

# Dialects

Note: Many of the examples used in this slide presentation were taken from the book  
African American English: A Linguistic Introduction by Lisa J. Green.

Green, Lisa J. *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

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## Arthur the Rat

A short tale devised to obtain phonetic representation from throughout the country of all phonemes in American English. See link at bottom of page.

1. Brooklyn, NY 70-year old white female with college education

2. **Rural community in nME** 73-year old white male with high school education

3. **Roxbury section of Boston, MA** young black female with high school education

4. **Memphis, TN** 72-year old black man with college education

5. **Island in eVA** middle-aged white male with high school education

6. **Small city in scGA** middle-aged white female with college education

7. **Wichita Falls, TX** middle-aged white male with (probably) high school education

8. **Village in nwWA** 74-year old white male with high school education

9. **Small city in nwWI** middle-aged white woman with college education

Source: <http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu:80/~ling80/audio/>

## GIRLS' RHYME: BOSTON, 1970s

Extra, extra, read all about it.  
All the boys are mentally retarded.

A rhyme????

## GIRLS' RHYME: BOSTON, 1970s

Extra, extra, read all about it.  
All the boys are mentally retarded.

|                    |          |          |
|--------------------|----------|----------|
|                    | əbawt ət | ɹətərdəd |
| flapping           | əbawr ət | ɹətərəd  |
| dediphthongization | əba:r ət | ---      |
| r-drop             | ---      | ɹətə:rəd |

**Result:**                      əba:r ət    ɹətə:rəd



Image courtesy of [Kent Manning](#) on Flickr.

## SAKS FIFTH AVENUE



Image courtesy of [Ruben Moreno Montoliu](#) on Flickr.

## MACY'S



## KLEIN'S

Image courtesy of [New York Public Library Digital Gallery](#).

## *Saks - Macy's - Klein's (1962)*

|               | <b>Saks</b> | <b>Macy's</b> | <b>Kleins</b> |
|---------------|-------------|---------------|---------------|
| <i>all r</i>  | 24%         | 22%           | 6%            |
| <i>some r</i> | 46%         | 37%           | 12%           |
| <i>no r</i>   | 30%         | 41%           | 82%           |

## *upper floor - lower floor*

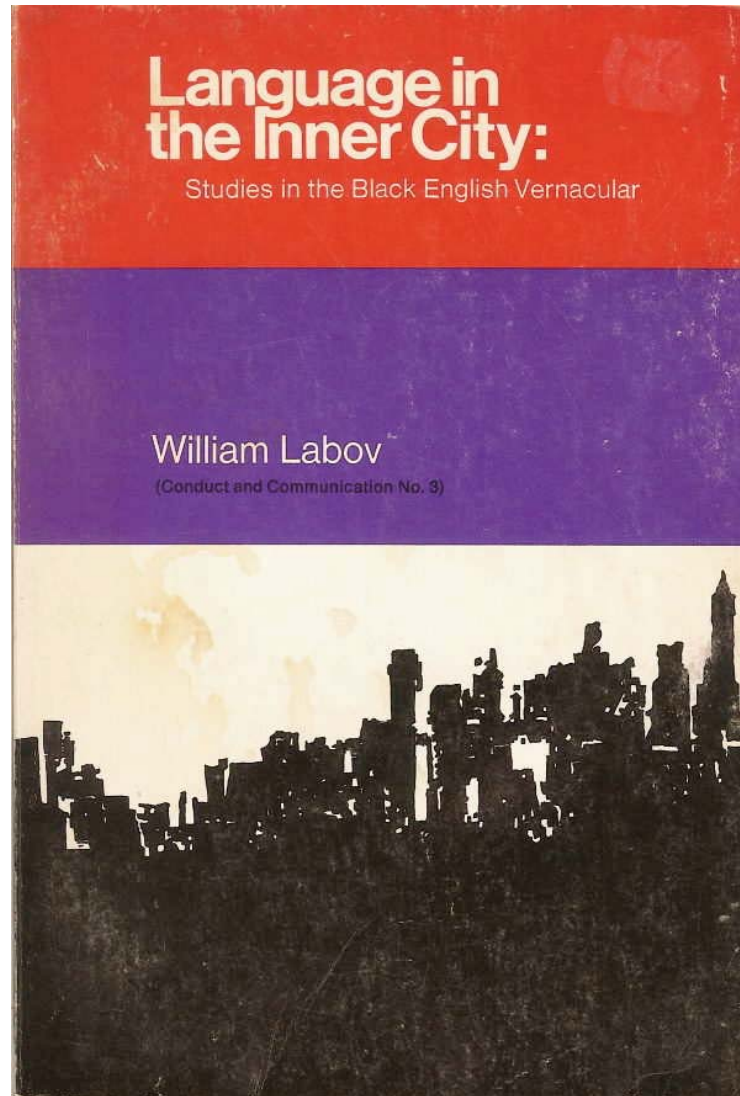
| <i>Saks</i>   | ground floor | upper floor |
|---------------|--------------|-------------|
| <i>all r</i>  | 23%          | 34%         |
| <i>some r</i> | 23%          | 40%         |
| <i>no r</i>   | 54%          | 26%         |

