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## African American Vernacular English (AAVE) Used by Rich Brian: A Sociolinguistic Investigation

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### Abstract

The author investigated the use of AAVE by Brian Imanuel or Rich Brian in his rap song lyrics. This study aimed to identify the grammatical features of AAVE in Brian's Amen album. Further, this study was also explored the underlying effect on Brian's use of AAVE. This study applied a descriptive-qualitative method. The context of the data in this study was song lyrics. The results are as follows: Brian rap song lyrics' contained 7 out of AAVE's 13 grammatical features. Those are copula absence, invariant be, completive done, specialized auxiliaries, negation, nominal, and ain't. The causal effect on the use of AAVE by Brian is influenced by the environment or neighborhoods where he grew up. Growing up around his friends who use AAVE in their daily conversation leads him to obtain AAVE's native-like control. Likewise, AAVE's use was the main effect of the linguistic marketplace in order to project identities in stable ways.

**Keywords:** AAVE; sociolinguistic; hip-hop

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### INTRODUCTION

In 2010, 11-year-old Brian Imanuel began to be exposed to American culture. He studied English by watching Youtube videos and listening to songs from rap singers such as Childish Gambino, 2 Chainz, Macklemore, and Tyler. In particular, they often use African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in their song lyrics. (Staehr & Madsen, 2015). Moreover, in 11, Brian has already acquired AAVE as a linguistic style associated with hip hop. It could be seen in 2015, he tried to adopt the Hip-Hop style and named himself as *Rich Chigga*. The term *Chigga* is modified from *Nigga*, an acronym for *Naturally Intelligent God Gifted African*, where *Nigga* is used in addressing Black (Makoni, 2017, p. 12).

In 2015, Brian moved to the United States of America and, for the first time, released his song, namely "Living in the Dream." As mentioned before, Brian has already adopted the Hip-Hop style, which AAVE linguistic style in his song lyrics. There are rules of authenticity in Hip-Hop along with the use of AAVE to demonstrated poor urban with rampant gang violence and what background they came from (Astuti, 2018). It includes talking about race and social class and the discrimination that often ensues for the urban. Brian has followed the rules in his song

lyrics of Living the Dream song, he illustrated the image of the underdog or coming from a low urban terrain, as in "*Started from the bottom, not going back to trappin', I'm just a youngin' with a dream hope to make it with my team.*" Brian states that he is not rich, but at least he has not lost hope. It is a characteristic of rappers who are trying to make it in the industry.

Given the opportunity to adapt with AAVE linguistic style, Brian, an Asian with a background as non-native English is interesting to be analyzed, regarding his use of AAVE in his song lyrics. The case of Asian rappers is still a minority, and no one has attempted to study this phenomenon of Asian rappers and their use of AAVE. The grammatical features of AAVE employed by Brian are fascinating to be investigated to show that this dialect is socially constructed, which also happens to belong to a particular culture. This study has two objectives: first, to identify AAVE's grammatical features in Brian's song lyrics. The theory of Wolfram (2004) used to analyze the data he postulates 13 grammatical features of AAVE. They are copula absence, invariant be, completive done, sequential be done, remote been, simple past had + verb, specialized auxiliaries, irregular verbs, subject-verb agreement, other verb phrase structures, negation, nominal, and question formation. Second, the

recognition of social environments — neighborhoods — sustains a causal effect on AAVE's use.

Bloomaert (2010) defined identity as a fluid, hybrid, and differentiated at the micro-interaction level. On the other hand, language is mostly a valuable element for creating a social identity, interfaces, and other stylistic identifiers such as apparel, gait, patterns of consumption, and other forms or attitudes on whether they conceptualize their identities. Maintaining speech patterns, getting dressed, walking, or often dancing from certain cultural circles all over state boundaries and indigenous boundaries is progressively aspect of how younger folks structure their self-identity (Terkourafi, 2010). Urban teenagers who have been closely associated with Hip-Hop are part of this movement once they embrace ways of communicating, walking, and acknowledging urban African American adolescence (Bucholtz, 2011).

