

SVEUČILIŠTE U ZAGREBU

FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET

Odsjek za anglistiku

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KARAKTERISTIKE AFROAMERIČKOG ENGLESKOG VERNAKULARA  
U BEYONCÉINIM PJESMAMA

Diplomski rad

Mentor: dr. sc. Anđel Starčević, poslijedoktorand

prosinac 2018.

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FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
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AAVE FEATURES IN BEYONCÉ'S SONGS

Master's Thesis

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December 2018

Abstract:

This thesis investigates the morphosyntactic and lexical features of African American Vernacular English as occurring in the audio and visual album *Lemonade* of the R&B, pop, and hip-hop singer Beyoncé. Despite the fact that studies of non-standard and distinctively African American grammatical features abound, the interest for researching their occurrence within the context of mainstream music is still infrequent. Although small, the present corpus of our study was specifically selected because of its accentuation of black identity issues. The rationale behind the selection of the corpus was that, in order to achieve the appropriate effect, the specific characteristics of the language of the African American community had to be exploited to a large extent. The study we conducted has confirmed this hypothesis: although some of the ‘core features’ associated with AAVE were missing (habitual *be*, the remote past *BIN*), many other AAVE features, both grammatical and lexical, were used throughout the songs. Apart from presenting the theory concerning the variety, the research part presents instantiated characteristics of AAVE and discusses the possibilities and restrictions on their occurrence. We also present specific African American lexical items found in the corpus and categorize them by topic. We hope that this study may present a foundation for further sociolinguistic and educational studies related to the use of performed language in communicating racialized identities and ideologies.

Keywords: AAVE, non-standard features, Beyoncé, mainstream music, black identity, performed language

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The research on African American Vernacular English is highly prolific. It expands across decades and focuses on every possible study area – the variety’s origins, development, syntax, semantics, and vocabulary, and sociolinguistic and educational topics, among many others. Wolfram and Thomas (2002: 1) observe that the research interest for AAVE has always been substantial –more has been written on its diachronic and synchronic status than on any other English vernacular. Despite that, the interest for a more recent status of AAVE in the “contemporary Black American expressive culture” (Alim, 2006: 5-6), namely, the hip-hop movement, was formulated only in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Since then, however, the number of cultural and linguistic studies has rocketed – which is not surprising if one is to consider the global reach of hip-hop. Nevertheless, even amidst this ever-growing interest for the phenomenon of hip-hop, studies devoted to AAVE in contemporary song lyrics are scarce. Our thesis aims to fill this gap – we devoted it to a linguistic study of AAVE features found in song lyrics of a hip-hop, R&B, and pop performer Beyoncé, more specifically, her latest solo album *Lemonade*. What is the importance of studying the usage of AAVE in such a context, one could ask. In his book *Roc the Mic: The language of Hip Hop Culture*, Alim conveniently cites the cultural theorist Raymond Williams who says that “A definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world”. (Williams 1976: 21, in Alim *ibid.*: 8) In that sense, we consider performed language, which song lyrics definitely are, as an instance of expressing human condition, i.e. as an expression of interconnectedness of identities, attitudes, languages, culture, society, and politics. However interesting, due to a limited scope of the present thesis, we will not be focusing on these, more complex, sociolinguistic issues. What we will do is lay a possible foundation for such a study – a basic description of a language used to address the social (in)justice and identity politics of the AAVE community.

Despite the long-lasting and continually growing body of research on AAVE, the notion of African American speech remains controversial in the academic as well as in mainstream domains. On the one hand, AAVE is characterized by an on-going scholarly dissent – differing perspectives regarding its definition, history, variation, and development have not yet been reconciled, and, probably, will not be in the near future. On the other hand, the existence of “two separate societies” (Smitherman 2000: 36) on the U.S. soil, in which the White society sets the political, cultural and economic, as well as linguistic standards, perpetuates the mainstream’s perception of AAVE as a substandard language. Nevertheless, extensive research

on the grammatical, lexical, and phonological system of AAVE has proved these contentions completely erroneous. Today, it is more than obvious, at least in academic circles, that AAVE constitutes a legitimate and systematic linguistic variety, and that its speakers do not speak a “broken”, “lazy”, “ignorant” or “bastardized” English (Rickford and Rickford 2000: 6), but follow specific language rules. AAVE is a variety that has set phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and lexical patterns (Green 2002: 1) that differentiate it notably from General American English, but also from other American English dialects. However, non-structural elements, such as prosody, intonation, and rhetorical styles, make AAVE even more markedly different from other American varieties. (Lippi-Green 2012: 182) Therefore, even when a speaker does not use any structurally specific AAVE patterns, he/she might still be speaking AAVE. (ibid.) This is often the case with middle-class speakers of AAVE: for the most part, their speech is accommodated to the General American English norm, and as a result, it frequently lacks specific phonological, grammatical and/or lexical features often invoked when considering AAVE. However, AAVE spoken by the middle class is still deeply influenced by intonational and/or stylistic features of what Smitherman (1995, in Lippi-Green ibid.) calls the African American Verbal Tradition. Practices of signification, call-and-response, sermonic tone, and tonal semantics give them a way to establish and maintain a linguistic connection and of signifying solidarity with the rest of the African American community. (Lippi-Green ibid.) In our thesis, however, we will not be dealing with such features, mostly because of the methodological problems that arise when acquiring and processing data for studying intonation and prosody. Moreover, even though we believe that a comprehensive linguistic description of AAVE should definitely incorporate rhetorical practices such as, for example, signifying, sermonic tone, and call-and-response, the limited framework of this thesis has forced us to focus solely on the grammatical and lexical features of AAVE.

Our thesis is divided into six sections. The first, theoretical part of our thesis consists of five chapters. In Chapter two, we present a brief overview of the terminological and definitional issues and trends related to AAVE. We also touch upon the question of whether AAVE constitutes a language or a dialect. Additionally, we discuss the uniqueness and uniformity of the variety, briefly mentioning the divergence/convergence dichotomy, discussed in greater depth in Chapter three. The third chapter mainly deals with the debate concerning AAVE’s origins. We present four major hypotheses, each one providing a different explanation of the genesis and development of the contemporary AAVE. Chapter four is dedicated to an overview of the most distinctive grammatical features of AAVE. Here, we briefly discuss some

morphological and syntactic properties of AAVE, namely tense, modality and aspect (TMA) markers, which are often believed to be one the most differentiating characteristics of AAVE, and four other grammatical features of AAVE – copula and auxiliary absence, verbal –s, negative element *ain 't*, and negative concord. For each of the patterns, we provide descriptions, specific rules, and discuss constraints or restrictions on their occurrence, when necessary. We dedicated Chapter five to discussing the cultural and social relevance of the chosen material of our study. Chapter six is the last chapter of the theoretical part of our thesis, and it presents our corpus and the chosen methodology for the study. The second part of our thesis is dedicated to the research of AAVE features in Beyoncé's songs. It is divided into two parts: the first one discusses the occurrence and constraints on the distribution and meaning of the morphosyntactic features observed in our corpus. The second part is dedicated to lexical features of AAVE present in our corpus. It begins with a brief discussion of AAVE vocabulary and aims at categorizing distinctive AAVE lexical features occurring in our corpus according to different topics, while explaining their meaning.

## 2. DEFINITIONAL SCOPE

### 2.1. TERMINOLOGY

Since its very beginning, the research into a variety called African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has been surrounded by controversy and ambiguity. This fact can be seen on the plane of AAVE's origins and development, which will be revisited in the following chapter, as well as in its terminological variations. There has been a wide spectrum of names used to refer to the variety in question: Negro Dialect, Nonstandard Negro English, Black English, Vernacular Black English, Afro-American English, Ebonics, African American (Vernacular) English and African American Language. (Rickford, 1999: xxi) As Rickford (ibid.) and Wolfram (2015: 341) note, volatile social and political perceptions of AAVE's speakers in the American society and the accompanying terminological trends are the primary cause for the abundance of different labels for the variety.

The incoherence of naming practices among different authors is further caused by the disagreement around the question of what language forms can be considered African American, and of their particular origin. (Rickford 1999: xxi–xxiii) For example, in their introduction to “The Oxford Handbook of African American Language”, Lanehart and Malik (2015: 3) employ the term African American Language (AAL). According to them, this designation covers various language forms used within diverse African American communities. These include



Gullah and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as well as different idiolects, sociolects, and situational repertoires that lack the most overt non-standard grammatical features often invoked when considering the speech of African Americans. In that sense, Rickford (2015: 50) estimates that the accentuation of the qualification of ‘language’ may “help overcome the negative associations some people have when they think of the variety discussed ... as a ‘dialect’ of English”. However, he considers that AAL may actually be considered as an umbrella term also covering various creole forms of different European languages spoken by African descendants across the Caribbean, Central, and South America. (ibid.) Hence, in Rickford (1999: xxi, 2015: 50), he uses the term African American English (AAE) to refer to what Lanehart and Malik (2015: 3) call AAL – covering a range of African American language varieties that exist on a spectrum extending from the most vernacular or non-standard to the most standard. (Rickford 1999: xxi).

Another definitional dilemma related to AAVE concerns the qualification of ‘English’ in naming practices. The dispute over and different practices of including this qualification in the name for the variety actually stems from another definitional concern – a question of whether AAVE descends from English dialects or African creole. (Green 2002: 6) Among different views on the matter, we follow Rickford’s (2015: 50) opinion that the term AAVE is neither Eurocentric nor Afrocentric, but neutral. According to him, the term primarily addresses “distinctive varieties of English spoken in African America (in the United States) and acknowledges that the bulk of AAVE’s lexicon is from English” (ibid.). In similar vein, Rickford (1999: 9) considers necessary the retention of the ‘vernacular’ qualification. According to him, its function is to mark a difference between the nonstandard, i.e. vernacular variety that is usually employed by working class urban speakers, and various other language forms used by middle-class African Americans that mostly lack distinctive nonstandard structural characteristics, such as copula and auxiliary absence, habitual *be*, and third-person – *s* absence. (ibid., Thomas 2015: 432) As it is obvious from this, sociolinguists have yet to agree on the most appropriate term for the variety spoken by African Americans and the array of ethnolinguistic repertoires it encompasses. In our thesis, we will generally focus on the more vernacular variety, namely AAVE. Ultimately, following Green (2002: 7), we should point out that, although we will frequently refer to African Americans and African American community, it is not to imply that all African Americans speak AAVE. The linguistic system we are describing is not used by all African Americans; however, it is used by some non-black speakers, who, according to Wolfram and Schilling (2016: 219), may use elements of AAVE

to “index affiliation with African American ethnicity or with character traits (stereotypically) associated with it.”

## 2.2.DIALECT OR LANGUAGE? HOW UNIQUE AND UNIFORM?

Another definitional concern regarding AAVE is the perpetuating question of whether it constitutes a language or a dialect. The fact that many linguists recognize (cf. Green 2002: 2, Smitherman 2000: 15, Wolfram 2015: 342, Wolfram and Schilling 2016: 219) is that such a difference, in fact, is not related to structural linguistic features or (a lack of) mutual intelligibility, but with ideology, identity and the sociopolitical power of its speakers. (Wolfram 2007: 77) As Fasold (2001: 2, cited in Wolfram 2015: 342) concludes, the notion of language “is *purely* a social construct and (...) linguistic criteria play no role whatsoever.” Along the lines of the mentioned authors, we also acknowledge that the issue of dialect versus language pertains to matters of “sociopolitical constructions” (Smitherman 2000: 16), rather than linguistic ones, thus exceeding the scope of our thesis.

