings in the league, share their lives outside of sports, or promote their sponsors. Nevertheless, the primary reason why I chose to analyze Twitter profiles and why the majority of professional athletes use them is that they provide each athlete with an opportunity to freely express themselves outside of the traditional media channels, resulting in various linguistic phenomena that are worth analyzing. The social media profiles of the selected athletes serve as a corpus for my analysis.

7.1 Corpus

To analyze the African American Vernacular English of professional athletes of color, I used a social media platform known as Twitter and thoroughly examined the profiles of the selected athletes. It is important to note that some of the presented examples included words that do not differ in meaning, however, their spelling is different compared to the standard one. As is for social media language typical, some examples omitted punctuation marks, and certain contained emoji which I deliberately excluded. Nevertheless, the language is understandable, and these constraints are insignificant for this linguistic analysis.

I analyzed the Twitter profiles of 6 athletes and chose three of the most popular sports leagues in the United States of America. To ensure a balanced representation of the three chosen sports leagues, two of the selected athletes play basketball in the National Basketball Association, two play football in the National Football League, and two compete in Major League Baseball. All of the selected athletes are actively competing and none of them are inactive or retired. The athletes were selected based on my familiarity with their names, however, without any other prior knowledge about them.

The analyzed features of AAVE are listed in an order which is mirroring the order of these features in the theoretical part. Nonetheless, not all features from the theoretical part were examined in the analytical part.

All of the used tweets with their corresponding web links can be found in the bibliography section of this thesis, as well as on the enclosed CD, where they are fully transcribed.

7.2 Athletes

The main criteria for the selection of the athletes were their performance in their respective sports, as well as their activity on social media. When researching the careers and achievements of the six selected athletes while analyzing the texts, I noticed that their social background substantially influences their language. For instance, some of the linguistic choices of Tim Anderson, one of the selected athletes, are commonly associated with inner-city youth culture and street life. Therefore, it is necessary to shortly introduce each athlete, as their upbringings, and also their sports achievements play an important role in the way they present and express themselves.

7.2.1   Ja Morant

Ja Morant, or Temetrius Jamel Morant by his full name, is a professional basketball player born in 1999. He was born in Dalzell, South Caroline, where he attended high school. In 2017, after graduating high school, Morant moved to Ohio and played for Murray State College for two years where he performed exceptionally well and subsequently got drafted into the NBA by the Memphis Grizzlies as the second overall pick. Morant plays the point guard position and, in his relatively short professional career, he has received several awards. In his first season with the team, he won the 2020 NBA Rookie of the Year award, and in 2022, Morant was named the NBA Most Improved Player. (Online Sports Database, n.d.)

7.2.2   James Harden

James Harden is a professional basketball player for the Philadelphia 76ers of the NBA. Harden was born in 1989, in Los Angeles, California, and attended Arizona State University. He was drafted into the NBA in 2009 as the third overall pick by Oklahoma City Thunder. Harden is now an NBA veteran that represented four teams in a total of thirteen seasons and established himself as one of the greatest players in the history of the sport. Among a multitude of accolades and achievements, he was crowned the NBA Most Valuable Player of 2018 and won an Olympic medal with the United States national basketball team. Outside of basketball, Harden is also known as a passionate investor and philanthropist. (Online Sports Database, n.d.)

7.2.3   Odell Beckham Jr.

Odell Cornelius Beckham Jr. is a professional football player for the Baltimore Ravens of the NFL. Beckham was born in 1992 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where he not only competed in football but also in basketball, soccer, and track. Beckham entered the NFL

draft in 2014 and as an overall twelfth pick, he was selected by the New York Giants. He is a wide receiver, best known for his speed and agility. Throughout his sports career, Beckham managed to break several clubs, as well as league, records and he holds the prestigious accolade of being a Super Bowl champion. Off the field, he is a fashion enthusiast and has been involved in several charitable organizations. (Online Sports Database, n.d.)

7.2.4 Jalen Ramsey

Jalen Ramsey is a professional football player for the Miami Dolphins of the NFL. Ramsey was born in 1994, in Smyrna, Tennessee, and later moved to Florida where he attended Florida State University which was one of the more than twenty prominent schools in the USA that were interested in signing him. In 2016, he was drafted into the NFL by Jacksonville Jaguars, and in the same year, he debuted in the league. Ramsey quickly established himself as one of the best cornerbacks in the NFL and is recognized especially for his versatility and lockdown coverage skills. Outside of the playing field, he is a philanthropist and founder of the organization Ramsey's Reach which positively impacts communities with mentorship, and financial and material means. (Online Sports Database, n.d.)