*floorwalker - cashier - stockboys*

|        | Floorwalkers | Sales | Stockboys |
|--------|--------------|-------|-----------|
| all r  | 46%          | 18%   | 7%        |
| some r | 8%           | 35%   | 14%       |
| no r   | 46%          | 47%   | 79%       |

# *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

In 1965: Office of Education commissions Yoko 'Labov to conduct a study of linguistic factors that might contribute to reading difficulties among African-American school-age children.



Labov, William. *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1973.



# *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

## Phonological features of AAVE

### **r (and l) deletion**

$r \rightarrow \emptyset / \_\_\_ \{C, \#\}$

#### *rhymes:*

guard    god

nor        gnaw

court     caught

(compare upper-class British)

Labov, William. *Urban Black English in Philadelphia: Sociolinguistic Coping*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1973.

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# *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

## Phonological features of AAVE

### r (and l) deletion

$l \rightarrow \emptyset / \_\_\_ \{C, \#\}$

#### *rhymes:*

toll toe

all awe

help hep

compare proto-Slavic → Polish: Russian [dal], Polish [daw] 'gave'

Labov, William. *African American Vernacular English*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1973.

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# *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

## Phonological features of AAVE

### syllable coda cluster reduction ...

|        |          |
|--------|----------|
| [hæn]  | 'hand'   |
| [dɛs]  | 'desk'   |
| [pows] | 'post'   |
| [pæs]  | 'passed' |
| [mæs]  | 'mask'   |
| [gif]  | 'gift'   |
| [bowl] | 'bold'   |

# *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

## Phonological features of AAVE

**syllable coda cluster reduction**  
**except when the coda cluster is of the form**

**[+voiced] [-voiced]**

[hæn] 'hand'      vs.      [pænt] 'pant'

[kowl] 'cold'      vs.      [kowlɫ] 'colt'

**Exceptions: *ain'* and *don'***

# *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

## Consequences for perception of past-tense/participial morphology

|         |                                |
|---------|--------------------------------|
| [pʊʃ]   | 'push' or 'pushed'             |
| [pejdʒ] | 'page' or 'paged'              |
| [rejz]  | 'raise' or 'raised'            |
| [dʒʌmp] | 'jump' or 'jumped'             |
| [mis]   | 'miss' or 'missed' (or 'mist') |

*from Labov (via Green):*

- 'He pick me'
- 'I've pass my test.'
- 'Last week I kick Donald in the mouth, so the teacher throwed me out the class.'

...with predictable consequences for classroom performance on reading/writing tasks involving this suffix (Labov).

Labov, William. *Labov, William. @Ubl i U[ Y ]b 'h\ Y ' =bb Yf '7]fm 'Gh X]Yg ]b 'h\ Y '6 'UW\ '9b[ ' ]g\ ' J YfbUW 'Uf.* University of Pennsylvania Press, 1973.

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# *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

## **Lexical features of AAVE**

### **Zero copula**

- a. He wild.
- b. She real nice.
- c. He not American.
- d. If you good, you going to heaven.

### **Invariant *be***

- a. He be wild.
- b. Sometime she be fighting.
- c. She be nice and happy.
- f. Sue be knowing that song.
- g. Sam's wholesale stores be on the outskirts of town.

# *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

## **Irish:**

a. **Is** fear é.  
COP man him  
'He is a man.'