Regardless of how we choose to call it, both laypeople and scholars agree on the fact that the vernacular African American speech is distinctly characterized by a restricted subset of phonological and grammatical features more or less unique to the variety. (Wolfram and Schilling 2016: 224) Wolfram and Schilling (ibid. 221) point out that the dialectal uniqueness of AAVE is especially prominent when comparing it with European American varieties in Northern urban contexts. However, the variety’s uniqueness in Southern contexts is much more questionable because of the shared history of AAVE and Southern White American Vernacular English (SWAVE). As explained by Winford (2015: 85), apart from the shared ancestor (British settler dialects that were spoken throughout the Southern United States), these two varieties evolved in the same context and had an extensive linguistic influence over each other, which resulted in shared dialect traits. (Wolfram and Schilling 2016: 224) Despite that, Wolfram and Schilling (ibid.) claim that, even though qualitative differences in Southern contexts may be much more limited than assumed, quantitative differences between respective varieties greatly contribute to their differentiation.

A more recent path of development of AAVE was primarily influenced by Northern urban contexts, where the variety became particularly ethnically marked. (Wolfram and Schilling 2016: 231-232) According to Wolfram and Schilling (ibid.), the 20<sup>th</sup> century migration of African Americans from rural to urban areas and the subsequent inner-city segregation prompted the growth of cultural and ethnic identity awareness. This, in turn,

supported the perpetuation of a long-standing linguistic divide between the black and white society, and prompted the development of a supraregional variety of AAVE. (ibid.) As Wolfram and Thomas (2002: 202) note: “In effect, African American speech (...) turned away from local, rural norms toward the norms of AAVE found in other settings throughout the USA, particularly urban contexts.” Such a development was especially influenced by younger generations of AAVE speakers who, under the influence of the growing African American cultural and identity appreciation, intensified their use of the distinctive African American linguistic features, and even added some new ones. (ibid. 189-205) These tendencies gave rise to the transregional variety that is characterized by a core set of AAVE structures, which younger generations across the country consider and use as a prototype of the vernacular. (ibid.) According to Wolfram (2015: 341), this common set of structural features includes morphosyntactic structures such as invariant *be* with a habitual denotation, the absence of copula and auxiliary *be*, verbal *-s*, possessive *-s*, and plural *-s*, among others, as well as phonological structures such as syllable-coda prevocalic consonant cluster reduction, labialization of non-initial interdental fricatives, and postvocalic r-lessness. Despite the above said, it would be erroneous to consider that AAVE lacks regional variation. Although it certainly exhibits supra-regional tendencies, Wolfram and Schilling (2016: 225) affirm that AAVE is composed of various language forms that differ from region to region and from generation to generation. In that sense, Schneider (2015: 136) explains that “AAVE has always been characterized by internal heterogeneity”. The discussion of its origins that awaits us in the subsequent chapter attests to his observation that “components drawn from standard English, dialectal English, innovative developments, and creole, to varying proportions” (Schneider ibid.), have all contributed to its formation and development.

### 3. ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT DEBATE

Much of the previously mentioned controversy following contemporary African American Vernacular English revolves around its origins and early development. Various problems arise in discussing its roots. As Van Herk (2015: 24-8) observes, varieties chosen for the relevant comparison may not be appropriate or there may be difficulties in determining the direction of influence due to longstanding contact between AAVE and some of its comparison varieties. The research on its earlier stages is additionally exacerbated by difficulties in providing relevant data and documentation on its usage – Winford (2015: 86) notes that there are practically no records of the earliest forms of AAVE spoken in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Additionally, much research has been denounced due to its uncritical selection of features from

various comparison varieties “without considering histories of contact and the mechanics of linguistic diffusion.” (Van Herk 2015: 23) Owing to these and other issues, the dispute over AAVE’s origins is far from being resolved. However, a majority of researchers adhere to one of the four major hypotheses accounting for the origin and early development of AAVE. In the rest of this section, we will review each one of them and their associated arguments. As one shall see, however, more often than not, these arguments tend to be ambiguous and open to different interpretations.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the theory that dominated the field was the Anglicist hypothesis. This English origins hypothesis postulated that AAVE’s distinctive features are the direct result of preservation of non-standard features of various English dialects spoken by British settlers during the colonial period (between 1607 and 1776). Nevertheless, over the course of years, respective features were gradually lost from these European American dialects, thus differentiating AAVE from them. (Van Herk 2015: 23, Winford 2015: 85, Wolfram and Schilling 2016: 226) Furthermore, the theory suggests that during the initial period of the importation of slaves, they spoke a number of different African languages. However, due to the contact situation favoring the acquisition of the White man’s language, various mother languages of the newly arrived Africans became gradually lost. (Wolfram and Schilling, *ibid.*)

The theory that first challenged the assumptions put forward by the Anglicists was the Creolist hypothesis that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s. This then widespread position maintains that AAVE originated from a creole language that had developed during the early contact between Africans and Europeans on the US soil, and which had extended over the pre-war Southern states. According to the Creolists, this creole was not unique to the mainland South but also found in the African diaspora, such as in the Caribbean (Barbados and Jamaica), North America and other parts of Africa, e.g. Sierra Leone and Liberia. Additionally, it is postulated that Gullah, a creole language still spoken today off the coast of Saint Carolina and Georgia, developed from the assumed proto-creole. Creolist hypothesis adherents posit that the contact between the assumed creole and other European English varieties led to a process called decreolization: a loss of creole structures and their replacement by non-creole features. However, not all properties were lost and present-day AAVE features are believed to be a continuation of the assumed creole’s characteristics. (Wolfram and Thomas 2002: 13, Wolfram and Schilling 2016: 226-7) Nevertheless, Rickford (2015: 36) acknowledges that no current creolist favors the strong creolist hypothesis, which considered that the Southern United States were home to a mature creole language extending over its whole territory. Rather, the author

notes that the current instantiation of the position and its adherents such as Winford (1998) and Rickford (1997, 1998) acknowledge the diachronic and sociolinguistic variability of AAVE, accepting both creole and English influences on the early development of the variety.

According to Wolfram and Schilling (2016: 228-9) the Creolist Hypothesis fell out of favor with the emergence of new types of historical data. The data in question refers to written records of ex-slave narratives from the 1930s, letters written by semi-literate ex-slaves in the mid-nineteenth century, and Hyatt texts – a set of interviews conducted with black voodoo practitioners in the 1930s. This data revealed much more similarities between AAVE and postcolonial American English than previously thought, which led to the formation of the Neo-Anglicist Hypothesis. Additional evidence in favor of the newly formulated hypothesis came from studies of black expatriate varieties of English spoken in Samaná, in the Dominican Republic, in Liberia, and in Nova Scotia. The studies showed that the language spoken in these isolated communities is more similar to earlier European American varieties than to the presumed creole. Similar to the Anglicist Hypothesis, the Neo-Anglicist hypothesis considers that AAVE originated from the English dialects spoken by the early British settlers. However, unlike the Anglicist hypothesis, Neo-Anglicist adherents presume that, during its evolution and triggered by its own internal changes, AAVE diverged from them. (Wolfram and Schilling 2016: 229, Van Herk 2015: 23) Hence, Labov (1998: 119, in Wolfram and Schilling, *ibid.*) and Poplack (1999: 27, in *ibid.*) argue that the most distinctive properties of AAVE are not the result of the early influence of the British dialects, but more recent innovations, thus supporting the theory of the early convergence with and later divergence from English dialects.

Despite all the evidence supporting the theory of English influence, the early development of AAVE may have had a completely different path of development. Wolfram and Schilling (2016: 230-1) consider that AAVE's distinctive features may, in fact, have arisen from the early influence of substrate languages. According to them, substrate languages had still existed in the earlier contact situations between speakers of English dialects and various African and/or creole languages, such as during the passage of slaves from Africa to North America. In these situations, the substrate varieties, be those African languages or early creoles, may have had a strong influence on the initial development of the African American speech and may have been the primary cause of its distinctive features. Despite all things being said, many of the mentioned authors point out that different sociohistorical and local circumstances, population ecology, and a general lack of data for the earliest stages of AAVE hinder the possibility of completely resolving the question of its origin and early development. What is

certain, as Schneider (2015: 135) points out, is that AAVE is far from being a “monolithic entity”. Quite the opposite, the unresolved question of AAVE’s genesis and development stands as a monument to complexities, diversity, and resilience that have characterized the formation and development of its speech community.

### 3.1. CONVERGENCE/DIVERGENCE AND REGIONALITY/SUPRAREGIONAL VARIETY

Wolfram and Thomas (2002: 27-9) assert that a more recent development of AAVE, namely, its development during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is equally subject to different and often completely opposed opinions and attitudes. According to the authors, various types of data and research findings point in opposite directions – convergence with and divergence from surrounding vernaculars. On the one hand, studies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century AAVE have shown that the variety is much more similar to the 19<sup>th</sup> century European American varieties than previously thought. Additionally, such research indicated that certain present-day differences did not originate in that period, but during the later development of AAVE. The authors point out that the comparison between the research of AAVE in Philadelphia in the mid-1980s and the research of AAVE in New York in 1960s, both conducted by Labov and his team (1968, 1972), further indicated growing disparities between AAVE and its surrounding American English vernaculars, which, generally, came about due to AAVE’s internal changes. Furthermore, previously mentioned studies of Diaspora varieties, coupled with written documentation and audio recordings of ex-slaves, also supported the divergence hypothesis. (ibid.) On the other hand, in citing Fasold et al. (1997), Wolfram and Thomas (2002: 25-29) remind us that the issue of divergence versus convergence is not a straightforward matter. Due to socioeconomic and sociohistorical complexities, AAVE might have gone through various phases. For one, it is possible that the development of AAVE was characterized by divergence as well as convergence, but at different points in time. Convergence and divergence, respectively, were not some homogenized processes that followed prescribed paths - they may have had unfolded in various different ways and changed at different points during the development of the variety. Furthermore, Wolfram and Thomas (ibid. 29) consider possible that particular linguistic structures converged with surrounding American English vernaculars, while other structures diverged from them. In that sense, Wolfram (2015: 347) attests that AAVE may have gone through at least three different paths of change: “one in line with the divergence hypothesis, (...) one that supports the convergence hypothesis, (...) and one (...) that includes periods of convergence and divergence over time.”

