

## AN ANALYSIS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH GRAMMATICAL FEATURES IN *SHARK TALE* FILM

Ronnaoranska Rombe Pamangin<sup>1,\*</sup>, M. Bahri Arifin<sup>2</sup>, Ririn Setyowati<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup>English Literature Department, Faculty of Cultural Sciences,

Mulawarman University

Email: [ronnapamangin@gmail.com](mailto:ronnapamangin@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

Every language varies and has its own characteristics. The varieties can be seen in terms of age, gender, region, social class, ethnicity, etc. One of the characteristics of a language is its grammatical features. An example of language variety that is affected by ethnic group is African American Vernacular English (AAVE). This research aimed to analyze the grammatical features of AAVE through Oscar's utterances in *Shark Tale* film and the variables that influence his AAVE utterances by using Wolfram and Rickford & Rickford's Theory. Out of four AAVE grammatical features, the researcher found that Oscar produced three of them which are verb phrase, negation, and nominal. Question formation feature is not found in Oscar's utterances. AAVE grammatical features that appeared in Oscar's utterances are copula/auxiliary absence, habitual *be*, double modals, subject-verb-agreement, *ain't*, multiple negation, plural noun suffix-*s* deletion, and *y'all*. Those grammatical features are influenced by his lower working-class status, his male gender, his young age, and his mood which the AAVE utterances produced whether he was comfortable or uncomfortable with the audiences or with the topic.

**Key words:** Language variety, AAVE, *Shark Tale* film

### ABSTRAK

Setiap bahasa beragam dan memiliki karakteristiknya sendiri. Keberagaman tersebut dapat dilihat dari hal usia, jenis kelamin, tempat, kelas sosial, etnik, dan lain-lain. Salah satu karakter pada sebuah bahasa adalah fitur-fitur gramatika. Contoh ragam bahasa yang dipengaruhi oleh grup etnik adalah Bahasa Inggris Vernakular Afrika Amerika (AAVE). Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisa fitur-fitur gramatika AAVE melalui tuturan Oscar di film *Shark Tale* dan variabel-variabel yang mempengaruhi tuturannya dengan menggunakan teori Wolfram dan Rickford & Rickford. Dari keempat fitur AAVE, peneliti menemukan bahwa Oscar menuturkan tiga diantaranya, yaitu frase kata kerja, negasi, dan nominal. Fitur formasi pertanyaan tidak ditemukan dalam tuturan Oscar. Fitur-fitur gramatika AAVE yang muncul dalam tuturan Oscar adalah ketiadaan kata kerja penghubung, penggunaan *be*, dobel modal, kesesuaian subjek dan kata kerja, *ain't*, multi negasi, penghapusan imbuhan -*s* pada kata benda jamak, dan *y'all*. Semua fitur-fitur gramatika yang dituturkan oleh Oscar tersebut dipengaruhi oleh status kelas sosialnya yang rendah, jenis kelaminnya, usianya yang muda, dan suasana hatinya saat dia nyaman atau tidak nyaman dengan mitra tutur atau dengan topik bahasan.

**Kata kunci:** Ragam bahasa, AAVE, Film *Shark Tale*

## **A. INTRODUCTION**

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is a language variety spoken by African-Americans in the USA which shares a set of grammatical and other linguistic features (Fough, 2006, p.46). Grammatical features are one of AAVE characteristic. The distinctiveness of AAVE grammatical features is shown in the verb phrase such as subject-verb-agreement (SVA) of AAVE in a sentence, for example “*It kill me !*” There are so many representation of this variety in literary works. A character that depicts the African-American in Disney animated film is Oscar from *Shark Tale* film.