**Is** fuar é.  
COP cold(hearted) him  
'He is a coldhearted person.'

b. **Tá** sé ina fhear. (anois).  
COP he in-his man (now)  
'He is a man (now).', i.e. 'He has become a man.'

**Tá** sé fuar  
COP he cold  
'He is cold.' (i.e. 'He feels cold.') *(source: Wikipedia, yes really)*

## *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

### **Spanish:**

a. Soy norteamericano.  
I.am North.American

[ser]

b. Estoy cansado.  
I.am tired

[estar]



# *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

## *AAVE Zero copula: intrinsic property*

- a. He wild.  
'He's a wild person'
- b. She real nice.  
'She's a nice person'
- c. He not American.
- d. If you good, you going to heaven.

## *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

*AAVE Invariant be: situation-dependent property, habitual*

a. He be wild.

'He's acting wild/shows signs of wildness'

b. Sometime she be fighting.

c. Sometime when they do it, most of the problems always be wrong.

d. She be nice and happy.

e. Sue be knowing that song.

(i.e. when we ask her, it generally turns out that she knows the song)

f. Sam's wholesale stores be on the outskirts of town.

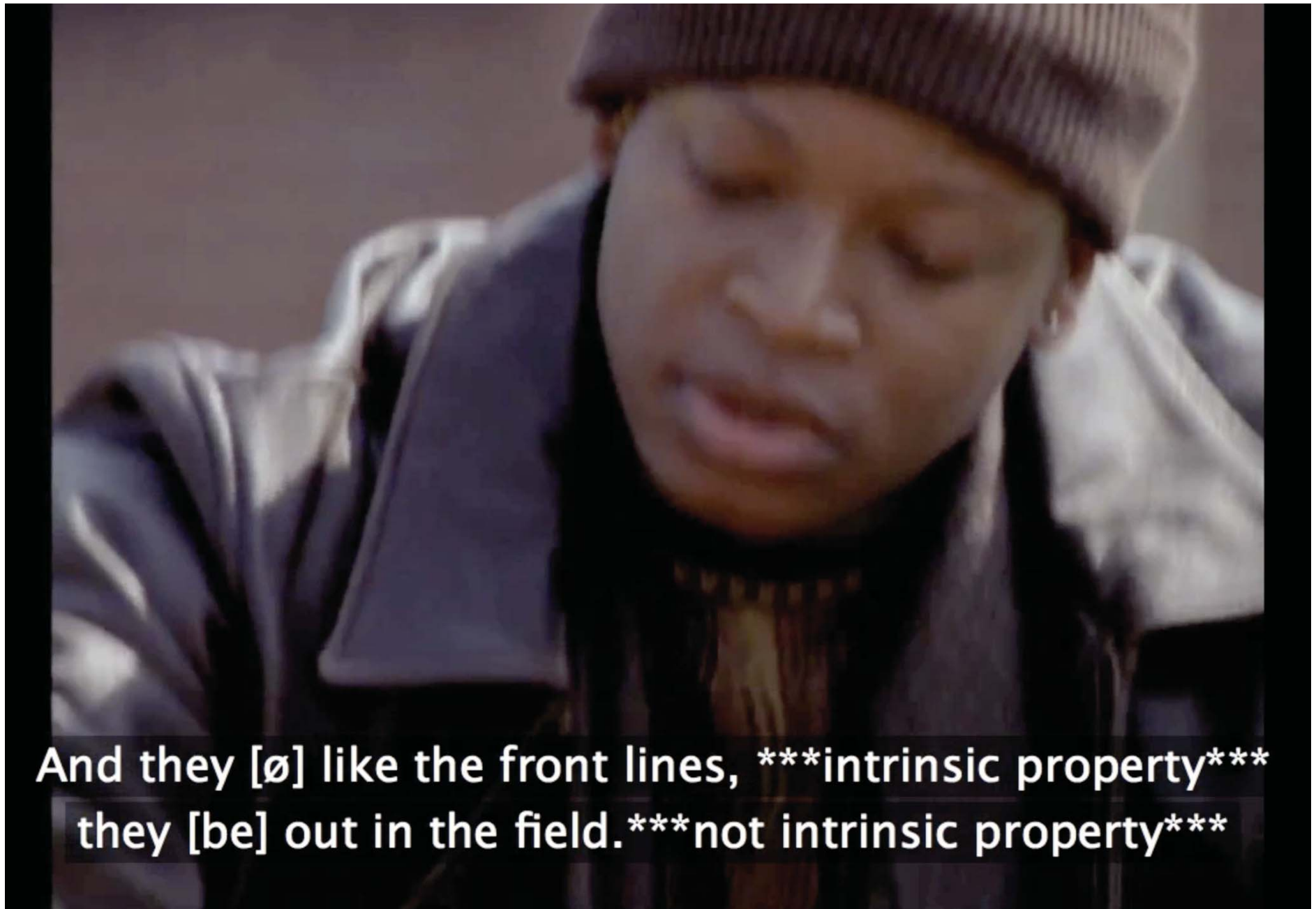
# *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*