7.2.5 Tim Anderson

Tim Anderson is a professional baseball player born in 1993 in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. After graduating from high school, Anderson enrolled at East Central Community College in Mississippi where he played until being drafted into MLB in 2013. He made his MLB Debut in 2016 for the Chicago White Sox and quickly established himself as a star player on the team. In 2019, Anderson received his first Silver Slugger award, given to the best offensive player at each position. Off the field, Tim Anderson is a philanthropist and a founder of Anderson's League of Leaders, which is an organization that strives to bring positivity, safety, and unity into communities by providing scholarships, mentorship, service, and material support. (Online Sports Database, n.d.)

7.2.6 Amir Garrett

Amir Garrett, also known by his nickname Count on AG, is a professional baseball player for the Kansas City Royals of MLB. Garrett was born in 1992, in Victorville, California, and attended St. Johns College until 2011 when he entered the MLB draft and was picked by the Cincinnati Reds. Garrett, however, did not make his MLB debut until 2017, as he played in

Minor League Baseball where he dominated as a pitcher and received many awards such as the Minor League Pitcher of the Year, and MiLB All-Star. (Online Sports Database, n.d.)

8   PHONOLOGICAL FEATURES

Several phonological features also found their way into the written language and particularly social media. When analyzing the Twitter profiles of the selected athletes, I noticed numerous instances of features such as consonant cluster reduction, the substitution of the sound *ng* (ŋ) for *n*, and the replacement of the *th* sound with *t/d* or *f/v*. However, as Eisenstein (2013, 11) states, the endeavor to transcribe these phonological features into the written language is primarily lexical in nature. Nevertheless, by examining those phonological features in their written form, I was able to obtain a better understanding of how the spoken aspect of African American Vernacular English affects digital communication.

8.1 Consonant Cluster Reduction

This phenomenon was identified within my analysis, however, it appeared relatively infrequently in the athletes' tweets. Eisenstein (2013, 12) claims that in order to more accurately identify consonant cluster reduction in a written text, the reduction of consonant clusters should be followed by a vowel-initial word. In my analysis, the consonant cluster reduction was primarily followed by consonant-initial words. Nonetheless, instances, when the consonant cluster reduction preceded vowel-initial words, were also present.

   (1) *Rolls Royces come wit umbrellas…*   (Ja Morant)

   (2) *Ya'll kno I love the last laugh.*   (Odell Beckham, Jr.)

   (3) *But I kno I gotta put in the work.*   (Jalen Ramsey)

8.2 Replacement of *th* with *t/d* or *f/v*

During my analysis, I came across two instances of this phenomenon. The first is the word *smoove*, which is pronounced with *v*, as in *[smuv]* instead of typical *[*smuːð*]* where the *th* sound is present. And the second was the word *wit,* pronounced as *[wɪt]*. Instances when the *th* sound was completely omitted also occurred.

   (4) *Majority of 'em folded but I'm still solid.*   (Ja Morant)

   (5) *Smoove my man!*   (James Harden)

   (6) *Year 10 wit it.*   (James Harden)

   (7) *Walk 'em down.*   (Jalen Ramsey)

8.3 Simplification of *-ing*

Another notable phenomenon that was observed was the simplification of *-ing*, and all of the examined athletes were found to employ this phonological feature in their tweets. The high frequency of this phonological feature is not surprising, since it is a commonly used feature in Standard American English and other nonstandard varieties of English as well.

(8) *Ya'll love speakin' on 12…* (Ja Morant)

(9) *Been workin' on something for y'all…* (James Harden)

(10) *Hope everybody is havin' a wonderful day.* (Odell Beckham, Jr.)

(11) *Man, what they got goin' on ringside…* (Jalen Ramsey)

(12) *He been tryin' to tell me…* (Tim Anderson)

(13) *I be jammin' out on the mound warming up.* (Amir Garrett)

9 LEXICON

As previously stated in the theoretical part, it is not possible to create a lexicon that would list all slang terms of African American Vernacular English due to the fact that the lexicon of AAVE is constantly evolving. Nevertheless, as my findings show, there are lexical features that are commonly used among the majority of selected athletes. I also noticed that all of the found slang terms are widely used in the Hip-Hop culture, which is not surprising since Hip-Hop and sports are culturally interrelated phenomena in the USA.

9.1 Addressing people

Since Twitter is a platform created mainly for the purpose of human communication, terms that are used to refer to people were one of the most frequent features of AAVE that I encountered during the analysis. The expression *dawg* is employed by males to refer to other males whom they consider their close friends, and my findings support this claim, as in all three examples, the athletes use this expression to show admiration for somebody else. (Urban Dictionary.com, n. d.) Jalen Ramsey, in particular, employed this slang term several times in his tweets.