As Wolfram and Thomas (2002: 23) indicate, linguistic diversity and variation are the expected outcome of historical, demographic, regional, and social diversity of AAE speakers. As suggested by Winford (2015: 86-7), various ethnic backgrounds of numerous Africans brought over to the American continent, and the fact that, upon their arrival, they were thrust into very different ethnolinguistic contexts, are the primary cause of variation in terms of the earliest African American English varieties spoken on the US soil. However, linguistic variability of AAE is not confined only to the earlier AAE speech. On the contrary, it is equally characteristic of AAE spoken today. (Wolfram and Schilling 2016: 225) As Wolfram (2015: 328) indicates, contemporary AAE is “a dynamic collection of social and regional varieties (...)” which developed due to various reasons. Among them, factors such as different levels of accommodation to and convergence with surrounding White vernaculars, and distribution of AAVE features across various communities stand out as primary contributors to the extensive regional variation of AAE. (Wolfram and Kohn 2015: 142-151) Moreover, in addition to regional and social differences, the speech of African Americans is also subject to generational stratification as well. (ibid. 147)

Contradictory to the regional diversification of AAE is the fact that the variety also shows uniformity across different regional spaces of the American continent. As Wolfram (2015: 341-2) and Wolfram and Schilling (2016: 232) note, the earliest descriptions of AAVE (cf. Fasold and Wolfram 1970, Labov 1972) were especially interested in features that appeared to be shared by members of different African American communities on the continent. The distinctiveness of these features separated it from Mainstream American English (MAE) and became characteristic of the social groups that usually displayed them in their speech, namely black working-class, urban youth. (Wolfram and Schilling ibid. 218) Although it is recognized today that the earliest descriptions of AAVE somewhat exaggerated its uniformity, all while choosing to neglect its regional, social, and generational variability, the argument for AAVE’s transregionality remains true. (ibid. 238) Studies such as Wolfram and Thomas’s (2002) and Rickford’s (1999) present ample evidence that regionally situated varieties are ever more substituted by the supraregional variety of AAVE, primarily characterized by a set of distinctive structural features that appear in the African American speech throughout the United States. (Wolfram and Schilling 2016: 224) As we have noted in section 2.2., various social trends contributed to the development of the supraregional variety. Apart from the previously mentioned causes, Rickford (1999: 274) demonstrates that an additional cause lies in the fact that AAVE became an important means of asserting black identity, especially among younger

generations. Characteristic of these generations is “a growing tendency to talk and act in their ‘natural’ way” (ibid.), readily seen in their accentuated use of the common core features and the development of new ones. (ibid.) In that sense, Wolfram and Schilling (2016: 234-6) note that the speech of both urban and rural teenagers became deeply characterized by the usage of habitual *be*, so much so that it became a stereotypical characteristic of AAVE. In addition, the feature assumed an additional meaning and now refers to not only habitual, but also more permanent states. The language of hip-hop music, accompanied by the media, has been supporting the spread of this and other features of the supraregional variety. As the authors note, the AAVE speech norm as seen on the television, movies, internet videos, and music “tends to be urban and generic rather than rural and local, thus projecting the image of a unified AAE that young African Americans throughout the country can use in constructing their cultural identities as part of the larger community of African Americans (...)”. (Wolfram and Schilling 2016: 236)

#### 4. SOME DISTINCTIVE GRAMMATICAL TRAITS OF AAVE

As it was mentioned beforehand, repertoires used by African American speakers vary, and not every African American uses all distinctive AAVE features in their speech. Wolfram and Schilling (2016: 219) acknowledge that an average AAVE speaker does not use each and every ‘core’ AAVE structure: the speech of every African American is, in fact, a combination of idiosyncratic features used to index one’s ethnicity. The process of indexation rests upon the selection of different prosodic, phonological and morphosyntactic features, as well as various discursive strategies. (ibid.) Among the most distinctive morphosyntactic structures that are generally associated with working-class African Americans, we can find aspectual *be*, absence of third singular present tense *-s*, plural *-s*, possessive *-s*, and copula and auxiliary absence. (Wolfram and Schilling 2016: 221-2) Although the list does not end here, due to a limited scope and specific aims of the present study, we are not in a position to discuss every possible vernacular usage of AAVE. Rather, in this chapter, we will mainly focus on presenting a theoretical overview of the grammatical (morphological and syntactic) features of AAVE occurring in our corpus, such as the absence of third person singular present tense *-s*, the absence of copula/auxiliary *is* and *are*, the use of *ain’t* as a general preverbal negator, and negative concord. Some of the most prominent grammatical features associated with the core set of AAVE are not present in our corpus, e.g. aspectual *be*, *BIN* and *done*, and the use of double modals; hence, we will only mention them briefly, without embarking upon a deeper discussion.



#### 4.1. PREVERBAL MARKERS OF TENSE, MODALITY, AND ASPECT

As stated by DeBose (2015: 371), the main peculiarity of AAVE relates to the way of expressing tense, modality, and aspect (TMA). In accordance with the author (2015: 371-3), we note that AAVE tense markers may indicate the present tense, however, without a verb overtly marked for present, as in the sentence “She at home”. The instance of covert marking of the present tense is known as zero copula or the absence of copula. The zero copula phenomenon usually includes the deletion of copula as well as of auxiliary (e.g., Rickford 1999: 61-89, Green 2002: 38). Therefore, in the next section of this chapter, we will also consider them together.

Furthermore, sentences such as “They was at home” express the occurrence of an event in the past and represent the past tense. (DeBose 2015: 372) In AAVE, the past tense is overtly marked by the verb *was* before adverbials. However, AAVE frequently uses a singular verb form of the past tense with a plural or second person singular subject (Green 2002: 38), which will be discussed in more detail in the next section. Additionally, as exemplified in Rickford (1999: 6), another distinctive AAVE feature is the use of *had* to mark the simple past, as in “then we had went outside” for Standard English “then we went outside”, however, such usage is recorded primarily among preadolescents. (ibid.) Although identical in shape to pluperfect, the sequence *had + preterite* is not used to indicate the past before the past. (Green 2002: 92) Rather, as Green (ibid.) observes, AAVE speakers often use the sequence in narrative contexts to indicate the simple past tense. Moreover, AAVE speakers may also use the past tense form (V-*ed*) as the past participle (V-*en*), as in “He had bit” for SE “He had bitten.” (Rickford 1999: 7) Conversely, AAVE speakers may also use the past participle form (V-*en*) as the past tense form (V-*ed*), as in “She *seen* him yesterday” for SE “She saw him yesterday.” (ibid.)

As for the future tense, AAVE grammar allows for its overt marking, either by the marker *gonna/gon*, occurring before the predicate phrase, or by the auxiliary *will*, as in sentences “We gon(na) be at home” and “They will be at the party”, respectively. In addition, as observed by Rickford and Rickford (2000: 121) in order to mark that the occurrence of an event is imminent, AAVE speakers may use the tense-aspect marker *finna*. The authors (ibid.) explain that *finna*, a derivation of *fixing to*, as appearing in the sentence “He is fixin’ to go” is not a feature restricted to African American speech, but is also present in white vernaculars. As we have previously seen, the tendency in AAVE, and especially among preadolescent speakers of AAVE, is to delete the copula *is* and *are*, thus reducing *fixin’ to* to *finna*, or its other pronunciations *fidna*, *fitna*, *fixna*, *fista*, *finsta*. (ibid.) Despite the fact that the marker also occurs in other Southern English varieties, Green (2002: 71) maintains that the major difference in the

use of the feature between the two varieties lies in its pronunciation. As for the verbal tense marker *gon(na)*, we will revisit and discuss it more thoroughly later in our analysis.

As stated by DeBose (2015: 372) the concept of *modality* refers to “the part of meaning of a sentence that expresses a degree of doubt or uncertainty about the truth of a predicated event, or makes its truth contingent upon circumstances.” In AAVE, modality is marked by modal auxiliaries that are no different from their Standard English (SE) equivalents: *should, can, could, may, might*. Despite their similarity, the contrast between AAVE and other White vernaculars lies in its use of double and sometimes triple modals, as in the examples “He may can do the work” and “They might should oughta do it”; however, this usage is also commonly found in Southern White vernaculars. (Rickford 1999: 6, Rickford and Rickford 2000: 125-6) Unfortunately, there were no examples of AAVE modal markers in our corpus, so we will not proceed with further discussion about them.

Finally, DeBose (2015: 372) maintains that the concept of *aspect* refers to duration, completion, or habitual occurrence of some eventuality that is expressed in SE by adverbial forms such as *usually*. The following sentences exemplify the listed aspectual categories (ibid.):

- (1) She runnin’ through the woods.
- (2) I forgot my purse. / I cook a mess of greens.
- (3) I dən forgot my purse.
- (4) We be at home.
- (5) They BIN at school.

A number of points regarding AAVE aspectual markers should be observed. For now, we will ignore the progressive/continuous aspect and the absence of the auxiliary in example (1), which will be revisited in the following section, and we shall focus on the rest of the examples. The completive aspect exemplified by sentences in (2) is interesting in at least two ways. First off, although the sentence “I forgot my purse” denotes that the event occurs in the past, in AAVE, the sentence may refer to the simple past tense as well as the present perfect tense. In other words, sentence (2) can mean either “I have forgotten my purse”, or “I forgot my purse”. (DeBose *ibid.* 372) Green (2002: 39) notes that in AAVE, the simple past and the present perfect often appear the same; therefore, these two tenses can be distinguished only in emphatic affirmation environment that includes the stressed form of the auxiliary *have* appearing on the surface in the present perfect tense. Despite their identical shape, Green (*ibid.*) explains that speakers of AAVE indeed distinguish between the simple past and the present perfect, the fact that can be confirmed by observing their negative equivalents: “I ain(’t)/haven’t forgot” vs. “I din (didn’t) forget.” Furthermore, the second sentence in example (2), “I cook a mess of greens”,

demonstrates another African American feature: the absence of the suffix *-ed* on regular verbs. To explain this phenomenon, Rickford (1999: 7) indicates that AAVE speakers may use verb stem form as the preterite form (*V-ed*), as in “He come down here yesterday” for SE “He came down here yesterday”. However, unlike DeBose (2015: 372), he does not mention the possible present perfect reading for such constructions.

Among other preverbal aspectual markers of AAVE that do not occur in our corpus, but should be mentioned when discussing the morphosyntactic system of AAVE, we note aspectual *be*, remote past *BIN*, and unstressed *dən*. Aspectual *be*, or invariant habitual *be*, is probably the most famous grammatical feature of AAVE. Wolfram (2004: 322, in Singler 2015: 117) considers that aspectual *be*, sometimes also called habitual or invariant *be*, “is largely an innovation of the post-World War II era and that the change has spread from an urban locus outward.” As indicated by Green (2002: 47), the function of aspectual/invariant/habitual *be* marker is to give a following verb the habitual or iterative interpretation. Rickford and Rickford (2000: 114) also point out that, in order to emphasize the “continuative, persistent nature of an action”, AAVE speakers may also use the marker *steady*. Green (2002: 71) also notes that *steady* cannot precede a verb that denotes a state because of the clash of semantic meaning.

Furthermore, according to Green (ibid. 54-5), remote past *BIN* marks that an action or a state occurred in the distant past. *BIN* can either predicate an event that began and ended a long time ago, or an event that began in the distant past and lasted until the moment of the utterance, as in example (5). (ibid.) As explained by DeBose (2015: 373), the stressed *BIN*'s counterpart, unstressed *been*, is very similar to SE *been* in that it marks a durative aspect of a verb. However, unlike SE *been*, AAVE *been* can be used instead of SE *have + past participle*, as in the example “I been knowing her for a long time”, and it can be used where an SE speaker would use *was*: “About eleven or twelve o'clock he *been* eating everything.” (Rickford and Rickford, 2000: 117) Ultimately, the marker *dən* indicates that an action has been completed or that it is going to be completed very soon. (Green and Sistrunk 2015: 362) According to Green (2002: 60-66), it is different from the General American English (GAE) past participle *done* and from nonstandard varieties of English. The authors explain that its meaning is similar to the present perfect in GAE, but it is not clear whether they always share the same range of meaning. (ibid.)

## 4.2. ZERO COPULA

As observed by Walker (2015: 391), copula and auxiliary absence, or zero copula, is “probably the most studied feature of AAVE”. Although all English varieties are characterized by contracted forms of the copula, copula absence is a unique feature that occurs only in AAVE and English-based creoles. (ibid.) Rickford (2015: 42) points out that the practice of deleting the copula also appears in some Southern White vernacular varieties, however, as Wolfram and Thomas (2002: 79) note, copular deletion among European Americans almost always means the absence of *are* and is found only in largely nonrhotic regions. Even in these regions, the absence of *are* is much more frequent in AAVE than in European American vernaculars. (ibid.) Hence, Rickford (2015: 42) presumes that the *are* deletion practice in White vernaculars represents an influence from AAVE, and not the other way around.