"The Buys." Episode 3 from Season 1 of the series "The Wire." Home Box Office, 2002.

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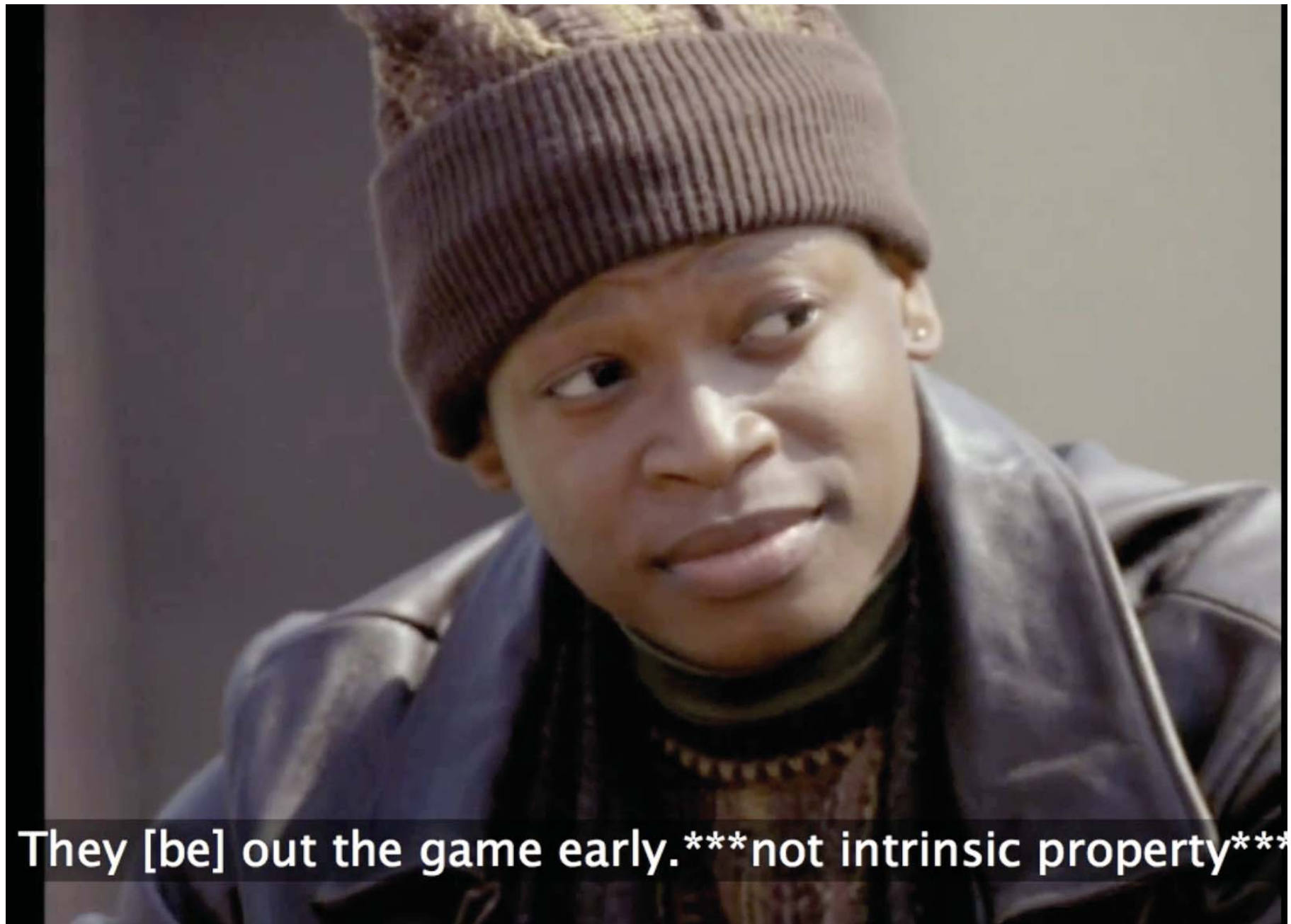
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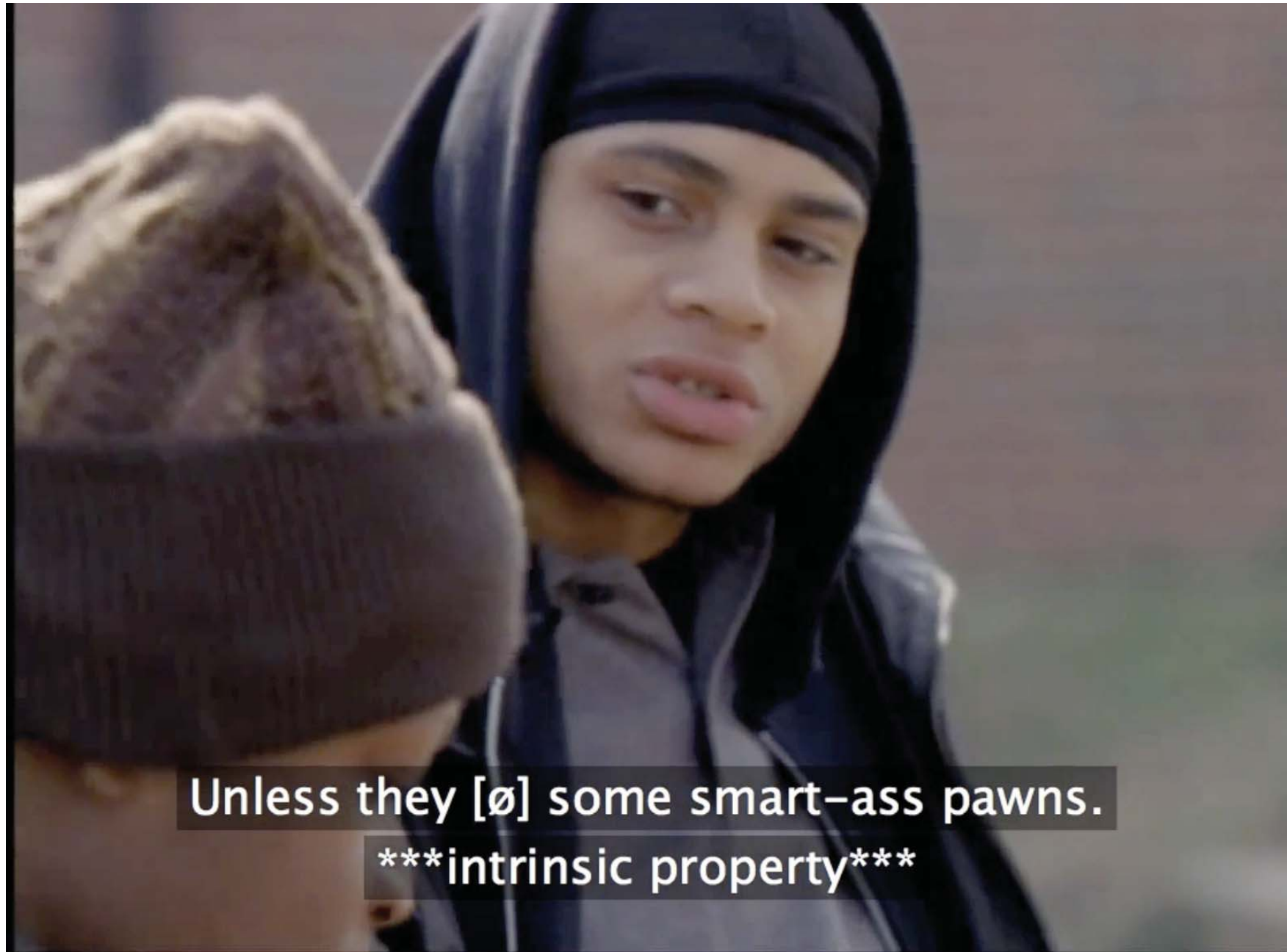
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# *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*



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# *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*



**They [ø] like the front line.      [ø→ser]**  
**They [be] out in the field.      [be→estar]**  
**(*lit.* "They are always fighting.")**

"The Buys." Episode 3 from Season 1 of the series "The Wire." Home Box Office, 2002.