(14) *Happy birthday to my dawg.* (Ja Morant)

(15) *Proud of my dawg.* (James Harden)

(16) *So happy for my dawg right now.* (Jalen Ramsey)

(17) *... you are special dawg.* (Jalen Ramsey)

A different slang term that appeared in many tweets, however, with various spellings is *brudda*, *brotha*, and *broski*. This term conveys the same meaning in all three cases, and its usage is very similar to the previously mentioned expression *dawg*. The variation in spelling may reflect either regional differences or individual preferences, nonetheless, it also demonstrates the rich and dynamic nature of this variety of language.

(18) *So proud of you lil brudda.* (Ja Morant)

(19) *Live life broski.* (Odell Beckham Jr.)

(20) *I can't wait to see my brotha...* (Jalen Ramsey)

When analyzing the athletes' profiles, I noticed the frequent use of the expression *gang* which, in examples number (21) and (23), refers to a team's victory. Traditionally, however,

this term is associated with an organized group of individuals that is involved in criminal activities, and in example (22), Tim Anderson used it in such a way. Although the term is used in two completely different contexts, there is a correlation between the two, as both interpretations emphasize the importance of solidarity and unity.

(21)	*Big win for the gang!*	(James Harden)
(22)	*Took the whole gang up out the hood…*	(Tim Anderson)
(23)	*…what a win for the gang.*	(Amir Garrett)

9.2 Other Slang Expressions

As Green (2002, 30) states, material gain is a recurring theme in Hip-Hop culture. And it is no different in professional sports such as basketball, baseball, and football where athletes sign lucrative contracts that earn them millions of dollars a year. My findings support the claim as there were a few instances where athletes addressed the financial gain in slang terms. The expression *paper* was mentioned in the theoretical part, and two additional slang terms referring to money were found within my analysis. First, the expression *get the bag* which means accumulating a large sum of money, and second, the expression *bread*. (Urban Dictionary.com, n.d.)

(24)	*She know I got dat bag …*	(Ja Morant)
(25)	*I'm getting paper.*	(James Harden)
(26)	*… count the bread at night.*	(Tim Anderson)

A term that I assumed to occur more frequently within my analysis was *ballin*, this particular expression originated in basketball, however, later it was adopted by the Hip-Hop community, and now it is a polysemantic word that could be interpreted either as playing basketball or to be affluent or wealthy. (Urban Dictionary.com, n.d.) Furthermore, this also highlights the interconnectedness of different subcultures within African American communities.

(27)	*Ballin like March Madness.*	(James Harden)
(28)	*Still ballin till my last breath.*	(Odell Beckham Jr.)
(29)	*KC been ballin for weeks now.*	(Jalen Ramsey)

10 GRAMMATICAL FEATURES

As stated in the theoretical part, grammatical features of African American Vernacular English prove that it is a complex variety of language governed by rules and that in several aspects, AAVE substantially differs from Standard American English. Moreover, the frequent usage of these grammatical features in my corpus supports the claim and also highlights the dialect's importance in the world of entertainment, and particularly, the sports industry.

10.1 Zero Copula

Out of all features of African American Vernacular English, zero copula is the phenomenon that occurred the most frequently within my analysis, as it appeared in the tweets of all selected athletes. The frequent occurrence of this syntactic feature supports the claims of Green (2002, 38) about it being one of the most distinct and well-known features of AAVE.

(30) *This game crazy…*   (Ja Morant)

(31) *Mahomes nowhere near done…*   (James Harden)

(32) *Them boys fighting like uncles…* (Odell Beckham Jr.)

(33) *This the only thing that matters to me…* (Jalen Ramsey)

(34) *Real life still going on.*   (Tim Anderson)

(35) *…the trenches where I feel safe at.* (Amir Garrett)

Nonetheless, there were also instances when the athletes chose to not omit the copula *be* forms *is* and *are*. This may be the result of code-switching, the act of shifting between two or more dialects. I believe there are two possible reasons for the code-switching of athletes on Twitter. One is the intention to communicate in a formal way, for instance, when advertising a product or campaign, and the second is to expand their reach to a broader audience. (Collins Dictionary, n.d.)

(36) *This is for Dalzell, Murray, Memphis…* (Ja Morant)

(37) *Time is priceless.*   (James Harden)

(38) *Good sleep is pure luxury.*   (Odell Beckham, Jr.)