Walker (2015: 391) indicates that copula absence has had a privileged position in the debate over the origins and development of AAVE – it has been used as an argument for all theories of origin. Nevertheless, the question of the historical development of zero copula is out of scope of this overview. Therefore, to sum up the dispute, we cite the author (ibid.), who notes that “it has been variously interpreted as an extension of [copular] contraction (...), as evidence of a prior creole (...) and subsequent decreolization (...), or as the relic of second language acquisition.” We again call attention to the fact that most linguists, Rickford (1999: 61, 2015: 51) and Wolfram and Thomas (2002: 77) included, use the term copula in its broad sense, to include what could be distinguished in a narrow sense as copula *be* (before a noun phrase, adjective, or locative) and auxiliary *be* (before V+ing or *gon(na)* Verb).

Rickford (2015: 42) considers that grammatical environment is the strongest constraint on the possibility of copular deletion. According to him, the frequency of copula absence is the highest before *gon(na)*, and the lowest before a noun phrase. In Rickford (ibid.), these and other grammatical environments are ordered as below:

(6) \_\_Noun Phrase < \_\_Locative < \_\_Adjective < \_\_Verb + ing < \_\_gonna Verb

Other important remarks regarding copular deletion are as follows: non-finite and past tense forms of the copula must be represented in its full form, as in “She will *be* here” and “They *was* here yesterday”, although the past form of the verb *be* for singular and plural is often the same. Furthermore, when occurring with the first person singular (*I'm*) pronoun and the third person singular neuter pronoun (*It's*), the copula cannot be deleted and is often contracted. In addition, the overt auxiliary/copula form is obligatory at the end of a sentence or when

appearing in its stressed form in emphatic contexts. (Rickford and Rickford 2000: 114-5, Green 2002: 38) All things considered, the only forms that allow full, contracted, and zero options are present tense forms *is* and *are* for first person plural, and second and third person singular and plural. (Rickford 1999: 62)

#### 4.3. VERBAL –S

In Standard English, third person singular present tense verbs require the –s inflection. Walker (2015: 394) remarks, however, that AAVE and English-based creoles tend to delete verbal –s in third person singular contexts as well as add it to verbs that do not require an –s. Similar to the absence of the copula, the variable affixation of verbal –s also served as an argument for various AAVE origins theories. Different stances characterized it as a “random hypercorrection (...), as the legacy of nonstandard British English systems of subject-verb agreement (...), or as the relic of a prior creole aspectual marker”. (Walker *ibid.*)

Green (2002: 99-100) observes that the practice of omitting verbal –s results in a single verb form as used for all subjects, including third-person singular, as in the sentence “He *like* to run.” In Rickford (1999: 272), the author likewise observes that in AAVE, in cases where it is not deleted or contracted, the plural and singular form of the verb *be* for all persons is often the same: *is* for the present tense, and *was* for the past tense. Regarding possible constraints in the grammatical environment, Rickford (*ibid.*) highlights that the occurrence of the variable depends exclusively on the verb type, where *have* and *don’t* occur without third person singular inflections more frequently than regular verbs do.

Contrary to the practice of omitting third person singular –s, AAVE speakers may also add verbal –s on verbs that occur with third person plural subjects, as in the sentence “The dogs *barks* at the ducks”. (Rickford 1999: 272) However, since this feature does not occur in our corpus, we will not proceed with a more detailed analysis of its occurrence. Green (2002: 100) also observes some other nonstandard instances of the occurrence of verbal –s, exemplified in (7). She reports that these constructions may have a number of different functions: third person singular agreement marker, narrative present marker and habitual marker. We will discuss these constructions more thoroughly in Chapter 7.

- (7) a. He had called me Wednesday afternoon and asked, “Do you want to go the movies” . . . so I gets in the car.  
b. And I works just like it was back in the days.

#### 4.4. *AIN'T* AND NEGATIVE CONCORD

Rickford and Rickford (2000: 122) note that the most common negative form in AAVE is *ain't*. As claimed by Wolfram and Schilling (2016: 385), in spite of the fact that *ain't* is not strictly limited to AAVE but also present in other vernacular varieties in the US, the main difference is the fact that it can replace various SE negative forms. Hence, AAVE *ain't* may be used as the equivalent of SE forms *be + not* (*am not, isn't, aren't*), *have + not* (*hasn't, haven't*). However, contrary to most White vernacular varieties, AAVE *ain't* can also be used as the equivalent of SE *do + not* (*don't*) and *did + not* (*didn't*). (ibid.) In that sense, Green (2002: 39) explains that *ain't* serves as a general negative marker and is not overtly marked for tense, i.e., it does not have distinct past and non-past forms.

Another African American negative feature is multiple negation or negative concord. As indicated by Green and Sistrunk (2015: 366), negative concord is a type of negation where more than one negative element occurs in the same sentence. However, additional negative elements do not add any extra negative meaning or intensify the negative reading of the sentence; as the authors (ibid.) explain, they are “negative in agreement with the primary negator”. In addition, the authors explain that negative concord may also appear in relative clauses, crossing the clause boundary and extending into another clause. (ibid.) Green (2002: 77) additionally observes that in multiple negative constructions, negation can be marked on auxiliaries and indefinite nouns such as *anybody* (*nobody*) and *anything* (*nothing*).

Also related to the negative concord phenomenon is negative inversion, or in Green and Sistrunk's (2015: 367) terminology, “declarative negative auxiliary inversion” (NAI). NAI sentences reorder their two negative elements: a negative auxiliary or modal, e.g. *don't, can't, ain't, won't*, is positioned at the beginning of a sentence and followed by a negative indefinite noun phrase, e.g. *nobody, none, no man*, etc. (Green 2002: 78) The sentence in Green (ibid.) exemplifies this phenomenon: “Don't no game last all night long”. Green and Sistrunk (2015: 367) indicate that the interpretation of these kind of sentences is that of absolute negation, i.e. in the aforementioned example, the sentence communicates that no game in the world can last all night. Additionally, the authors emphasize that such constructions can also occur as embedded, as in the following sentence extracted from Green (2002: 78): “I know [don't no game last all night long]”.

## 5. ON THE RELEVANCE OF *LEMONADE* IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURAL AND SOCIAL SPACE

*“You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation.”*

Beyoncé Giselle Carter Knowles, “Formation”

The above-cited sentence was uttered by Beyoncé at the climax of the final song of her latest solo album *Lemonade*. Throughout “Formation”, the first single of the album, Beyoncé employs braggadocio theme, frequent in hip-hop and everyday AAL conversational context (Smitherman 1997: 12): she boasts about her financial wealth, sexual prowess, power, influence and “freshness”. As Smitherman (ibid. 13) notes, when using braggadocio, a Black performer assumes the role of a superior individual that is “able to overcome all odds”. However, braggadocio also serves as a way of bringing into existence “the self-empowerment dreams of his [or her] Black audience”. (ibid.) After the release of “Formation” and its accompanying music video on February 6, 2016, which was followed by Beyoncé’s performance the next day at the Super Bowl 50 halftime show, mainstream press, internet media and social networks such as Twitter exploded with opinions on the matter. The fact is that *Lemonade* is not just an average R&B album, and the public quickly recognized that. There are numerous articles dealing with its meaning, political and social messages, Beyoncé’s celebration of Blackness, femininity, and her African and Southern roots, and various cultural influences and references. Primary reactions of some European Americans are comically portrayed in the Saturday Night Live’s sketch “The Day Beyoncé Turned Black”<sup>1</sup>, which displays the mass hysteria of Whites following the “Formation” song and video. The sketch implies that, while anybody can watch and listen to it, the song was written for a specific audience and can be fully understood and appreciated only by African Americans. The echo among the African American community has not been any less vocal in articulating various attitudes. Opinions range from considering the “Formation” video and song an ode to Black female pride, a protest anthem, all to insisting that it is just a clever marketing strategy that lacks the cultural and revolutionary value others have ascribed to it.

*Lemonade*, Beyoncé’s sixth album, was released on April 23, 2016. It is composed of twelve songs and features vocals from various musicians: Kendrick Lamar, Jack White, The Weeknd and James Blake, among others. *Lemonade* is also a composition of various musical

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<sup>1</sup> “The Day Beyoncé Turned Black,” Saturday Night Live Season 41 Episode 13, originally aired February 13, 2016, <http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/the-day-beyonce-turned-black/2985361>, accessed April 14, 2018.

genres and influences, including trip-hop, hip-hop, country, gospel, pop, R&B, reggae, blues, rock, and funk, among others. On the date of release, *Lemonade* was also accompanied by an hour-long film of the same title, premiered in the US on HBO. Although the album's tracks deal mostly with infidelity and relationship problems, notable exceptions are songs "6 Inch", "Forward", "Freedom", and "Formation", each one talking in its own way about intersectionality<sup>2</sup>. The concept of intersectionality is also explored in the visuals and imagery of the film, which are primarily focused on representing the problematic experience of black women. The film features mothers of African American men killed in a series of incidents of police brutality or race-fueled crimes, holding their photographs, Beyoncé's mother, her husband's grandmother and their daughter Blue Ivy, cameos from the tennis player Serena Williams, and other prominent black artists such as Zendaya and Amandla Stenberg. Additionally, throughout the film, excerpts of the prose poetry narrating the experience of women, written by the British-Somali poet Warsan Shire, is used. The film also samples an excerpt from Malcolm X's speech "Who Taught You to Hate Yourself", where Malcolm X can be heard reciting: "The most disrespected person in American is the black woman. The most unprotected person in American is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman." *Lemonade* also abounds with imagery of Yoruba mythology, references to Baptist ceremonies, African conjuring practices, and other African American folklore and literary history, such as the Igbo Landing, Georgia, a historic location that was the site of a mass suicide by drowning in 1803 of captive Igbo people who had been taken as slaves. (Akande 2018, Roberts and Downs 2016)

Apart from generating discussions in various kinds of media, the impact of *Lemonade* can also be seen in economic, social, and cultural spaces. Marvel Comics paid tribute to Beyoncé with the cover of its comic book "America", whose protagonist, America Chavez, is featured wearing a hat, dress, and accessories, invoking the image of Beyoncé in the "Formation" video. (Lang 2017) In addition, according to the article "See the Far-reaching Impact of Beyoncé's *Lemonade*" (Hoffman 2017), sales of Warsan Shire's pamphlet *Teaching my mother how to give birth*, recited by Beyoncé throughout the album, have increased by an astounding 400% after the release of *Lemonade*. Likewise, sales of a dining chain Red Lobster, which Beyoncé mentions in "Formation", "grew significantly". (ibid.) Ultimately, the most

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of intersectionality was coined in 1989 by the UCLA professor Kimberlé Crenshaw. The concept explains that individuals with overlapping "minority" social identities (e.g. a black gay woman) are affected by an interplay of various forms of discrimination and oppression. (Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research, "Intersectionality", <https://www.genus.se/en/wordpost/intersectionality/>, accessed 28 November 2018)



notable cultural impact of Beyoncé's *Lemonade* can be observed in the fact that not one, but five different universities began offering classes on cultural phenomena as represented in the singer's work. To give just one example, the University of Texas at San Antonio, as of fall 2017, offers a "Black Women, Beyoncé, and Popular Culture" course, whose purpose is to "explore the theoretical, historical, and literary frameworks of black feminism, which feature prominently in LEMONADE." (Scribd, "UTSA 'Lemonade' class syllabus")

## 6. CORPUS AND METHODOLOGY

The material for our study was collected from lyrics of twelve songs from the R&B, hip-hop, and pop artist Beyoncé's studio and visual album *Lemonade*, respectively, both released on April 23, 2016. We included both the studio and visual version of the album in our corpus because the studio version includes extended lyrics of the songs "Don't Hurt Yourself", "6 Inch", "Love Drought" and "Freedom", while the visual version contains records of AAVE usage from various interviews not present in the studio version. Song and movie's lyrics and closed captions of interviews (available on the web page [genious.com/albums/Beyonce/Lemonade](https://genious.com/albums/Beyonce/Lemonade), and in srt format from [opensubtitles.org](https://opensubtitles.org), respectively) were converted into a text document and organized into a corpus of 5737 words to facilitate the identification of features, and to present a sense of frequencies. However, since the focus of this thesis is qualitative, we will generally steer away from indicating quantities and frequencies of the variables. At one point, nevertheless, we will indicate quantity; namely, we will present the number of zero copula instances in order to demonstrate that our corpus shows some deviation from the rule accounting for copula deletion.