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## *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

### **Part of a rich tense/aspect system that includes:**

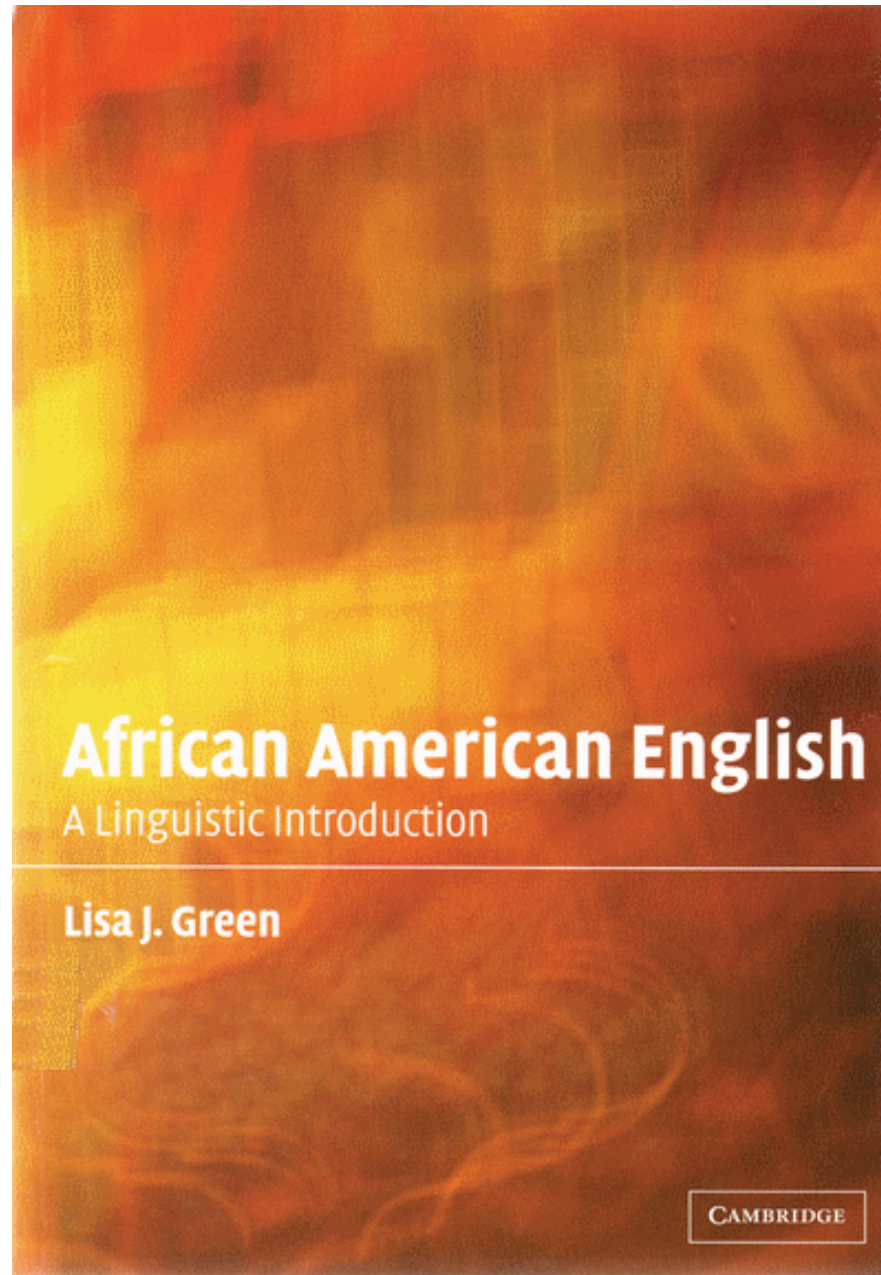
1. Present progressive: He runnin.
2. Present habitual progressive: He be runnin. ("aspectual *be*")
3. Present intensive hab.prog: He be steady runnin.
4. Present perfect progressive: He bin runnin  
'He has been running.'
5. Present perfect with remote inception:  
He BIN runnin.

