

Phonological and Morphological Features of Afro-American Vernacular English (AAVE) of Malcolm X Movie

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Abstract

Afro-American Vernacular English (AAVE) is one of dialects of American English and it has been extensively explored in previous research in sociolinguistic. The aims of this study are to analyze the phonological feature of AAVE based on theory by Thomas (2007) and morphological feature of AAVE based on theory by Green (2002). The movie adaption of Spike Lee entitled Malcolm X was utilized, and to obtain the data the researcher used a descriptive-qualitative approach. The result shows that the researcher found eight aspects of phonological features that include consonant aspects and eight features of morphological feature of AAVE in the movie, they are; the use of demonstrative *them*, copula absence, subject-verb agreement, completive *done*, negative forms of *ain't*, negative construction, the phrase of *y'all*, and the phrase of *'em*, which include of three aspects of morphological features of Afro-American Vernacular English (AAVE). The most commonly used features are the deletion of *-r* or *r*-lessness such as *brother* and *minister* and the use of negator which is *ain't* such as in "I *ain't* no questions" for "I *have* no questions". However, the researchers did not find the vowel aspect of AAVE in Malcolm X movie as described in Thomas's theory.

Keywords: English Dialect, AAVE, Morphology Features, Malcolm X Movie

Abstrak

Bahasa Inggris Vernakular Afro-Amerika (AAVE) merupakan salah satu dialek bahasa Inggris Amerika dan telah dieksplorasi secara ekstensif dalam penelitian sebelumnya dalam bidang sosiolinguistik. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis fitur fonologis AAVE berdasarkan teori Thomas (2007) dan fitur morfologis AAVE berdasarkan teori Green (2002). Peneliti menggunakan film adaptasi karya Spike Lee yang berjudul Malcolm X, dan untuk memperoleh data, peneliti menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif-kualitatif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa peneliti menemukan delapan jenis fitur fonologi yang termasuk dalam aspek consonant dan delapan jenis fitur morfologi AAVE dalam film tersebut, yaitu; penggunaan demonstrative *them*, ketiadaan copula, subject-verb agreement, kelengkapan *done*, bentuk negatif *ain't*, konstruksi negatif, frasa *y'all*, dan frasa *'em*, yang termasuk dalam tiga aspek fitur morfologi Bahasa Inggris Vernakular Afro-Amerika (AAVE). Fitur yang paling sering digunakan adalah penghapusan *-r* atau *r*-lessness seperti *brother* dan *minister* dan penggunaan kata negatif yaitu *ain't* seperti pada "I *ain't* no questions" untuk "I *have* no questions". Namun, peneliti tidak menemukan aspek vokal AAVE dalam film Malcolm X seperti yang dijelaskan dalam teori Thomas.

Kata kunci: Dialek Bahasa Inggris, AAVE, Fitur-Feat Morfologi, Film Malcolm X

INTRODUCTION

Background of The Study

Language plays a significant role in a diverse range of human circumstances. It is utilized by individuals as a means to convey or engage with each other. English is the most commonly used language, it is widely distributed and taught in educational institutions worldwide. Afro-American Vernacular English (AAVE) is one of the

variations of English that is predominantly spoken by Afro-Americans in the United States. Malcolm X (1992) is one of the movies that showcases numerous Afro-American performers, thus the researcher feel interested to analyzed that movie to discover the phonology and morphology characteristics of African American Vernacular English in the movie. Ananda & Hamzah (2019) defines that there are

numerous captivating fields of linguistics to explore, such as semantics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and countless others. But in this movie, the researcher has solely analyzed the phonological and morphological elements of AAVE. The researcher has utilized the dialogues of Afro-American actors in the movie to gather the data for this research. In this study, researchers only focused on finding phonological and morphological features in the movie *Malcolm X*. Besides the researcher selecting the movie *Malcolm X* for analysis due to its impressive score of 7.7 on IMDb, the movie *Malcolm X* also garnered numerous accolades in the global cinema realm, including the Golden Globes, USA (1993), National Society of Film Critics' Awards, USA (1993), Political Film Society, USA (1993), and many others. But the main reason why the researcher chose this movie for this research is because it involves many Afro-American actors in the movie.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relevant Previous Studies

The researchers took some previous studies that related to this research. The first research is from Pongkaew (2017) who used a Qualitative descriptive method to examined the syntactic characteristics of Afro-American Vernacular English in the movie *Fences*. The study concentrated on identifying syntactic aspects employed by the protagonist in the movie, *Troy Maxson* and also to compared the dissimilarity of syntactic characteristic of AAVE from Standard English. The study found six syntactic features in *Fences* movie, which are negative forms, copula absence, completive done, subject-verb agreement, habitual be, and question formation. The second study is taken from Arifin (2017). This research used Qualitative descriptive method and used Wolfram and Howe's theories to find grammatical aspects of AAVE in *Straight*

Outta Compton movie and also to compared the findings to the Standard English. The research found some grammatical aspects of AAVE in the movie, such as the negator of *ain't*, the use of remote *been*, the use of auxiliary, and some copula absence in interrogative sentences such as "*what you want?*" for "*what do you want?*". The third research is from Anggreeni et al., (2018). They are used Qualitative descriptive method to analyzed grammatical aspects of AAVE and the factors underlying them in the movie *Shrek*. The object of the research the main character in the movie which was *Donkey*. The result of this study showed that Donkey's AAVE utterances have three AAVE's grammatical features which are nominal, negation and verb phrase and all four factors which consist of social class, age, gender and linguistic environment underlying those grammatical characteristics.