Our research is based on the observational study followed by a close linguistic analysis of the African American speech in the audio and visual album *Lemonade*. During the listening and viewing process, notes were taken on any use of AAVE in accordance with our knowledge of previous scholarship on the grammar and lexicon of the variety. Following this, we compared the relevant phenomena with our corpus, verifying it once again with the audio and video version. Finally, we categorized observed features of AAVE so that we could subsequently conduct a linguistic analysis. Due to a limited scope of the thesis, we did not include each and every AAVE feature present in the corpus. Namely, despite their relevance in qualitative studies of African American speech, we decided to exclude prosodic features, which are deserving of their own study (Trotta and Blyahher 2011: 19). Furthermore, we also neglected the study of AAVE phonological structures. Additionally, non-verbal elements, such as gestures and facial expressions, could not be covered in the study of this length. Nonetheless, we accounted for

every other instantiated morphosyntactic and lexical phenomena of AAVE. Identified morphosyntactic and lexical structures were later compared with studies and detailed examinations of AAVE such as Labov (1972), Rickford (1999), Rickford and Rickford (2000), Green (2002), Wolfram and Thomas (2002), and Lanehart (2015), among others. Many authors (cf. Wolfram and Thomas 2002, Wolfram and Schilling 2016) point out that a descriptive analysis of AAVE should not focus solely on characteristics that stand out the most when comparing AAVE with GAE, since such practice disregards the fact that the system in question encompasses all language use. However, the intention of our study is only to provide an overview of a part of the system of lexical and sound patterns that speakers of AAVE, including Beyoncé, use, and to explore how the performer portrays a racial linguistic identity in her album.

## 7. AAVE FEATURES IN BEYONCÉ'S SONGS

In this chapter, in accordance with Rickford (1999) and Green (2002), respectively, we will list different morphosyntactic (grammatical) features of AAVE under subcategories of preverbal markers of tense, mood, and aspect; other aspects of verbal tense marking; nouns and pronouns; and negation. We will discuss constraints on their distribution and meaning and their usual linguistic environments, comparing them with instances in our corpus. Afterwards, we will proceed with the categorization of distinctively African American lexical features occurring in our corpus, subdividing them into subjective thematic categories: terms of address, terms that describe and characterize people, terms for money and possessions, terms for actions, and other terms we could not group into any of the aforementioned categories.

### 7.1. GRAMMATICAL FEATURES

#### 7.1.1. TMA PREVERBAL MARKERS

The following section will focus on AAVE preverbal markers of tense, mood, and aspect as occurring in our corpus. Although some of the most distinctive TMA markers, such as habitual *be* and remote past *BIN*, are not instantiated in our data, we will discuss every other TMA marker that appears in our corpus: the absence of copula and auxiliary, unstressed *been*, and future markers *will*, *gon(na)*, and *I'ma*.

### 7.1.1.1. ZERO COPULA

Among AAVE grammatical features appearing in our corpus, the absence of copula in present tense sentences is by far the most frequently occurring one. Following other authors (e.g. Rickford 1999, Green 2002, Wolfram and Thomas 2002), we again call attention to the fact that under the designation ‘copula’, the deletion of the copular verb *be* (before a noun phrase, adjective, adverb, or locative) as well as the progressive auxiliary *be* (before Verb+*ing* and *gon(na)*) is included. As we have previously mentioned, the frequency of copular deletion depends primarily on its grammatical environment: it is the highest when copula is followed by *gon(na)*, and the lowest when followed by a noun phrase. (Rickford 2015: 42) Although data from our corpus follows this pattern quite consistently, we do attest more instances of copula absence before a following V+*ing* than before a following *gon(na)*. Interestingly enough, even tokens of copula absence before an adjective are greater than before *gon(na)*, and tokens of copula absence before a locative are the same as for *gon(na)*. However, this may be due to a relatively limited research sample. For *gon(na)*, we attest five different tokens; for V+*ing*, ten different tokens; for adjective, seven different tokens; for locative, five different tokens; and for noun phrase, two different tokens. The following examples from our corpus substantiate the discussed:

- 1) \_\_*gon(na)*. Verb – 5 different tokens
  - a) Me and my baby, we Ø gon be alright, we Ø gon live a good life.
  - b) If you try this shit again you Ø gon lose your wife.
  - c) Oh, she Ø gon slang.
  - d) We Ø gon slay.
- 2) \_\_V+*ing* – 10 tokens
  - a) We Ø not reachin’ peaks enough.
  - b) You Ø only lyin’ to yourself
  - c) He Ø tryin’ to roll me up, I ain’t pickin’ up.
  - d) You Ø interruptin’ my grindin’.
  - e) I see them boppers in the corner, they Ø sneakin’ out the back door.
  - f) She Ø stackin’ money, money everywhere she goes.
  - g) She Ø mixin’ up that Ace with that Hennessey.
  - h) She Ø pushin’ herself day and night.
  - i) Six headlights Ø wavin’ in my direction, Five-O Ø askin’ what’s in my possession.
- 3) \_\_Adjective – 7 tokens
  - a) If this Ø what you truly want, I can wear her skin over mine.
  - b) She don’t gotta give it up, ‘cause she Ø professional.
  - c) And she Ø worth every dollar, she Ø worth every dollar, and she Ø worth every minute.
  - d) She Ø too smart to crave material things.
  - e) Only way to go is up, them old bitches Ø so wack.
  - f) Y’all haters Ø corny with that Illuminati mess.
- 4) \_\_Locative – 5 tokens

- a) Her Yamazaki  $\emptyset$  straight from Tokyo.
- b) He  $\emptyset$  from the hood, just like me. He  $\emptyset$  from Chi-Raq, you know?
- c) My daddy  $\emptyset$  Alabama, mama  $\emptyset$  Louisiana.

5) \_\_Noun phrase – 2 tokens

- a) But you  $\emptyset$  my lifeline, think you tryna kill me?
- b) You know you  $\emptyset$  that bitch when you cause all this conversation.

Furthermore, the deletion of copula in AAVE has certain restrictions: it can occur only in the environments where SE would demand copula on the surface, either in its full form or contracted. In the environments where SE cannot contract copula, AAVE cannot delete it, such as, for example, in clause final positions. Hence, Labov (1972: 48-73) considers it a part of the underlying structure of AAVE. (ibid.) Additionally, as previously discussed, copular deletion in present tense sentences is restricted to *is* and *are*, i.e., copula is almost always present with the first person singular (6). Past tense forms of copula (*was*, *were*) are always present (7), as well as non-finite forms (8) (ibid. 70-1):

- 6) *I'm prayin' you catch me listening.*
- 7) a) *She murdered everybody and I was her witness.*  
b) *But y'all know we were made for each other.*
- 8) *You know, that give me inspiration on I can be whatever I wanna be.*

Ultimately, although not directly related to the copular deletion phenomenon, we mention the absence of auxiliary *have* in constructions *have + got*. The result of the process of *have* deletion is the single form of *got*, which usually stands to mean 'to obtain or gain possession of something'. (Trotta and Blyahher 2011: 25) However, in AAVE and other English vernaculars where the process of *have* deletion appears in *have + got* structures, *got* comes to replace the *have + got* structures that usually indicate the possession or ownership of something. (ibid.) Instances from our corpus are as follows:

- 9) a) *And keep your money, I got my own.*  
b) *She got them commas and them decimals.*  
c) *I got hot sauce in my bag, swag.*  
d) *Prove to me you got some coordination.*

Similarly, in AAVE as well as in other non-standard English varieties, in order to express obligation, speakers usually use the phrases *got to* or *gotta* instead of deontic modal expressions *have to* or *have got to*. (ibid.) Sentences in 10) exemplify this practice. Nevertheless, Trotta and Blyahher indicate that the absence of *have* in *have got to* constructions is "best considered to be informal English and only tangentially interesting in a discussion [of] AAVE." (ibid.)

- 10) a) *You gotta call him, you gotta call Jesus, 'cause you ain't got another hope!*  
b) *I could be more than I gotta be.*

#### 7.1.1.2. UNSTRESSED *BEEEN*

We have noted previously that the word *been* occurs in AAVE in two contrasting ways referred to as unstressed *been* and stressed *BIN*. Our corpus, however, provides us only with the less interesting one (at least considering peculiarities of AAVE) – unstressed *been*. Green (2002: 55) indicates that *been* is distinguished from its counterpart *BIN* phonetically –by the lack of stress (or pitch accent)–, and semantically – according to Rickford and Rickford (2000: 117), it indicates the perfect past and is an equivalent to “has been” or “have been” in SE. This use of *been* can be clearly seen in our corpus:

- 11) a) I’ll always be committed, I *been* focused.
- b) I always paid attention, *been* devoted.

Nevertheless, AAVE speakers equally use *been* in its full and contracted forms, which is also visible from examples from our corpus. We note additionally the usage of *been* in sentence 12c), which corresponds to the verbal paradigm of modal perfect, with the auxiliary *have* reduced to ‘*a*. (Green 2002: 38)

- 12) a) Lord forgive me, I’ve *been* running
- b) Tell me, what did I do wrong? Feel like that question *has been* posed.
- c) Looking at my watch, he should’*a been* home.

#### 7.1.1.3. FUTURE MARKERS: *WILL*, *GON(NA)*, *I’MA*

As we have previously maintained, AAVE grammar allows for the possibility to mark the future tense by the marker *gonna/gon*, occurring before the predicate phrase, or by the auxiliary *will*.

Since *gon(na)* is a future tense marker present in most English vernaculars, its relative significance in discussions of AAVE primarily lies in the fact that it is, most frequently, characterized by the absence of the preceding copula. (Trotta and Blyahher 2011: 26) Since we have already enumerated instances of copula absence before *gon(na)* in section 7.1.1.1., we will not repeat them here. Another issue with *gon(na)*, as indicated by Green (2002: 40), is that it does not occur with first person singular. Rather, it is often reduced to *I’ma*, as exemplified in our corpus:

- 13) a) *I’ma* walk, *I’ma* march on the regular, paintin’ white flags blue.
- b) *I’ma* keep running ‘cause a winner don’t quit on themselves.
- c) I don’t wanna lose my pride, but *I’ma* fuck me up a bitch.

Rickford (1999: 5) considers that *I’ma*, as the reduced form of *gon(na)*, stems from the AAVE’s phonological rule that deletes initial *b*, *d* and *g* (voiced stops) in certain tense-aspect markers or

auxiliaries, such as in “ah ‘*on* know” for SE “I don’t know”. In addition, the author also considers that the distinctive AAVE use of *ain’t* for *didn’t* probably derives historically from this rule. (ibid.)