'He has been running for a long time (and still is).'

and more ...



# *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*



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# *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

## **Aspectual *be* and $\emptyset$ -copula**

a. Bruce run.

'Bruce runs on occasions.'

b. Bruce  $\emptyset$  running.

'Bruce is running now.' *or* 'Bruce is running these days.'  
(i.e. it's part of who he is)

c. Bruce *be* running.

'Bruce is usually running.' *or* 'Bruce usually runs.'

## *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

### **more about "Aspectual *be*"**

- a. She be telling people she eight.  
'She is always telling people she's eight.'
  
- b. It be knives in here. It be ice picks in here.  
'There are usually knives in here. There are usually icepicks in here.'
  
- b. He doesn't even allow women to wear pants at women's retreats and he doesn't even be there.  
'...and he isn't even usually there'
  
- c. She gotta be there for 9m so they be don gone to school.  
'She has to be there at 9, so they have usually already gone to school.'

## *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

### **Side point: expletive *it***

It be knives in here. It be ice picks in here.

'There are usually knives in here. There are usually icepicks in here.'

Compare French expletive *il*:

Il y a des couteaux ici.

**It** is INDEF knives here

'There are knives here.'

## *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

### **Side point: expletive *it***

LH (age 16): *You know, like, ah, some people say if you're good an' shit, your spirit goin' to heaven, an' if you good—be bad, your spirit goin' to hell, well bullshit, your spirit goin' to hell anyway, good or bad.*

KC: Why?

LH: *Why? why? I'll tell you why. 'Cause you see, doesn't nobody really know that *it's a God*, you know. 'Cause I mean I have seen black gods, pink gods, white gods, all color gods, and *don't nobody know it's really a God*, and when they be sayin' if you good you're goin' to heaven, that's bullshit.*

KC: Is that so?

LH: *You ain't goin' to no heaven. 'Cause *it ain't no heaven for you to go to.**

(W. Labov)

## *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

### **"Aspectual *be*": interesting semantic complications**

- a. Some of them be big and some of them be small.
- b. Sam's wholesale stores be on the outskirts of town.
- c. Some iMacs be tangerine.

but...

*Do Sam's wholesale stores move around?*

*Isn't color an intrinsic property of an iMac?*

## *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

**"Remote past *BIN*": interesting semantic complications**

"*BIN* situates an activity or state (or some part thereof) in the remote past."

effect of stress:

*remote past BIN*:

She *BIN* running.

'She has been running for a long time.'

*present perfect bin*:

She *bin* running.

'She has been running'

She *bin* had him all day.

'She has had him all day'

## *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

### **"Remote past *BIN*"**

I BIN knowing he died.

'I have known for a long time that he died.'

A: The police going bad.

B: They ain't going bad. They BIN bad.

'They aren't going bad. They have been bad for a long time.'

He BIN a preacher there.

'He has been a preacher for a long time.'

A: Where'd you get that shirt?

B: I BIN had it.

'I have had it for a long time.'

A: Hunh

B: I BIN got it.

'I got it a long time ago.'



## *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

### **verbal marker *dɔn***

"The verbal marker *dɔn* denotes that an event has ended."

I told him you *dɔn* changed.

'I told him that you have changed.'

A: You through with Michael Jordan [a magazine] I bought you?

B: I *dɔn* already finished that.

'I have already finished that.'

A: Push your seat.

B: I *dɔn* pushed it.            'I already pushed it'

A: Push it again.

# *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

## **compositional semantics**

*be dɔn*: habitual resultant state

A: Y'all keep up with the news, hunh?

B: Yeah, when it come on there, we be dɔn read it in the newspaper.

'Yeah, by the time the news comes on there (on TV), we have usually already read it in the newspaper.'

She gotta be there for 9, so they be dɔn gone to school.

'She has to be there at 9, so they have usually already gone to school by then'

Anybody who don' have no money and jus' be dɔn got paid, must be on drugs.