In the film, Oscar was at the bottom of the social class. Sykes, Oscar’s boss, stated a very clear statement about the reef hierarchy which, in summary, stated that Oscar was at the very bottom of social class. The film shows that Oscar was convicted of not being able to pay his debt to Sykes, then Sykes told his henchmen to tie Oscar and put him in the deepest hole in the ocean. There were two sharks, Lenny and Frankie. Frankie told Lenny to prey on fish, and Oscar was the target at that time. Lenny pretended to eat Oscar, but unfortunately, his brother found out the lie, then he swam fastly toward Oscar and aimed to eat him, unlucky, he was struck down by an anchor and died on the spot that making Lenny scared and run away. The henchmen came to Oscar and assumed that he had killed the shark, surprisingly, he lied and said that he killed the shark by saying to the men “*Exactly how it look.*” This AAVE utterance changed his life dramatically the lie was widespread.

Related to discussion above, the researcher is interested to analyze Oscar’s AAVE grammatical features. There are some reasons why the researcher chose to analyze AAVE grammatical features in Oscar’s utterances. First, the researcher wants to examine the understanding of language variety especially AAVE grammatical features. Second, AAVE is one of the most popular varieties to be studied. Much research has been conducted to study AAVE, whether it is in African American people or literary work. The fact that many non-human characters in literary work represent African American people through their AAVE utterances so that it makes those characters interesting, such as Oscar who has a stereotyped as African-American people and has characteristics in his utterances. Representation means having characters with layers and showing them as human beings, so people can relate to or have mixed emotions toward that character. Character is the representation of human beings, so that way the character is depicted as the portrayal of real life, such as Oscar in *Shark Tale* film. Third, the distinctiveness of AAVE makes the researcher eager to study it. Therefore, an AAVE research on one of *Shark Tale*’s characters, Oscar, is interesting for the researcher.

Based on the background above, this research aims to identify the AAVE grammatical features spoken by Oscar in *Shark Tale* film as well as to validate the variables that influence his AAVE grammatical features.

## **B. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1. Language Variety**

Language variety is sociolinguistic phenomenon which occurs in society. It is caused by the existence of social interaction activities carried out by the communities or groups that are very diverse and due to the non-homogeneous speakers. Figueroa (1994) adds that every language has its own characteristics. The characteristics are different in every speech

community. In sociolinguistics, the difference is seen as a social effect that occurs in a particular society like gender, region, social class, and others.

## 2. Vernacular

Labov (1972) defines that the term of vernacular refers to a local speech variety spoken by a native or general population of a specific place in everyday life. In short, it is the common day-to-day language of a local speech community. Moreover, Holmes (1992) adds that vernacular is a language which has not been standardized.

## 3. African American Vernacular English

African American Vernacular English is a variety language spoken by many African-Americans that is most commonly used in the USA (Wolfram, 2004). In addition, Fought states that AAVE is a language variety spoken by African-Americans in the USA which shares a set of grammatical and other linguistic features. Rickford (1992) also states that AAVE contains non-standard grammatical features.

### a. Grammatical Features of African American Vernacular English

Wolfram (2004) defines that there are some grammatical features in AAVE which are Verb Phrase, Negation, Nominal, and Question Formation. And each of them are divided into several features.

#### 1. Verb Phrase

##### a) The absence of copula/auxiliary

AAVE speakers tend to delete the copula/auxiliary in their utterances, as in “*She Ø in the same grade*”.

##### b) Habitual *be*

There are two kinds of habitual *be*. First, *be* after leaving out *will* and *would* (e.g. “*She be [ = ‘ll be ] there in a minute.*”). Second, invariant habitual *be* (e.g. “*Sometimes they be playing games*”).

##### c) Completive *done*

He states that *done* is almost equivalent to *has*, *have*, and *already*, as in “*They done used all the good ones*” which in Standard English is “*They have already used all the good ones.*”

##### d) Sequential *be done*

Sequential *be done* has the same meaning as Standard English’s future perfect. In AAVE, as in “*My ice cream be done melted by the time we get there*”.