Similarly, the auxiliary *will* can be reduced to ‘*ll* or ‘*a*, or not be represented overtly at all, thus being marked by  $\emptyset$ . In such instances, the future tense can be expressed by the use of invariant *be*. (Rickford ibid. 6, Green 2002: 41) The following example from our corpus demonstrates the deletion of *will* and the covert expression of the future tense by *take*:

14) Earned all this money, but they  $\emptyset$  never take the country out me.

### 7.1.2. OTHER ASPECTS OF VERBAL TENSE MARKING

In this section of our analysis, we will focus on peculiarities of AAVE subject-verb agreement occurring in our corpus. Specifically, we will refer to features such as verbal *-s* (primarily the absence of third-person singular present tense *-s*) and present and past tense *be* regularization.

#### 7.1.2.1. VERBAL *-S*

In our discussion in section 4.3., we mentioned that the number distinction between singular and plural present tense verbs is neutralized in AAVE, resulting in the use of one form in both singular and plural, most often plural being used as the default form. As a result, the sentences such as those in 15) are produced, in which the verb that occurs with the third person singular subject is not marked with the *-s* inflection:

- 15) a) He only *want* me when I’m not there.  
b) She *love* the way it tastes, that’s her recipe.  
c) She *stack* her money, money everywhere she goes.  
d) When he *fuck* me good, I take his ass to Red Lobster, ‘cause I slay.  
e) If he *hit* it right, I might take him on a flight on my chopper, I slay.  
f) He... He from the hood, just like me. He from Chi-Raq, you know. I’m from New Orleans. You know, that *give* me inspiration on I can be whatever I wanna be, like, you know, whatever I wanna be.

However, throughout our corpus, and as it can be seen from the highlighted examples, there is variability in the occurrence and absence of third person singular *-s*. This contrasts with Labov et al.’s (1968: 164, in Rickford 1999: 272) contention that third person singular *-s* is not an underlying part of the AAVE grammar.

In addition, Rickford (ibid.) mentions two novel features of AAVE: the use of *-s* as a marker of narrative past and the tendency to insert *-s* in the first but not the second member of conjoined verb phrases (the author gives the example “she takes your clothes out, and lend them

to people”). Green (2002: 100) notes that the verbal *-s* marker may have a number of different functions; she mentions Rickford’s marker of narrative past but calls it a narrative present marker, and explains that it occurs in the narration of events. Moreover, Green (ibid.) considers that *-s* can also occur in habitual contexts and function as a habitual marker. A following example from our corpus is somewhat ambiguous regarding the mentioned *-s* marker: it can be interpreted as either the narrative present marker or habitual marker; however, a narrative nature of the song would suggest that it should be interpreted as the narrative marker:

16) Blindly in love, I *fucks* with you, ‘till I realize I’m just too much for you.

Rickford’s *-s* that occurs on the first, but not on the second member of conjoined phrases is also evident in our corpus:

- 17) a) She works for the money, she *work* for the money from the start to the finish.  
b) She grinds from Monday to Friday, *work* from Friday to Sunday.

Furthermore, we have already mentioned Rickford’s (1999: 272) observation that verbs *have* and *don’t* occur without third singular inflections more frequently than regular verbs. Our corpus supports that contention, at least regarding the verb *don’t*, as can be visible from the following examples:

- 18) a) When it’s only in my memory it *don’t* hit me quite the same.  
b) Somethin’ *don’t* feel right because it ain’t right.  
c) She *don’t* gotta give it up, ‘cause she professional.  
d) But she *don’t* mind, she loves the grind.  
e) Every promise *don’t* work out that way.  
f) I’ma keep runnin’ ‘cause a winner *don’t* quit on themselves.

Trotta and Blyahher (2011: 21) observe that this invariant *don’t*, especially with a pronoun acting as a subject, is frequently occurring in other non-standard English dialects. Nevertheless, the authors (ibid.) point out that, unlike in other non-standard English dialects, AAVE invariant *don’t* can occur not only with a pronoun subject but also with a full noun phrase, as seen in the example 18e). It can also appear with a proper noun, however, no such examples have been found in our corpus.

#### 7.1.2.2. LEVELING TO *IS* AND *WAS*

Another AAVE feature occurring in our corpus concerns present and past tense *be* regularization. As noted by Rickford (1999: 7), Rickford and Rickford (2000: 126), and Wolfram and Schilling (2016: 45), if the verb *be* is not contracted or deleted in AAVE, it may

be leveled to a single form: *is* as used for the full paradigm of the present tense and *was* for the past tense. Our corpus shows one instance of leveling to *is* and two of *was*:

- 19) Who the fuck do you think I *is*?
- 20) – You wish your grandmother and grandfather *was* here with us?
  - I wish you *was* here with us.

### 7.1.3. NOUNS AND PRONOUNS

Among non-standard uses of pronouns in our corpus, we note the use of *y'all* as a second person plural pronoun, the use of the object form *them* instead of demonstrative pronouns, and the use of object pronouns (me, him, etc.) after a verb as personal datives. Trotta and Blyahher (2011: 29) and Wolfram and Schilling (2016: 387) indicate that *y'all*, a contraction of *you-all*, is not a unique AAVE feature, as it is also present in white Southern American English. Other forms of plural second person pronoun are present in Northern vernaculars and in areas extending from Southern Appalachia to Pittsburgh, such as *youse* and *you'uns*, respectively. (ibid.) According to Wolfram and Schilling (ibid.), since the second person singular and plural pronoun have the same form in SE, *y'all* (and other forms) developed in these vernaculars as a means of differentiating singular and plural pronoun subjects. Instances of *y'all* in our corpus are as follows:

- 21) a) But *y'all* know we were made for each other.
- b) *Y'all* haters corny with that Illuminati mess.

The extension of object forms to demonstratives refers to the usage of the pronoun *them* in place of plural demonstrative pronouns *those* and *these*. However, according to Wolfram (1998: 342, in Trotta and Blyahher 2011: 29), such usage is also found in other English vernaculars:

- 22) a) Never made it out the cage, still out there movin' in *them* streets.
- b) Middle fingers up, put *them* hands high.
- c) He always got *them* fucking excuses.
- d) I see *them* boppers in the corner.
- e) She got them commas and *them* decimals.
- f) Only way to go is up, *them* old bitches so wack.
- g) – Say, “All *them* men make them feel better than you.”
- h) I twirl on *them* haters, albino alligators.

Finally, we note the personal dative use of the object pronoun form in sentence 23). According to Wolfram and Schilling (2016: 387), the feature indicates that the subject of a sentence benefits in some way from the object. In our case, Beyoncé benefits by taking revenge upon her partner's alleged lover:



23) I'ma fuck *me* up a bitch.

#### 7.1.4. NEGATION

We have already mentioned in section 4.4. that in AAVE, *ain't* can be used in nearly every situation that involves negation. As observed by Wolfram and Schilling (2016: 385) and evidenced in our corpus, *ain't* can correspond to any present tense form of *be + not* (24a-c)) or *have + not* (24f)). Additionally, it can be used as a contraction of *do + not* and *did + not* (although such instances are not present in our corpus), and of *had + not* (24d-e)). (Wolfram and Schilling *ibid.*)

- 24) a) You *ain't* trying hard enough, you *ain't* loving hard enough.  
b) Sorry, I *ain't* sorry.  
c) He trying to roll me up, I *ain't* picking up; headed to the club, I *ain't* thinking 'bout you.  
d) Before I met him, you dig... I *ain't* really see myself going nowhere. I mean, really.  
e) I *ain't* really cared if I lived or died.  
f) You gotta call him, 'cause you *ain't* got another hope!  
g) I *ain't* tell you that?  
h) All I wanna, *ain't* no other.

Sentences 24d) and 24e) are additionally interesting regarding their marking of past tense. Both sentences obviously narrate past events, however, only sentence 24e) overtly expresses the past tense on its main verb *care*. As we have previously mentioned, *ain't* does not have distinct past and non-past forms, the fact that somewhat complicates its relationship with the verbs it negates. As Green (2002: 39) observes, *ain't* can occur in past contexts such as in 24d), in which the main verb is in the non-past form, as well as in contexts where the main verb is in the past form, as in 24e).

Furthermore, we also note the peculiar status of the interrogative sentence 24g). The sentence is an excerpt from an interview included in Beyoncé's visual album, and it is obviously a direct question directed at the interlocutor. However, the question is not formed in accordance with SE rules accounting for the formation of direct questions, where inversion of the subject and auxiliary verb is obligatory. Green (*ibid.*: 42) points out that auxiliaries in AAVE do not need to be overtly expressed in questions – they can be signaled using a special question intonation, as is the case with the sentence 24g) and the following sentence that also occurs in our corpus:

25) You understand what I'm sayin'?

The case of sentence 24h) is also worth mentioning. Apart from the attested use of the negator *ain't*, the interesting thing about its occurrence is the fact that it combines two AAVE

features – negative inversion of the auxiliary and indefinite pronoun subject, and the existential construction. According to Trotta and Blyahher (2011: 29), in negative inversion of AAVE, the negator *ain't* is positioned at the beginning in an inversion pattern similar to *yes-no* interrogatives, then followed by a negative indefinite pronoun, in our case *no*. On the subject of existential constructions in AAVE, Rickford (1999: 8) elaborates that AAVE speakers may use existential *it* (*is, 's, was, ain't*) instead of *there* (*is, 's, was, isn't*), thus rendering sentences similar to our example in 24h).

The final morphosyntactic feature of AAVE we mention is the multiple negation or negative concord illustrated in sentence 24d). As we have maintained in chapter 4.4., AAVE speakers have the possibility to mark the negative on the auxiliary and all the indefinite pronouns following the verb. In our case, the negated auxiliary is *ain't*, followed by the negated indefinite pronoun *nowhere*.

## 7.2. LEXICAL FEATURES

As it should have become obvious by now, AAVE is a systematic and rule-governed language variety. Nevertheless, both non-linguistic audience and even some amongst linguistic circles have often characterized it as “ungrammatical” or “broken English”, “deficient”, “lazy”, and “slang”. (Smitherman, 2015: 559) Despite the incorrectness of such terms, it is true that slang is one of the most recognizable parts of AAVE, although certainly not the only one, as we have seen from our discussion of morphosyntactic features. However, slang, which Rickford and Rickford (2000: 94) describe as “relatively new and informal usages that are most common among teenagers, and likely not to last long”, is only one part of the unique AAVE vocabulary. Smitherman (2000: 2) indicates that AAVE also contains a “lexical core of words and phrases” that are shared across various social subgroups, and that have existed for a long time. Although Smitherman’s lexicon *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* (2000) does not explicitly separate slang and lexical items that belong to the African American linguistic system, the author (ibid.), nevertheless, notes that: “True, Black slang is Black Language, but all Black Language is not Black slang.” It is equally noted in Smitherman (ibid.) and Rickford and Rickford (2000: 94) that the lexical items familiar to every member of the African American community developed from a shared history, culture, and experience. Such items, according to Rickford and Rickford (ibid.), refer to physical attributes, social distinctions, and cultural practices and traditions of African Americans, as exemplified by words such as *ashy, kitchen, Uncle Tom, Miss Ann*, etc. The authors also highlight the existence of translations of literal and metaphorical expressions from West African languages to English,

or more specifically AAVE, citing examples such as *bad-eye* (threatening glance), *bad-mouth* (to speak ill of someone), or *suck-teeth*. Smitherman (2000: 36) adds to the list of loan translation phrases the word *bad*, whose meaning in the African language Mandinka is “good”, and even the word *okay*, for which she attests several possible African language origins, where it is used as an element “added to a statement to mean ‘yes’, ‘of course’, or ‘all right’.” The mentioned examples attest to the lasting influence of African languages and cultures on the development and evolution of AAVE vocabulary. In Smitherman’s (ibid. 32-42) opinion, other sources and domains of Black vocabulary include the Traditional Black Church (*sista, brotha, shout, what go round come round*), Black Music, especially the blues (*funky, the dozens, gig, jazz*), and servitude and oppression. We will not engage in a deeper discussion of these influences, apart from the latter, for it is related with the concept of slang.