'It is usually the case that anybody who doesn't have any money but has just gotten paid must be on drugs.'

# *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

## **compositional semantics**

*BIN dɔn*: remote past resultant state

You should'a *BIN dɔn* called me down there.

'You should have called me down there a long time ago.'

He *BIN dɔn* put that in there.

'He put that in there a long time ago.'

# *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

**And what about ...**

*be BIN*

*BIN be*

# *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

## **And what about ...**

*\*be BIN*

\*Bruce be BIN running.

'It usually the case that Bruce was running a long time ago.'

*\*BIN be*

\*Bruce BIN be running.

'A long time ago, Bruce was in the habit of running.'

## *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

verbal marker *steady*

Precedes a verb form in the progressive to indicate that "an activity is carried out in an intense or consistent manner."

They want to do they own thing, and you steady talking to them.  
'They want to do their own thing, and you're continuing to talk to them.'

Now that you got the new life, Satan steady bothering you.  
'Now that you have a new life, Satan is consistently bothering you.'

May follow habitual *be*

Them students be steady trying to make a buck.

## *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

Negative concord in AAVE:

He don' do nothin'.

'He does nothing'

Negative concord in Russian:

On ne delaet ničego.

he not does nothing

'He does nothing.'

\*On delaet ničego.

*African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*  
**RESOLUTION OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION**  
**Oakland, CA (1996)**

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To view the 1996 Oakland, CA Board of Education resolution on Ebonics, go to: <http://linguistlist.org/topics/ebonics/ebonics-res1.html>



## *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

"EBONICS: THE SELF-ESTEEM MOVEMENT GOES OFF THE DEEP END" Jeff Jacoby, Boston Globe, 1997

Oakland's Board of Education drew nationwide scorn with its recent vote to teach black schoolchildren in ghetto-ese [...]

This is the self-esteem movement gone insane. For generations, countless millions of poor English speakers viewed mastery of the language as a critical key to success and self-respect. Now come the Ebonics extremists, and proclaim the opposite: Make young black Americans learn proper English and their cultural pride will be shattered.

If we degrade their language," says one Los Angeles Ebonics instructor, we're degrading their whole home environment, their whole race. That creates a filter; they just tune us out." Translation: Black children are too dumb to learn good English. If you're looking for racism, look no further."

Jacoby, Jeff. "The Self-Esteem Movement Goes Off The Deep End," *6cghcb*; 1cVY, January 23, 1997.

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## *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

"Black ghetto dialect is no more immutable than the bungled English of those Jewish greenhorns from Eastern Europe. I know of one immigrant from Czechoslovakia who couldn't speak a word of English when he got off the boat in 1948. Twenty months later, recuperating in Colorado from an illness, he wrote a letter to his relatives in Cleveland:

"Where were you that time what you wrote me? Do you get together after with each other? Rita changed her mind and wrote me a letter, but I do not think that I will answer it. How is she with you, did you talk to her and when, not because it interest me just I want to know what did she told you about me."

That young immigrant struggling to write in English was my father. "

Jacoby, Jeff. "The Self-Esteem Movement Goes Off The Deep End," *6cghcb*; 1997, January 23, 1997.

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# *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

Actor Bill Cosby



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## *African American Vernacular English (AAVE)*

May 2004 speech by Bill Cosby to an NAACP ceremony celebrating the 50th anniversary of *Brown vs. Board of Education*

*"Brown Versus the Board of Education is no longer the white person's problem. We've got to take the neighborhood back. We've got to go in there. Just forget telling your child to go to the Peace Corps. It's right around the corner. It's standing on the corner. It can't speak English. It doesn't want to speak English. I can't even talk the way these people talk. "Why you ain't where you is go, ra," I don't know who these people are. And I blamed the kid until I heard the mother talk. Then I heard the father talk. This is all in the house. You used to talk a certain way on the corner and you got into the house and switched to English. Everybody knows it's important to speak English except these knuckleheads. You can't land a plane with "why you ain't..." You can't be a doctor with that kind of crap coming out of your mouth. There is no Bible that has that kind of language."*

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To view the Linguistic Society of America's Resolution on the Oakland "Ebonics" issue, go to:  
<http://www.linguisticsociety.org/about/what-we-do/resolutions-statements-guides/lisa-res-ebonics>

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