##### e) Remote *been*

There are unstressed *been* (*been*) and stressed *been* (*BEEN*). *Been* is almost similar to *has/have been*, as in “*They been showing her the witch*” while Standard English speakers say “*They have showed her the witch*”. *BEEN* followed by a past tense verb is functioned as a marker for the distant past activity.

f) Simple past *had* + verb

The use of *had* followed with either present or past tense verb is said to be the equivalent to simple past tense, as in “*They had went outside and they had messed up the yard*”.

g) Specialized auxiliaries

- (1) The use of *come* is to indicate a state of indignation.
- (2) The use of *steady* is to mark a continuative intensifying activity.
- (3) The use of *finna* is to indicate an immediate future or planned event.

h) Double modals

There are two modals at once, such as *may can*, *might can*, and *might could*, as in “*I might could do it*” which means “*I might be able to do it*”.

i) Irregular verb

- (1) Past as participle as in “*I had went down there*”
- (2) Participle as past as in “*They seen it*”
- (3) Bare root as past as in “*They walk there yesterday*”

j) Subject-verb-agreement

There are two kinds of SVA, which are the absence of suffix *-s* in third-person-singular present tense verb and the use of present tense *be* (*are* and *am*) to *is* and past tense *be* to *was*.

k) Other verb phrase structure

- (1) *beat* for *won* (e.g. “*We beat the match*”)
- (2) *blessed out* for *scold* or *swear at* (e.g. “*She blessed him out*”)
- (3) *say* to introduce a quotation (e.g. “*She told him, say, where you been?*”)
- (4) *go* as static locative (e.g. “*Here go the house*”)

2. Negation

a) *Ain't*

*Ain't* is the most common negative form in AAVE which is a general preverbal negation.

b) Multiple Negation

The second negation is used to emphasize the first negation, as in “*He don't do nothing*” which in Standard English is “*He doesn't do anything.*”

c) Negative Inversion

This feature exists when a declarative sentence begins with a negated auxiliary or modal, such as *can't*, *don't*, or *won't*, followed by a subject like *nobody*, *everybody* and *all of you*.

d) *Ain't but* and *didn't but*

An example of *ain't but* can be seen in “*He ain't but fourteen years old*” which means that the person is only fourteen year old boy, and *didn't but* in “*He didn't take but three dollars*” which means the person took no more than three dollars.

### 3. Nominal

#### a) The absence of suffix–'s in possessive

An example of this feature is “*The dogØ tail was wagging*”.

#### b) The absence of suffix–s in plural noun

An example of the characteristic lies in “*It’s four mileØ from here*”

#### c) Associative plural *an ‘em*

An example of the use of *an ‘em* in a sentence is “*Jerome an ‘em*”.

#### d) *Y’all* and possessive *they*

The examples are “*Y’all go now,*” “*It’s y’all ball,*” and “*It’s they book.*”

### 4. Question Formation

#### a) Non-inverted wh question

An example of a non-inverted wh question is in the sentence “*Where that is ?*”.

#### b) Inverted embedded question

It is inverted without *whether* or *if*, as in “*I asked her could I go with her*” which is recognized in the standard pattern as “*I asked her if I could go with her*”.

### b. Variables Influencing the AAVE Grammatical Features

Rickford and Rickford (2000) define the variables that influence AAVE grammatical features, namely: Social Class, Gender, Age, and Linguistic Environment.

#### 1. Social Class

Rickford & Rickford explain that the stratification of social class that is shown by its speaker can be seen through their AAVE utterances. The use of multiple negation and the absence of suffix–s in the third person singular present tense verb show much more frequency of used by the lower working class AAVE speakers.

#### 2. Gender

Males delete copulas more often than females. This grammatical feature does not have a sharp stratification, but the difference of frequency shows that males tend to delete auxiliaries more than females when they show their maleness or toughness.

#### 3. Age

Some AAVE grammatical features that are influenced by age are copula/auxiliary absence, habitual *be*, simple past had + verb, the absence of suffix–s in the third person singular present tense verb, and the absence of suffix–'s in possessive.

#### 4. Linguistic Environment

AAVE speakers are pretty comfortable sharing information to other speakers they like and to talk about any topics they like. The variable of linguistic environment could be seen in any grammatical features each speaker used based on the similarity of either the audience or the topic covered.