People express their origin and whom they would like to be through language or language style (Cutler, 2015, p. 237). Many people are faced with preferences regarding how they would like to design their language to demonstrate which cultural circles they affiliate. Once groups of individuals cross ethnic lines and adopt one another's language style and other cultures, there is indeed a tendency for intensified cross-ethnic awareness and tolerance. In particular, dialect refers to a specific group of languages (Anderson, 2010). Dialects can be geographical (e.g., Southern American English), racial (e.g., AAVE or Chicano English), or social status (e.g., Cockney English; Rickford, 2002), which constitutes a dialect from a language that becomes a debatable topic. However, the dissimilarity continues to be more socio-political than linguistic (Anderson, 2010).

The distinction over what is perceived the standard version of the language and what is not always a matter of power — certain types of language approved by the government and other state institutions are mostly regarded to be the 'proper' form of the language (Anderson, 2010), while other forms are assigned to 'non-standard' dialects. Standard dialects, such as British Received Pronunciation, are portrayed quite positively than non-standard dialects (e.g., Morales, Scott, & Yorkston, 2012). For example, in the United States, the non-standard Southern American dialect is related to lower social status, lower education levels, and is viewed by many as the least acceptable use of American English (Dent, 2004). These contrasts play an essential role in sociolinguistic indicators for listeners, offering a full range of stereotypical details on speakers' status.

Most young individuals or Hip Hop community (and several others across speakers of other languages) already formulated substantial long-term relationships with African American Vernacular English and distribute a standard paradigm as part of the Hip Hop culture. Such an interaction has drawn along young folks from quite diverse backgrounds in the world and made everyone realize as if they are somehow part of a collaborative, politically involved youth community. Hip-Hop culture across cultural fashion trends might be a path for youngsters from various social and cultural origins to counter and reconstruct ethnicities. Eventually, the Hip-Hop phenomenon had such an impact on the creation of urban immigrant youth identities (Hassa, 2010). AAVE speech style assesses audiences' role as urban and culturally diverse and demonstrates the affiliation they share with other young people (Cutler, 2015, p. 237).

The term African American Vernacular English or AAVE developed in part of the speech of many Black citizens of the northern United States (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015 p 46). While not every Black American speaks AAVE, AAVE's use is not limited to Black Americans only (Carter, 2013). AAVE is characterized primarily by its distinct grammatical and phonological features such as the absence of the suffix *-s* on finite verbs (e.g. *She like cheese*). A further feature is the urge to eliminate the verb *to be* when it contracted in Standard English (e.g., *He \_ excellent*). Labov in Wardhaugh & Fuller (2015) has enlightened, "if you can contract *be* in Standard English, you can delete it in AAVE" p. 48.

In particular, Wolfram (2004) hypothesizes 13 grammatical features of the AAVE. The first is the exclusion of a copula/auxiliary in the combination of *is* and *is*. The disappearance of Copula in urban AAVE is nearly stable. Second is invariant, as *Be here in a minute* is undoubtedly the most recognizable grammatical aspect of AAVE to the extent of getting stereotyping. The application of *habitual* is arranged by and will be the form of *will*. In the construction of *She's here in a minute*, the *be* derives from the absence of /l/ in front of the labial (*she'll be*). Alim (2001) believes that it is primarily included in hip-hop phrases. The third is completive done with the verb's past tense, as in *The dishes were washed*. The feature of this grammatical use in AAVE is a complete one, pointing to an event completed in the past, but it can also be used to demonstrate a change of state or a step-up procedure, as in a phrase as *I done told you not to late*.

Fourth is concurrent, a combination of

completing and performing together in sentences such as 'This chocolate is melting by the time we get there,' reflecting a current or future conditional state. This concept seems to act as a perfect future similar to the Standard English 'must have melted' in the scenario mentioned above. The fifth is remote been, underscored by the use of the past tense form, which reflects an event in the distant past. A sentence such as 'I was introduced to him' refers to an incident that took place, literally or figuratively, in a distant time frame. Sixth is simple past had + verb, one of AAVE's newer features to signify a simple past tense action. In sentences such as 'They went outside,' this usage is similar to using the simple past (e.g., they went outside). Seventh is a specialist auxiliary. There are many filling auxiliaries specializing in AAVE. Among these auxiliaries are the usage of coming to signify a state of indignation (e.g., walkin' here as he owned a goddamn place), the use of stable to denote constant intensification of action (e.g., John be steady steppin' in them number nines), and the use of finna to signify an imminent future or expected occurrence (e.g., I am finna go).