Another interesting thing I noticed was that some of the tweets that involved a brand partnership purposefully incorporated the athlete's personality into the text, to make the advertisement appear more organic, as in example number (26) by Odell Beckham, Jr.

(39) *Keepin' my smile fresh with…* (Odell Beckham, Jr.)

10.2 Invariant Be

Mufwene et al. (2021, 132) claim that invariant *be* is a fairly common phenomenon, present in various English dialects, including African American Vernacular English. My findings support this claim since there were several instances of the habitual *be*, which is generally the most commonly occurred type of invariant *be*.

(40) *I be in my own lane…* (Ja Morant)

(41) *I be in practice I got real skills…* (Ja Morant)

(42) *Life really be lifing lately…* (Odell Beckham, Jr.)

(43) *I be having so much to say…* (Odell Beckham, Jr.)

10.3 Verbal Markers

Since I was analyzing the athletes' tweets, thus written texts, it proved to be difficult to recognize verbal markers which heavily rely on pronunciation, however, the contextual information provided enabled me to identify some instances of verbal markers *been* and *done*. In the following examples by the athletes, the verbal marker *been* refers to the remote past, while the marker *done* refers to an event that has already happened.

(44) *It's a long story I been busy working.* (James Harden)

(45) *…I done revamped.* (Odell Beckham, Jr.)

(46) *I done helped people win…* (Jalen Ramsey)

(47) *We been waiting for a while for this…* (Amir Garrett)

10.4 Preverbal Markers

In the analyzed Twitter profiles, two out of three preverbal markers occurred. The preverbal marker *finna* which expresses that an event is going to happen in the near future, and the preverbal marker *steady* which precedes an activity that tends to continuously happen.

(48) *I'm finna take it there…* (Ja Morant)

(49) *I'm just steady chasin' God…* (Odell Beckham, Jr.)

(50) *I'm not perfect but I'm steady trying.* (Jalen Ramsey)

10.5 Absence of the Third Person Singular Present Tense -s

There were some examples where this phenomenon was used, however, I assumed that the omission of the present tense suffix *-s* would appear much more frequently in the athletes' tweets. The low occurrence of this grammatical feature could be attributed to the athletes' efforts to conform to the rules of Standard American English grammar.

(51) *If Kaari approve we good.* (Ja Morant)

(52) *I hope Russ go to Utah…* (Jalen Ramsey)

(53) *Before he run his mouth.* (Amir Garrett)

The usage of Standard American English forms when constructing the third person singular present tense was, to my surprise, more prominent. I observed that the Standard American English forms were employed by the athletes in tweets that had a serious tone, wherein the athletes addressed the current happenings in their professional careers.

(54) *First win of the season feels amazing.* (James Harden)

(55) *Can't lie it feels good to be where I'm at…* (Odell Beckham, Jr.)

(56) *… I never know what the future holds.* (Jalen Ramsey)

(57) *He scores at will.* (Amir Garrett)

10.6 Negation

As was stated in the theoretical part, African American Vernacular English is a negative-concord language, thus more than two negative elements can occur within a sentence. My findings support this claim as I found numerous instances of negative elements consistent with the grammatical rules of AAVE when analyzing the athletes' profiles. The negative element that appeared most frequently was *ain't*.

10.6.1 Multiple Negation

Multiple negation is another grammatical feature that was observed in my analysis. This phenomenon was particularly frequent in the tweets where the athletes addressed critics and criticism in general. I assume that multiple negation in these contexts was intentionally

employed in order to emphasize the disagreement with the criticism, or to simply stress a statement.

(58) *...they was tearin' me down, I ain't never break.* (Ja Morant)

(59) *...nobody gave nothing to me.* (Ja Morant)

(60) *Ain't got no shame in me...* (James Harden)

(61) *Don't accept nothing less.* (James Harden)

(62) *Them haters motivate, we wouldn't be nothin'...* (Tim Anderson)

(63) *Can't be nobody else.* (Tim Anderson)

10.6.2 Negative Inversion

Mufwene et al. (2021, 28) claim that negative inversion is a process during which the negated auxiliary verb inverts with the subject, and my findings support this statement as auxiliaries *can't* and *ain't* invert with their corresponding subjects in all examples. This phenomenon was found only in the tweets of two athletes, and since Tim Anderson and Jalen Ramsey are from the states of Alabama and Florida, respectively, which are both Southern States, I assume that the low occurrence of this grammatical feature is related to a dialectal background.