## **C. RESEARCH METHOD**

### **1. Research Design**

Qualitative research is a research method that is relevant to social research and uses words to describe and analyze the data. It goes along with this research that identified the AAVE grammatical features spoken by Oscar. On the other note, this research is descriptive in a way that the researcher identified the AAVE spoken by Oscar through its grammatical features as well as validated the variables that influence Oscar's AAVE grammatical utterances in the film.

### **2. Data and Data Source**

The data source of this research is the script of *Shark Tale* film. Through the data source, the researcher took the data which are Oscar's AAVE grammatical features.

### **3. Research Instrument**

The instrument of this research is the researcher herself. The researcher focused on collecting the data and analyzing Oscar's AAVE utterances in *Shark Tale* film as the data of the research.

### **4. Data Collection Technique**

In this research, the researcher collected the data in several steps. First, the researcher read the script of *Shark Tale* film. Second, the researcher underlined the possible data that related to the research question. Last, the researcher collected the data which contain the AAVE grammatical features spoken by Oscar.

### **5. Data Analysis**

After all of Oscar's utterances have been collected, the researcher did data reduction. Data reduction is a codification process where the researcher sort out data which suitable to the researcher's data criteria. The next step that the researcher did is displaying the data that have been reduced.. In this step, the researcher organized the data that have been reduced to make it easier for the researcher to do the analysis. After that, the researcher did the analysis. The final step that the researcher did is making a conclusion.

## **D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In this point, the researcher presents the findings of the study based on the research questions using the theory of Wolfram and Rickford & Rickford.

### **1. RESULTS**

#### **a. AAVE Grammatical Features Spoken by Oscar in *Shark Tale* Film**

##### **a) Verb Phrase**

- 1) The absence of copula/auxiliary

#### **Data 1**

*I got my 60" high-def, flat screen TV.*

The possession verb use either *have* or *have got*. It omitted an copula/auxiliary *have*. However, the omission of copula or auxiliary in his utterance is one of AAVE grammatical features. Therefore, these clarify that his utterance showed the absence of copula/auxiliary *have*.

2) Habitual *be*

**Data 24**

*I be trippin'!*

It shows the use of invariant habitual *be* which shows the replacement of auxiliary *am* in its structure.

3) Double Modals

**Data 7**

*I might could have this job...*

*Might could* is often spoken by the AAVE speakers which means *might be able to* in Standard English.

4) Subject-verb-agreement

**Data 5**

*Angie need to get her freak on.*

This data has AAVE grammatical feature of SVA because it deletes the suffix-*s* in third person singular present tense verb *need*.

**b. Negation**

1) *Ain't*

**Data 46**

*I ain't gonna laugh.*

It shows that one feature of AAVE grammatical feature, *ain't*, is exist to replace the copula/auxiliary *am not*.

2) Multiple negation

**Data 55**

*And you gonna say "Stop ! Don't y'all ! Don't go no further!"*

This data has multiple negation which are *don't* and *no*.

**c. Nominal**

1) The absence of suffix-*s* in plural noun

**Data 19**

*And bring back some little wiener thing.*

The utterance shows that there is a deletion of the suffix-*s* of the plural noun in "*And bring back some little wiener thing*∅".

2) *Y'all*

**Data 4**

*Y'all stay outta trouble, all right ?*

This shows the AAVE grammatical feature of *y'all* as second person plural.

## **b. Variables Influencing AAVE Grammatical Features Spoken by Oscar in *Shark Tale* Film**

### **1. Social Class**

#### **Data 25**

*Exactly how it look.*

Looking at the dialogue above, the italic utterance spoken by Oscar “*Exactly how it look*” shows that there is an omission of suffix–s in third person singular present tense verb *look*. As in the context of the utterances, it shows that Oscar is a lower working class person by looking at his job as a tongue-scrubber in Sykes’ Whale Wash. Thus, the absence of suffix–s of AAVE grammatical feature is influenced by the lower working class of Oscar.

### **2. Gender**

#### **Data 18**

*You mind bring us back some drinks ?*

The utterance “*You mind bring us back some drinks ?*” has the AAVE grammatical feature of copula/auxiliary absence. Oscar’s utterance which meant to flirt Lola is indicated that his maleness influences his AAVE grammatical feature of copula/auxiliary absence.