Smitherman (1997: 8) points out that the vocabulary of AAVE is not much different from the vocabulary of MAE. However, there are nuances in meaning and use among the two that developed because of the historical circumstances of enslavement and oppression. The means by which enslaved Africans of different ethno-linguistic origins countered their unfavorable situation was to create an “antilinguage” (ibid. 17), a coded language that would assign different meanings to English words. Additionally, such language also served to strengthen the in-group identity and solidarity. (Smitherman ibid.: 8) This process followed AAVE speakers to these post-modern times – slang words are being created and changed constantly, and even more so due to the fact that, since the 1920s, the White appropriation of Black slang has been on the rise. (Smitherman 2000: 31-3) As a counteract, Rickford and Rickford (2000: 98) note that, in an effort to keep their ethnolinguistic vitality, African American speakers constantly create new slang items to replace the old ones. In the following and ultimate phase of our research, we will present various slang items, subdividing them into somewhat arbitrary categories organized around a common topic: terms for people, terms for appearance and characteristics, terms for money and possessions, terms for actions, and terms that could not be grouped into any of the previous categories. Given that the majority of lexical items in our corpus correspond to slang, a few instances of words that pertain to the vocabulary shared by all age, educational, class, and other social groups of AAVE speakers will be explicitly noted. In addition, we will briefly discuss the meaning of each lexical item.

### 7.2.1. PEOPLE

Our material provides a wide array of words and expressions referring to other people. When considering frequencies, however, one designation immediately stands out: *bitch*. Throughout our corpus, it appears eight times, and it is used to address women as well as men. Additionally, depending on the context, it is used in a positive, negative, or a generic manner. For example, in the line “I don’t wanna lose my pride, but I’ma fuck me up a *bitch*”, Beyoncé sings about the suspicion that her partner is cheating, and expresses that she is prepared to violently confront the alleged mistress. However, elsewhere Beyoncé refers to herself as “no average *bitch*”, as well as in “you know you that *bitch* when you cause all this conversation”, hence using it as a generic term that women use to address one another or oneself. (Smitherman 2000: 69) When used to refer to males, the term is negative, and connotes a weak man, as in the following line where Beyoncé sings about the conflict between her and her partner: “*Bitch*, I scratched out your name and your face.” Similarly, the word *ho(e)*, a reduced form of “whore”, is used as a neutral term of address among women: “I did not come to play with you *hoes*, I came to slay, *bitch*.” As Smitherman (ibid. 165-7) notes, both terms seem to be instances of semantic inversion or *script flippin’*, in which a previously derogatory term is semantically reversed, losing its “negative punch”. Among other terms that refer to women in a negative manner, we find *bopper*, *Becky*, and *side chick*:

- 1) I see them *boppers* in the corner, they sneakin’ out to back door.
- 2) He better call *Becky* with the good hair.
- 3) Ashes to ashes... Dust to *side chicks*.

Green (2002: 28) explains that the term *bopper* refers to a woman that chases wealthy men for their status. Although not found in Smitherman’s AAVE lexicon, we also include *Becky*, which is, according to Young (2016), the author of the article “Where ‘Becky’ Comes From, And Why It’s Not Racist, Explained”, a derogatory slang term for a “privileged young White woman who exists in a state of racial obliviousness that shifts from [un]intentionally clueless to intentionally condescending.” As for *side chick*, also not appearing in Smitherman’s lexicon, a Wiktionary entry defines it as a mistress.<sup>3</sup> *Whoadie* is another term that appears in our corpus and is used to address either female or male person. (Green 2002: 29) According to Green (ibid.), it denotes a friend or comrade:

- 4) Me and my *whoadies* ‘bout to stroll up.

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<sup>3</sup> “Side Chick”. N.d. In *Wiktionary*. ([https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/side\\_chick](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/side_chick)). [Last accessed 16th April 2018]

We also note the status of the lexical item *baby*. Although this word does not any longer pertain exclusively to the AAVE vocabulary, as it has crossed over to the mainstream use, Smitherman (2006: 113) notes that, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *baby* “not only signaled Black masculinity, it also was culturally coded Black.” Additionally, the author emphasizes that Black males and females used it equally to demonstrate solidarity. (ibid.) Although not every instance of *baby* in our corpus corresponds to this interpretation, as it is often used as a marker of affection and intimacy, the sentence “Oh yeah, *baby*, oh yeah I like that” exemplifies the former meaning. Among the terms used to address males in a positive manner, in our corpus we find instances such as *brother*, *homie*, *nigga*:

- 5) I just love the Lord, oh yeah. I’m... I’m sorry, *brother*.
- 6) Big *homie*, better grow up.
- 7) I ain’t sorry, *nigga*, nah.

Smitherman (2000: 81) explains that *brother*, pronounced *brotha* in AAVE, is a term of address that may refer to any African American male. *Homie* or *homey*, according to the author, is a generic term for a person of African descent. (Smitherman ibid. 168) Beyoncé’s usage of *homie/homey* in line 5) is also interesting in the sense that it represents the instance of signifying<sup>4</sup>: her husband, Jay-Z, about whom the album allegedly talks, refers to himself as “Big Homie” in his and Beyoncé’s song collaboration from 2009, “Crazy in Love”. According to Smitherman (1997: 19), *nigga* is another instance of semantic inversion. In contemporary AAVE, it has a variety of connotations: it may take on a positive, generic/neutral, or negative meaning, denoting a close friend or referring to any African American. Additionally, it may be used by African American women as a term for a boyfriend or lover. (Smitherman 2000: 220) Similarly, Smitherman (2006: 55) attests that the use of *Negro* has re-emerged as another term that refers to fellow African Americans, and considers it a euphemism for *nigga*. Another slang term that can have either positive, negative, or neutral connotation in AAVE is *muthafucka*, which may refer to a person, a place, an event, or a thing. (Smitherman 2000: 205) The only instance of the term in our corpus –“Bad *muthafucka*”– is obviously used to address a male person in a negative manner. *Hater*, pronounced *hata* in AAVE, as instantiated in the line “Y’all *haters* corny with that Illuminati mess”, refers to “a person who verbally displays resentment or opposition to the personal success or gain of someone else”. (Smitherman ibid. 161) In the aforementioned line, Beyoncé dismisses claims expressed by some *haters* that her success

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<sup>4</sup> Smitherman (2000: 260) defines the act of signifying as a “ritualized verbal art in which the speaker puts down, needles, talks about (*signifies on*) someone, to make a point or sometimes just for fun.” According to her, signifying exploits double meaning, irony, and the unexpected by using quick verbal surprises and humor.

stems from her involvement with the Illuminati, which some conspiracy theorists believe to be a secret society pursuing world domination. The peculiarity of the word *ass* is also necessary to discuss. Spears (1998: 234, in Trotta and Blyahher 2011: 16) argues that *ass* “is usually used as the equivalent of the reflexive *self* ... [and is] also used as a substitute for other pronouns.” There are two examples in our corpus: “Motivate your *ass*” exemplifies the substitution of *self* by *ass*, and *his ass* in “When he fuck me good I take *his ass* to Red Lobster” would be rendered as *him* in MAE. The ultimate slang item we will review is *bamma*, a derivative of “Alabama”. *Bamma* usually refers to an unsophisticated, working-class person from the South. (Smitherman 2000: 89) Notwithstanding its usual function of an insult, in the line “You mix that Negro with that Creole make a Texas *bamma*” Beyoncé flips the script yet again and proudly appropriates such denomination.

### 7.2.2. APPEARANCE AND CHARACTERISTICS

Most lexical items we grouped into this category appear in the final song “Formation”, where Beyoncé “delights in her blackness, femininity, and Southern origin” (Kellman, 2016). The following terms are all related to physical appearance of people of African origin: *baby hair* is, according to Gabbara (2017), a “small, fine-textured hair close to the hairline, characteristic of people of African descent”. Smitherman’s lexicon (2000: 51) defines *afro* as a natural hairstyle of African American people, not straightened by chemicals or heat. Both lexical items stand in contrast with the concept of *good hair*, usually conceived as a non-kinky, naturally straight hair characteristic of Whites. These items are not slang but words that have been a part of the vocabulary of all African American people for generations. Another such item is *yellow-bone*. Smitherman’s lexicon (ibid.: 303) provides the explanation only for *yella/yelluh*, as a very light-skinned African American whose appearance evokes ambiguous attitudes in the African American community due to its similarity to European Americans complexion. However, the author of the article “Why it’s hard to be a ‘Yellow-bone’, Msonza (2015), similarly defines a *yellow-bone* as “a naturally light-skinned woman of African descent.”

8) I like my baby hair with *baby hair* and *afros*.

9) He better call Becky with the *good hair*.

10) I see it, I want it, I stunt, *yellow-bone* it.

Furthermore, the following are slang words generally associated with the hip-hop vocabulary: according to Smitherman (ibid. 133), *fly* means “exciting, dazzling, attractive”. In addition, three AAVE synonyms for *good* appear in our corpus: *fresh*, *bomb*, and *bad*. Additionally, as

we have already mentioned earlier, *bad* is a loan translation from the African language Mandinka, and stands to mean “good”. Hence, the SE translation for sentence 13) would be “the best woman”:

11) Paparazzi catch my *fly* and my cocky *fresh*.

12) Rest in peace, my true love, who I took for granted, most *bomb* pussy, who because of me, sleep evaded.

13) Never had the *baddest* woman in the game up in your sheets.

*Wack* stands in opposition to the abovementioned words, and denotes something undesirable and not good, as in the sentence “Them old bitches so *wack*.” (Smitherman *ibid.* 293) At the end of this section, we mention the interesting case of *fat* in AAVE. Smitherman (*ibid.* 31) notes that the use of *fat* by speakers of AAVE highlights the clash of African American and European American values, implicitly conveying the traditional African positive attitude towards the human body weight. In that sense, Beyoncé’s use of *fat ass* in the verse “You can watch my *fat ass* twist, boy” does not mark an insult; it stands as a metonym for a person whose intent is to say: “You can watch this desirable woman walk away from you”.

### 7.2.3. MONEY AND POSSESSIONS

Among many terms that African American slang provides for money, in our corpus we have identified three items: *paper*, *cake*, *commas and decimals*:

14) Stacking her *paper*, stacking her *cake* up.

15) She got them *commas* and them *decimals*.

The first two appear as slang items in Smitherman’s lexicon; however, the phrase *commas and decimals* appears to be a new slang item (we did not find another example of its use anywhere else). Additionally, *shit* is a very productive item in AAVE: it appears in a number of phrases and can be used to refer to almost anything, in a positive as well as negative manner – from events and conditions, to things and possessions. (Smitherman 1997: 42) This is also visible in our corpus; we provide three sentences with different instances of *shit*:

16) a) Tonight I’m fucking up all your *shit*, boy.

b) If you try this *shit* again you gon lose your wife.

c) I’ll probably be the next Spike Lee and *shit*, or something.

*Shit* in the first sentence obviously carries the meaning of possessions. In the second sentence, *shit* refers to a negative behavior, and the third sentence exemplifies the positive condition.