The eighth is irregular verbs, which includes the extension of the past as a participle (e.g., I went down here), the participle as the past (e.g., they saw it), the bare root as the past (e.g., they raced there yesterday), and the regularization of the past tense (e.g., everyone knew it). Ninth is the subject-matter of the agreement. There are two facets of the subject-concord that are common in urban AAVE, one related to the addition of the suffix -s (e.g., walking for She walks) and the other related to the conjugated forms of the past (e.g., people were there) and present forms (e.g., people are home). The tenth is another verb word form. There are types of verb structures that distinguish AAVE, but they are confined to and complemented by distinct lexical verbs. For example, AAVE's verb beat can act as an intransitive verb, as in 'We beat' for 'won.' The use of say can also be extended in AAVE to refer to non-human and inanimate objects, as in 'The rock says 'boom.'

The eleventh is a negotiation. The negation composition in AAVE invests in negative concord or multiple negations in whereby a specific negative assertion can be established. Both in the verb phrase and in the post verbal indeterminate, as in 'It was nothing.' AAVE also engages in the form of negative concord that includes a pre-verbal, indefinite, and verbal negative, such as 'No one likes him,' which is similar to the regular expression 'Nobody like him.' Construction like this was used for emphasis, particularly if it is stressed

indefinitely. Negative concord can also be transmitted by clauses, as in 'It ain't no cat can get in any coop.' AAVE uses 'ain't' as a general pre-verbal negative for the present tense (am not, is not) and for the perfect auxiliary 'haven't/hasn't' as in 'She hasn't been there lately.'

The twelfth is nominal; the lack of inflectional  $\neg$ -s is possessive and plural (e.g., the dog tail was wagging). Moreover, there is a pattern of  $\neg$ -s  $\neg$  absence applicable to the measurement of quantifier nouns, as in 'It's 4 miles from here.' The thirteenth is the development of queries. Two components of question composition discern the syntax of AAVE, which involves an auxiliary inversion subject. In the first place, questions can be raised without subject-auxiliary inversion (e.g., where). Second, questions can remain subject-to-auxiliary inversion (e.g., I asked him if I could eat with him in comparison to the regular pattern I asked him if I could eat with him). Hip-Hop language typically overlaps with AAVE in terms of phonology, grammar, syntax, and expression styles (Cutler, 2015, p. 232). For example, it is customary to refer to events and circumstances that are constant or repeated and appears quite frequently before a progressive verb (e.g., going to church). Hip-Hop has distinctive lexical features (e.g., madd, mackalicious, chill, and phat) and word definitions (e.g., yo, know what I'm saying) can be found on web platforms such as urbandictionary.com. Cultural differences between rappers from different parts of the world and diverse cultural backgrounds can exist (Bloomquist and Hancock, 2013). Midwestern rappers are pronounced 'she' and 'she' as 'hurr' and 'thurr' (Blake and Shousterman, 2010). In comparison, Southern rappers use special lexis and phonology as the pronunciation of 'thing' as 'thang' (Bloomquist and Hancock, 2013).

Astuti (2018) article conducted a study to identify the grammatical features of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) in Logic's Everybody and to reveal the underlying factors of this dialect use. This research applied a descriptive-qualitative method. The context of the data in this study was song lyrics. The study concluded two main results: first, Logic only employs 11 out of the 13 features in the entire 222 data. They are copula deletion, remote been, question formation, subject-verb disagreement, future form, use of ain't, concord negation, negative inversion, irregular verbs, non-standard pronouns, and nominal. Lack of subject agreement is the most dominant feature with the lack of verbal marker -s for third-person singular occurring most often. Features that are not found in the data are ha-

bitual *be* and intensified equative *be*. A possible explanation for this is that both are not prevalent features in AAVE, so it is not surprising that there is zero datum found in the lyrics.