### **3. Age**

#### **Data 23**

*You want me to go now ?*

The data above shows that Oscar omits the copula/auxiliary *Do* in his utterance. Since the utterance has the vernacular, it can be considered that the utterance “*You want me to go now ?*” is influenced by Oscar’s young age.

### **4. Linguistic Environment**

#### **Data 43**

*That’s what people be sayin’*

The AAVE grammatical feature of the habitual *be* is seen through this utterance. As stated by Rickford and Rickford, grammatical features of AAVE is influenced by linguistic environment when the utterance was taken place such as the audience or the topic that is discussed. Overall point by Rickford and Rickford’s explanation is that linguistic environment gives a mark to the speakers’ utterances as if they are comfortable with the audience or the topic discussed. Therefore, the italic utterance spoken by Oscar shows that he loved the topic about how great he was as a sharkslayer and how people respected him as a sharkslayer.

Other utterance spoken by him that is affected by his linguistic environment as well is in the data below :

#### **Data 58**

*Nobody love me as nobody !*

This data shows that Oscar delete the suffix–s in the third person singular present tense verb *love*. As stated by Rickford and Rickford, the AAVE speakers tend to use their variation due to show that they are comfortable. This utterance shows that Oscar talked to his best firend, Angie, about his lie as a sharkslayer. He did not like the topic because



Angie kept asking him to tell the truth. The context shows that Oscar wanted to be loved and respected by everyone as somebody because he knew that they always recognize him as nobody.

Based on all findings of the AAVE utterances spoken by Oscar that are influenced by linguistic environment, he used AAVE grammatical features when either he was comfortable or uncomfortable with the audience or the topic. The findings of this variable show that Oscar's AAVE grammatical utterances produced when he was comfortable while talking about how great he was as a sharkslayer and also when he was uncomfortable while talking about his lies as a sharkslayer. From the result that can be seen in the appendix, it shows that Oscar uses AAVE more when he was comfortable rather than when he was uncomfortable. These findings fit Rickford and Rickford's research that explain about AAVE speakers tend to use AAVE more when they are comfortable. In short, Oscar's linguistic environment truly influences his AAVE grammatical feature.

## **2. DISCUSSION**

There are 71 AAVE utterances that he uses in the film based on the grammatical features of AAVE. Out of four grammatical features, Oscar's AAVE utterances have three features which are verb phrase, negation, and nominal. There is not any utterance spoken by Oscar that shows question formation feature. Oscar produced 23 AAVE utterances in question sentences. However, those utterances do not indicate any AAVE grammatical features in question formation.

Among the AAVE utterances, the feature that most frequently used in Oscar's utterances is verb phrase. There are copula/auxiliary absence, habitual *be*, double modals and subject-verb-agreement. The findings of Oscar's verb phrase of AAVE feature shows that he deletes his copula/auxiliary a lot. Copula/auxiliary absence becomes the most frequent feature that Oscar has in his AAVE utterances. Another grammatical features under verb phrase feature that also appear in his AAVE utterances is habitual *be*. He uses the *be* in some grammatical constructions to replace the auxiliary *am* and *are*. This feature becomes the second frequent of AAVE verb phrase features that Oscar uses in his AAVE utterances. The other grammatical features that appear in Oscar's AAVE utterances are the deletion of suffix-*s* in the third person singular present tense verb and double modals of *might* and *could*. Besides the verb phrase of AAVE grammatical features, negation feature also appears through Oscar's utterances in two grammatical features which are *ain't* and multiple negation. The last grammatical feature that present in his AAVE utterances is nominal feature which are the deletion of suffix-*s* in plural noun and the use of second person plural *y'all*.