(64) *Ain't nothing wrong with him, he just ugly.* (Jalen Ramsey)

(65) *Can't nobody tell me...* (Jalen Ramsey)

(66) *Can't nobody change that either...* (Tim Anderson)

(67) *Can't nobody do your assignment for you.* (Tim Anderson)

10.6.3 Ain't

The negative indicator *ain't* also occurred in my analysis very frequently and it was employed by all of the examined athletes, who used it after nouns, personal pronouns, and determiners.

(68) *This year ain't it at all.* (Ja Morant)

(69) *...I ain't chose it.* (James Harden)

(70) *...but this ain't it.* (Odell Beckham, Jr.)

(71) *Every tweet ain't that deep.* (Jalen Ramsey)

(72) *...they ain't show me no sympathy.* (Tim Anderson)

(73) *...something ain't right.* (Amir Garrett)

10.7 Questions

Wh-questions are the type of questions that occurred the most within my analysis, and James Harden was the athlete that employed the AAVE question formation process most frequently. As stated in the theoretical part, *wh*-questions in African American Vernacular English can be formed in several ways, however, the auxiliary position is either occupied by an auxiliary or omitted, remarkably, in all four examples found by me, the auxiliary verb is omitted.

(74) *What time y'all start eating?*   (Ja Morant)

(75) *Who y'all got in the final four?*   (James Harden)

(76) *Who y'all rolling with for the tourney?*   (James Harden)

(77) *Who y'all going with?*   (James Harden)

Additionally, instances of questions formed in Standard American English also occurred in the tweets of the selected athletes. It is worth noting that these were very general questions, not related to sports, which suggests that the athletes likely sought answers from a wide range of people.

(78) *What are some good new movies out right now?* (James Harden)

(79) *Has anyone ever finished a full ChapStick?*   (Odell Beckham, Jr.)

(80) *What are some must-eat restaurants in Kc?*   (Amir Garrett)

10.8 Absence of Possessive 's

This feature appeared relatively infrequently in comparison to the other grammatical phenomena that I examined. It is possible that the low occurrence of the absence of the possessive suffix *'s* may be the result of athletes' intent to avoid misunderstandings, thus they followed the grammatical rules of Standard American English instead.

(81) *See that's everybody problem right there.*   (Ja Morant)

(82) *...everyone opinion really doesn't matter.*   (Tim Anderson)

As I mentioned, during my analysis, several instances of tweets that involved Standard American English forms of possession were also found. I noticed that these forms were

commonly present in tweets that were slightly longer, displayed proper syntax, and included punctuation.

    (83) *Life wasn't meant to live someone else's.*   (James Harden)

    (84) *I'm God's child.*   (Jalen Ramsey)

    (85) *...he will know Kobe's legacy.*   (Amir Garrett)

    (86) *Everyone else's opinion is irrelevant.*   (Amir Garrett)

CONCLUSION

The aim of this bachelor thesis was to analyze the African American Vernacular English of professional athletes of color. The social media service Twitter, and particularly the athletes' profiles on this platform, were chosen as the main material for this analysis.

Concerning the phonological features, I found that transcriptions of features such as the consonant cluster reduction, replacement of the *th* sound with *t/d* or *f/v*, and simplification of *-ing* serve as a way to realize these phonological features in the written language. The simplification of *-ing* emerged as the most notable phonological feature in the analysis, given that it was employed by all of the examined athletes.

The lexicon of the athletes was also examined, and the most prominent group of slang terms were those that are used to refer to people. Slang terms such as *dawg*, *gang,* and different spelling variations for the term *bro* were present as well. Other noteworthy slang expressions such as *ballin* and terms referring to money also occurred.

As far as grammatical features are concerned, almost all the features that were introduced in the theoretical part of this thesis also appeared in the analysis. However, the most common phenomena included in particular were the zero copula and negative indicator *ain't*, these two features were found within the Twitter profiles of all analyzed athletes. The other grammatical feature that was not employed by all examined athletes but occurred quite frequently was multiple negation, which the athletes used mainly with the intention of addressing criticism. The question formation process of African American Vernacular English also appeared and the *wh*-questions were the most common type.

Nonetheless, it should be emphasized that although the athletes frequently employed features of African American Vernacular English in their tweets, the structures that involved the rules of Standard American English were in terms of frequency nearly equally as present. The application of Standard American English rules was particularly noticeable in tweets where the third person singular present tense *-s* was used, to convey a serious tone, during question formation, so the athletes can get answers from as many people as possible, and finally, during the marking of possession, to avoid misunderstandings. This is the result of code-switching, the process of alternating between two or more language varieties, which the athletes of color often use as an adaptation technique, and it varies depending on the setting and audience.

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LIST OF TABLES

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Used tweets (see the enclosed CD)