#### 7.2.4. ACTIONS

Throughout *Lemonade*, Beyoncé uses many slang terms to describe her and others' actions. We decided to organize them into subjective categories of "submission" and "resistance", two concepts that permeate the album. Under the first category, verbs and phrases such as *play someone*, *dis*, and *give it up* appear as obvious slang. We offer Smitherman's (2000) explanation for each listed item. *Play* may have various meanings depending on the context. The ones that seem appropriate for ours are the act of cheating on your partner or of deceiving and outsmarting someone, as seen in the sentences "If you *play* me, you *play* yourself" and "My daddy warned me about men like you, he said 'Baby girl, he's *playing* you'". (ibid. 230) According to Smitherman (ibid. 106), *dissing* stands for disrespecting and discounting someone, as in the sentence "When you *dis* me, you *dis* yourself". *Give it up* in the sentence "She don't gotta *give it up* 'cause she professional" means having sex (ibid. 149); however, our subjective reading of the phrase indicates that it also communicates a lingering sense of passivity, powerlessness and subjection. On the other hand, *hit it*, another phrase that occurs in our corpus and carries the same meaning (ibid. 163), hints at masculinity and power. Interestingly, Beyoncé uses *hit it* in the line "If he *hit it* right I might take him on a flight on my chopper, drop him off at the mall, let him buy some J's, let him shop up", thus reversing gender roles and assuming the position of power, usually reserved for men. Here, Beyoncé also tackles the prejudice related to the notion that only wealthy men take their female partners to shopping sprees.

We turn now to other slang items that carry a sense of resistance – *wilding*, *go off*, *get mine*, *grind*, *slang*, *slay*, *chuck the deuce*:

- 17) Now you gotta see me *wildin*'.
- 18) Sometimes I *go off*, I *get mine*, I'm a star.
- 19) I dream it, I work hard, I *grind* 'til I own it.
- 20) She gon *slang*, she too smart to crave material things.
- 21) 'Cause I *slay*.
- 22) I don't give a fuck, *chuckin*' my *deuces up*.

*Wilding* conveys the meaning of behaving unconventionally and/or uncontrollably (Smitherman 2000: 256), while *go off* means either losing control and reacting violently and/or irrationally, or performing something outstandingly (ibid. 150), and both interpretations could be applied to the sentence from our corpus. In addition, *get mine* means to get or take one's share of something (ibid. 147). *Grind*, *slang* and *slay* do not occur in Smitherman (ibid.), probably because they are newer items. *Grind* and *slang* appear in the song "6 Inch", and refer to the process of working hard towards one's goal. Both verbs are typically used in the drug



trade and refer to the process of selling and distributing drugs. (Trotta and Blyahher 2011: 18) However, among various commentators on Urban Dictionary, a popular internet site where anyone can contribute to definitions of slang and colloquial terms, we cite the user Duality2 (2009), who additionally defines *grinding* as a sexually suggestive dancing, in which a woman rubs her buttocks against male genitals.<sup>5</sup> As for *slay*, an annotation provided by the user AndlWinAgain (2016) on the website Genius (dedicated to providing lyrics of songs and their meanings) explains that the word was first coined within the African American LGBTQ community, but has since crossed over to the mainstream use and gained the meaning of succeeding in or dominating something. Merriam-Webster dictionary additionally defines *slay* as to delight, or amuse someone.<sup>6</sup> *Chuck the deuce* is, according to Lomax (2018), the author of the article “Talk Like a Texan: To Chunk or to Chuck?”, a slang phrase used in the Houston hip-hop culture. It means that a person has said what s/he had on their mind and is prepared to leave a conversation/relationship/etc. Additionally, Smitherman (2000: 136) explains that *deuce* is often used in hip-hop to refer to the number two. Hence, *chuck the deuce* verbalizes the gesture of giving a peace sign. Two final slang terms we mention are *dig* and *down to*, which mean “to understand, comprehend”, and to be “agreeable” or “ready to do something”, respectively. (Smitherman *ibid.* 106-14)

#### 7.2.5. OTHER PHENOMENA

In the final section of our research, we provide Smitherman’s (2000) definitions for slang items that could not be grouped into any of the previous categories. Among such terms, we find *hood* (neighborhood a person lives or grew up in (*ibid.* 169)) and *Five-O* (the police, presumably derived from the American TV series Hawaii Five-O (*ibid.* 132)):

23) He, he from the *hood*, just like me.

24) *Five-O* askin’ me what’s in my possession.

*Game* is an interesting slang item for itself, as seen in the sentence “Let’s imagine for a moment that you ...never had the baddest woman in the *game* up in your sheets”. Smitherman (2006: 68, in Trotta and Blyahher 2011:18) provides the explanation of the concept of *game*, additionally relating it to the word *play*:

Taken together, ‘play’ and ‘game’ constitute a powerful linguistic icon. Every game in the social universe has its clearly defined rules of play. Conceptualizing reality and life as a game is a

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<sup>5</sup> Duality2. 2009. “Grinding”. Urban Dictionary. (Comment posted to <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Grinding>). [Last accessed 16th April 2018]

<sup>6</sup> “Slay”. N.d. In Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. (<https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/slay>). [Last accessed 16th April 2018]

framework that fixes things, puts structure and system in place, gives one the comfort of order in a random, disorderly world...

The game in the context as sung by Beyoncé refers to all the “activities and maneuvers” (Smitherman 2000: 142) taken by her in the social universe of female musicians and celebrities. Once again, Beyoncé employs braggadocio in order to emphasize her position of power and dominance in a world dictated by White standards, in which she is viewed, not only by herself but also by many others, as “the baddest woman”.

## 8. CONCLUSION

If we rely on various online sources and media outlets buzzing around and about the latest music album of Queen Bey, as she is called by her loyal fans – members of the Beyhive – we can conclude that “the baddest woman in the game” has definitely stirred up conversation around various racial, gender, and linguistic identity issues. Her impact range, however, does not involve only entertainment and media spaces. Not one or two, but five different universities around the globe: University of Copenhagen, California Polytechnic State University, the University of Texas at San Antonio, Arizona State University and Rutgers University, began offering courses studying the politics of Beyoncé, and especially her impact on and the promotion of the black feminist thought. *Lemonade*, her ultimate solo album, was most certainly intended to spark such a conversation. This 56-minute narrative movie features almost exclusively black women, immersed in a variety of American Southern and Voodoo imagery. The narrative is primarily personal, but quickly becomes political – Beyoncé uses a trope of a scorned woman to introduce a story of many invisible black women, which is readily seen early on in the movie when she uses Malcolm X’s speech excerpt: “The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman.”

As might be expected, *Lemonade* narrates the black woman’s experience in the black woman’s and man’s tongue – African American Vernacular English. AAVE permeates the songs – the pronunciation is African American, the morphosyntax is African American, the lexicon is African American, and the discourse strategies too are African American. In focusing on only two of these aspects, grammar and vocabulary, the primary intent of our thesis was to describe the language of the twelve songs. However, in order to conduct the study, it was necessary to provide a theoretical background of the variety. We started the thesis by briefly discussing one of AAVE’s hot potatoes: the terminological and definitional dispute. It speaks volumes that, four hundred years after the initial arrival of the first slave ships to America, people (in mainstream as well as academic spaces) have not come to a general agreement considering these two questions. Although the issue of AAVE’s linguistic integrity is out of question, its social characterization and evaluation remain problematic. Moreover, it has been acknowledged that the definitional and terminological controversy is further deepened because of the disagreement around language forms the variety may encompass and their possible origins. (Rickford 1999: xxi–xxiii) As we have shown, a general perception of the speech of African Americans is that of the vernacular: it is mainly spoken by the working-class, urban

youth, and it is differentiated from MAE by its nonstandard features. Nevertheless, it has been noted that the speech of a part of the African American community, namely the middle class, almost completely lacks nonstandard features. They signal their affiliation with the greater African American community by using a different “flavor” (Smitherman 2000: 19) of AAVE: prosody, intonation, and discourse practices.

The goal of Chapter 3 was to present another controversy following AAVE: the origins and development debate. In an effort to provide the accurate historical account of the speech of African Americans, four major theories concerning its origin have been created: the Anglicist hypothesis, the Creolist hypothesis, the Neo-Anglicist hypothesis, and the Substrate hypothesis. Although adherents of the Anglicist and Creolist hypotheses initially occupied positions on the opposite sides of the spectrum, trying to prove that AAVE originated either from the European settler dialects or from a creole language that emerged during the early contact between Africans and Europeans, many of them later recognized linguistic contributions of both English and African and creole sources. Related to the origins debate, we continued our discussion by presenting differing views regarding its more recent development, namely the convergence/divergence debate. As we have seen, this debate revolves around the question of whether AAVE is becoming more similar or more different from its surrounding white vernaculars. Once again, there is no final agreement on the question: the speech of African Americans shows various tendencies. As Wolfram (2015: 347) notes, there is evidence that supports at least three different paths of change: “one in line with the divergence hypothesis (...), one supporting the convergence hypothesis (...), and one (...) that includes periods of convergence and divergence over time”. Somewhat pertaining to this discussion, we also tackled the question of AAVE’s uniformity/diversity. The earliest descriptions of the variety emphasized its uniformity across different American regions, which prompted the establishment of a set of canonical structural features. However, as we have shown, this uniformity is somewhat exaggerated, and various linguists assert that AAVE shows rather strong generational and regional variation. Despite AAVE’s diversity, there are various findings arguing for its transregional tendencies, especially among younger generations. These teenagers are increasingly rejecting their local varieties and adopting the “core set” of AAVE features that came to be associated with the overarching norm of AAVE as seen in the media, television, music, etc.

Chapter 4 of our thesis was dedicated to discussing core grammatical features of AAVE, with special emphasis paid to those present in our corpus. In order to introduce them before

embarking into the research phase, theoretical overview and descriptions, as well as restrictions on their occurrence were presented for tense, modality, and aspect markers of AAVE, copula and auxiliary absence, verbal *-s*, negative element *ain't*, and multiple negation. Ultimately, the intent of the following two chapters was to introduce the readers to the social and cultural impact of Beyoncé's music album and to present our corpus and methodology.

The second and final phase of our thesis was the straightforward study of AAVE features found in Beyoncé's album *Lemonade*. We divided this part into two sections: the first one dealing with morphosyntactic features observed in the album, and the second one dealing with lexical features. In addition to demonstrating, categorizing, and explaining various lexical items pertaining to AAVE's vocabulary, the lexical part of our research additionally presented a brief discussion on AAVE's vocabulary, namely its definition, origins, and development.

During our research, we provided a great deal of evidence that the song lyrics present a faithful reflection of AAVE, both in terms of grammar and vocabulary. Although this kind of performed language cannot be equated with naturally occurring speech, it is, indeed, a means of asserting, performing, and communicating particular identities, i.e. ethnic, racial, and gender identities. As we have previously maintained, various universities have already recognized these intentions. That being said, the value and significance of this kind of linguistic inquiry primarily contributes to developing a starting point for other kinds of educational and sociolinguistic studies. As it was stated in the introductory part, in order to conduct any other kind of research, it is fundamental to provide a basic description of the material. However, due to the limitations of this kind of work, our linguistic analysis was rather narrow in that it focused on grammatical and lexical features exclusively. A more comprehensive analysis would also include phonological features, prosody and intonation, and various discourse practices connected to the African American Verbal Tradition (Smitherman 1995, in Lippi-Green 2012: 182) occurring throughout the chosen material. Additionally, a multimodal discourse analysis could further shine some light on the ways this particular album discusses and emphasizes the position of African Americans in the American society, which is still characterized by discrimination and racial and gender politics. As it was noted, not only representatively African American speech and its discursive strategies, but also imagery, scenes, and featured actresses all contribute to communicating specific ways of what it means to be a black woman in this day and age.

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