AAVE grammatical features are influenced by some variables from the speakers which are social class, gender, age, and linguistic environment. The most frequently occurring variables which influence grammatical features of Oscar's AAVE utterances are age and gender. It is because the feature that is used most frequently is copula/auxiliary absence. Rickford and Rickford state that this feature is influenced by speaker's gender and age. Thus, it clarifies that this feature is said to be influenced by Oscar's young age and his male gender. The other variable that influenced Oscar's AAVE utterances is social class. The grammatical features that are influenced by it are multiple negation and the absence of suffix-*s* in the present tense verb. Rickford and Rickford state that those AAVE grammatical features appear because of AAVE speakers' social status which is working

class. It goes along with Oscar's social class in the film which is shown as a tongue-scrubber at Whale Wash in the beginning of the film where he was scrubbing a whale's tongue. Thus, this finding fits the theory which shows that Oscar depicted as a lower working class in the film. The last variable that influences Oscar's AAVE utterances is linguistic environment when the speech is taken place. This variable can be found in any features based on speaker's style. Built upon the findings, it shows that Oscar used AAVE more when he is comfortable talking to the audience he familiar with and topic he likes which is showed in his utterances when he produced the features. Thus, this fits the theory which says that the variable of linguistic environment influences AAVE grammatical features based on the similarity either the participants or the topics covered.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

Through the film, it shows the existence of the features spoken by non-human character, Oscar, in *Shark Tale* film. According to the findings and discussion in Chapter IV, the researcher concluded that Oscar used AAVE variety in his utterances with three grammatical features which are verb phrase, negation, and nominal. In verb phrase feature, copula/auxiliary absence becomes the most frequently used, followed by habitual *be*, subject-verb-agreement, and double modals. Meanwhile in negation feature, *ain't* is the grammatical features that is used the most by Oscar followed by multiple negation. The last feature, nominal, has two grammatical features that appear in Oscar's AAVE utterances which are the use of second person plural *y'all* that most frequently used followed by the deletion of suffix *-s* in plural noun. In addition, there are some mixed grammatical features that appears through Oscar's speech which are six utterances have verb phrase and nominal and one utterance has these three features.

The grammatical features of AAVE in Oscar's utterances indicate that he represents the African American people in the *Shark Tale* film. Those features are influenced by the social status that occurs through Oscar's speech. It has been concluded that the variation of his AAVE utterances happened because of social class, gender, age and linguistic environment. The AAVE grammatical features are influenced by his lower working class, his male gender, his young age, and his mood when the utterances are being spoken. In the film, it shows that all female characters did not produce AAVE through their utterances because they are depicted as white people. Therefore, Oscar is the only one character that depicts African American man in the film. The effect of age and gender become the most frequent that influence his AAVE grammatical features followed by linguistic environment, and social class. The factor of the linguistic environment is divided into two which are whether the conversation makes Oscar comfortable or uncomfortable. In the film, Oscar uses AAVE in both situations, for example when he was comfortable talking about how great he is as a sharkslayer, and when he was uncomfortable talking about his lies as a sharkslayer. The finding shows that he used AAVE more when he was comfortable which this is in accordance with the theory. The variables underlying grammatical features of Oscar's AAVE utterances show that the variety of language is the result of the relationship between language and social factors that occurs in society.

## **REFERENCES**

Figuroa, E. (1994). *Sociolinguistic Metatheory*. UK: Elsevier Science Ltd.

- Fought, Carmen. (2006). *Language and Ethnicity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Labov, W. (1972). *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Rickford, John R. (1992). "Grammatical Variation and Divergence in Vernacular Black English". *Internal and External Factors in Syntactic Change* ed. by Marinel Gerritsen & Deiter Stein. The Hague: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Rickford, J. R and Rickford, R. J. (2000). *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English*. Canada: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Wolfram, W. (2004). The Grammar of Urban African American Vernacular English. In Kortmann & Schneider (Eds.), *Handbook of Varieties of English*. Retrieved from [http://www.ncsu.edu/linguistics/docs/pdfs/walt/PDF\\_Urban\\_AAE.pdf](http://www.ncsu.edu/linguistics/docs/pdfs/walt/PDF_Urban_AAE.pdf).

# *Ilmu Budaya*

**Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Seni, dan Budaya**

e-ISSN 2549-7715 | Volume 7 | Nomor 2 | April 2023 | Hal: 637-648

Terakreditasi Sinta 4

---