Second, Logic employs AAVE features to establish himself in the Hip-Hop community for AAVE is an integral part of Hip-Hop, an African-American culture. The neighborhood he grew up in may also have played a role in his using AAVE. Having grown up in an African-American household with an African-American father and siblings, he has, without a doubt, been exposed to AAVE daily. Lastly, he uses AAVE as a way to identify himself as black. African-Americans in the U.S. know how to speak AAVE and Logic being a half-black and identifying as one uses this dialect as a representation tool.

Moreover, in his thesis, Setiawan (2018) conducted a study to investigate how and why the African-American singers show grammar deviations in their song lyrics. The object of the study was song lyrics by African-American singers in billboard.com year 2016. Seventeen songs are being analyzed. The study results are; first, there are seven morphological features of AAVE found in the 2016 popular song lyrics. They are: particular use of *be* and *be* an omission, double negatives, verbal *-s* absence, particular use of *be* an omission in *I'mma* and *gonna* or *gon,* *ain't* acting as present and past marker, the use of *finna*, and the use of two kinds of *been* which are *BIN* and *bin*. The second result is that there are four main reasons why African-American singers' 2016 song lyrics show deviations from English grammar. They are: African-American people want to recall the period of slavery years ago; African-American people want to state themselves as real Africans who use English; African-American people want to show that their language is systematic and rule-governed; African-American people want their language to be approved as other English language varieties.

These two previous studies are investigated the grammatical features of AAVE and the reasonable use of AAVE in the song lyrics. Thus, these studies were only focused on African-American singers. Furthermore, the current study intended to fill the gap by allocating different research data. The object of this study is Rich Brian, an Asian rapper, and the data is gathered from his song lyrics. The research questions of this study are: (1) How are the grammatical features of AAVE in Rich Brian's song lyrics? (2) Are social environments—neighborhoods—exert a causal effect on the use of AAVE? How?

## METHODS

This research applied a descriptive-qualitative approach to obtain cases deemed rich information to saturate the data (Lambert, 2012). The form of the data in this study was in lingual units such as expressions as in phrases, sentences or clauses found in Rich Brian Amen album song lyrics. Fourteen song lyrics are being analyzed. The main instrument was the researcher herself, while the second instrument was in the form of a datasheet that helped the researcher analyze it. The data were collected qualitatively by listening to the album and reading the transcribed lyrics carefully and repeatedly. Then, the researcher classified the data as proposed by Wolfram. Finally, the researcher interpreted the result and concluded the research study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The grammatical features of AAVE in Rich Brian song lyrics.

Out of all the 13 grammatical features of AAVE proposed by Wolfram, Rich Brian only employs 7. They are copula absence, remote *been*, use of *ain't*, concord negation, negative inversion, subject-verb disagreement, future form, question form, nominal, irregular verb, and non-standard pronoun.

#### Copula/auxiliary absence

The absence of a Copula and auxiliary for contractible form has been one of the most often described AAVE (Wolfram, 1969). Consider the following extracts:

*She gon' need another fella.*

*She 'bout 30 years old.*

*Everybody show up 'cause they know I'm here.*

*She a vegan you can see it.*

If that can mean *she gon' end up* on my nitrous.

*She so clean, man.*

These extracts show a pattern in which copula deficiency only occurs in the 2nd and third-person environment. It shows that AAVE is resistant to the omission of a verb *be* when expressed by first person singular.

#### Invariant *be*

Invariant *be* in sentences referred to as non-finite *be* and habitual *be* is probably the most salient grammatical trait of AAVE. The use of habitual *be* derived through phonological processes that affect contracted forms of *will* and *would be* as follows:

She told me that *she be* worried.

Every week *I be* on the face.  
*I be ridin'* right down Melrose with a thick named Rose.

### Completive done

A persistent structural trait of AAVE is the use of *done* with the past tense of the verb.  
*I done seen you glow like that I must say that I'm proud.*

The use of *done* in data (10) about an event undertaken in the recent past, it has also been used to emphasize a state change or to escalate an occurrence.

### Specialized auxiliary

*Some other auxiliary fillings of different semantic-pragmatic functions that implicitly distinguish AAVE* from certain vernacular forms of English are as follows:

*Finally getting hard, so you know what's finna happen next.*

*It's my dream and ain't nobody finna wake me up.*

The use of **finna** in data (8) and (9) links to a direct future or expected occurrence.

### Negation

*Rich Brian* uses double negation in a single negative proposition by using negative auxiliary *don't* with the negative word *no* as in the following:

*I don't need no education, Internet's my favorite teacher.*

The negative concord above can be expressed in two ways in Standard English (S.E.). One can interpret it as *I don't need education* and omit the word *no*. On the other hand, one can omit the negative auxiliary *don't* instead.

Negative concord can either be extended through clauses, as seen in the following data (11), referring to simply *there is no fun and games*. At the same time, data (12) denotes that *He doesn't need to look at the past*.

*Ain't no fun and games.*

*Ain't no lookin' back.*

### Nominal

The characteristic of the noun phrase in AAVE is probably the absence of inflectional *-s* on plurals as in the following:

*Show some attitude and bitch I won't show.*

*Not checkin' my statement 'til I got 4 mill.*

There is a type of associative plural *'em* as in (16) *I put 'em* in their feelings for the girls

### The use of ain't

*Ain't* is used as a negative indicator in

AAVE, which corresponds to any present tense of *be + not* and *have + not*. This feature can occur in the first person, second person, and third person environment, as in the following:

*Don't test me because my skin ain't thick.*

*Bumping Lil Wayne, feeling like we ain't got time to think.*

*Then I realized I ain't even bring my paper.*

*Makin' up for the competition that I ain't do.*

### Neighborhood Influence

Brian Imanuel is an Indonesian, who was born in Jakarta. He moved to the United States of America and started his career as a rapper at seventeen. Without a doubt, he acquired native-like control of AAVE from rapper song lyrics as he learns it from the internet and moves to the United States of America. He shows his upbringing in some songs from his *Amen* album.

Born in Jakarta, but I live like I'm from Calabasas.

Landed in Chicago, met the customs,

Mean muggin' mothafuckers let me tell ya something,

And I almost got deported back to the home town,

'Cause I didn't know what road my hotels on,

Then I met my manager, Sean 88 chillin' in the passenger,

And I'm feelin' tripped out, seein' him for the first time,

Worked overseas for a year, that's a long run.

Still missin' home, but I'm havin' my fun, uh,

I would never quit, I'm too legit,

Indonesian MC Hammer in this bitch,

Beat your ass if you correct my grammar in this bitch.

These excerpts show Brian influenced by the environment or neighborhoods where he is hanging up with. Hanging out around his friends who use AAVE in their daily conversation leads him to obtain native-like control of AAVE.

AAVE is used as an identity representation tool by Black people in America. Brian once tries to identify himself as a part of black people using the term *chigga*. However, he never says that he identifies himself as black in his song lyrics. He uses AAVE in his lyrics to further conform to the rule of authenticity in Hip-Hop. It is evident, African-Americans know how to speak this dialect and do speak it even though not every day and not necessarily employ all the features in their practice. Brian does the same where he does not use all the 13 features proposed by Wolfram, but he uses them reasonably frequently and correctly.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the previous chapter's discussion regarding the AAVE use in Brian Amen album song, two conclusions can be drawn. First, Brian only employs 7 out of the 13 grammatical features in AAVE. They are the absence of Copula, invariant be, completive done, specialized auxiliaries, negation, nominal, and ain't. Second, Brian is influenced by the environment or neighborhoods where he grew up. Hanging out around his friends who use AAVE in their daily conversation leads him to obtain native-like control of AAVE. As the linguistic market offers styles, younger folks might cross ethnic borders (e.g., Brian from Indonesia) and draw styles from one another to achieve social identity securely.

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