Phonological Features of AAVE

Afro-American Vernacular English (AAVE), also known as Black English or Ebonics, is one of English dialect spoken primarily by Afro-Americans in the United States. AAVE possesses distinct phonology characteristics that set it apart from other varieties of English. These characteristics contribute to the unique rhythm and intonation that characterize AAVE speech. Phonological feature is a feature that studies about sound pattern. Poole (1999) argues that phonology focuses on the study of sounds in the context of languages and other varieties. There are several experts in the field of AAVE who put forward and classify the phonological theory of AAVE, including Rickford (1999), Green (2002), Thomas (2007) and Alim & Smitherman (2012). However, in this study, the researcher used Thomas's theory to analyzed the phonology of features in the film *Malcolm X*. One prominent characteristic of AAVE is the presence of

vowel sounds that differ from those found in Standard American English (SAE). For example, the vowel sound in words like "cat" and "trap" in SAE is often pronounced as a centralized vowel in AAVE, resulting in a pronunciation closer to "kyat" and "tryap." This phenomenon, known as the "centralization of vowels," is one of the trademarks of AAVE phonology. The phonology characteristics of AAVE reflect its diverse linguistic heritage and the influence of African languages on its development. These distinct features contribute to the lively and dynamic nature of AAVE speech, highlighting the linguistic diversity within the African American community.

Morphological Features of AAVE

Afro-American Vernacular English (AAVE) exhibits distinct morphological features that set it apart from other varieties of English. These features contribute to the richness and complexity of AAVE's linguistic structure. One notable characteristic of AAVE morphology is the use of the copula absence, also known as "zero copula." In AAVE, the verb "to be" is often omitted in certain contexts, such as in sentences like "She nice" instead of "She is nice." This feature represents a systematic grammatical pattern in AAVE and is an integral part of its morphosyntactic system. Another significant morphological feature of AAVE is the use of the habitual "be" construction. In AAVE, the auxiliary verb "be" is employed to indicate ongoing or habitual actions. For example, "They be working hard" conveys the idea that the individuals regularly engage in hard work. This construction adds nuance and temporal specificity to AAVE discourse, showcasing the intricacies of its morphological system. Furthermore, AAVE demonstrates rich and creative word formation processes. Speakers of AAVE often employ innovative morphological strategies, such as

reduplication and compounding, to create new words and convey specific meanings. The morphological features of AAVE reflect the complex interplay between historical, cultural, and linguistic influences. They contribute to the unique structure and expressive power of AAVE, showcasing its status as a vibrant and distinct dialect within the Afro-American community. There are multiple experts in the domain of Afro-American Vernacular English (AAVE) who propose and examine the morphological aspects of AAVE, they are Rickford (1999), Green (2002), Wolfram & Thomas (2006), and Smitherman (2012). Nevertheless, in this research, the researcher employed Green's theory to analyzed the characteristics of morphology of AAVE in the movie Malcolm X.

METHODOLOGY

This research was carried out using a qualitative descriptive research design. The design of this research method is the data analyzed in form of description, not numeral or deficient of cause-and-effect relationship and is presented in the form of words and phrases. This study is treated Malcolm X movie and its script of detailed examination of the elements by reason of the research analyzed and described phonological and morphological features of AAVE. This research has used Malcolm X movie that has been downloaded from <https://88.210.12.206/movie/malcolm-x-1992/> as its primary source and Malcolm X movie script that has been downloaded at <https://imsdb.com/scripts/Malcolm-X.html> as its secondary source. Therefore, in this thesis, the researcher would analyze selected songs lyrics from 12 songs on album 30.

Technique of Data Collections

The researcher used the theory of Miles et al., (2014) to analyzed the data which consist of *data condensation*, *data display*, and *conclusion*

drawing or verification.

1. Data condensation. The researcher focused on classifying all of the phonological and morphological features of AAVE used in the Malcolm X movie so that the researcher got the data that suited this research.
2. Data display. The researcher displaying the data that have been collected and present the data in a table. The phonological and morphological characteristics of AAVE will sort based on the literature review.
3. Conclusion drawing or verification. The researcher identified and described the data in narrative explanation for each classification of the phonological and morphological aspects of AAVE.

Technique of Data Analysis

The procedures of collecting data that the researcher used in this research are the following:

1. The researcher watched the Malcolm X movie many times and try to catch all phonological and morphological features of AAVE used in the movie.
2. The researcher crosschecked the sentences said by the actors/actress that contains phonological and morphological features of AAVE by comparing them with the movie script.
3. The researcher writes down and transcribed the movie script which said by the actors/actress that contains phonological and morphological characteristics of AAVE.
4. The researcher highlighted and classified all the categories of the selected phonological and morphological features of AAVE found in the movie script and the movie.

5. In the end, the researcher arranged and described the data regularly based on the selecting features.

FINDING(S) AND DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

Types of Phonological Features of AAVE in Malcolm X Movie

The researcher found consonant aspect of phonological features of Afro-American Vernacular English in the movie Malcolm X with 7 different types as classified by Thomas (2007) which are the loss of final stop /d/ 1 time, the loss of final stop /t/ two times, the realization of [ŋ] as [n] 17 times, the deletion of /l/ 15 times, the deletion /r/ after vowel 91 times, the substitution of /str/ for /skr/ 1 time, the absence of /ju/ 1 time, and substitution of /sk/ for /ks/ 7 times.

Word-final consonant cluster reduction

Thomas & Bailey (2015) define word-final cluster reduction as simply the loss of final stops /t/, /d/, /k/, and /p/. This following dialogue is spoken when the main character of the movie Malcolm X, Malcolm deletes the final stop /d/ and /t/.

The loss of final stop /d/

Malcolm: *Elijah Muhammad can get you out of prison. Out of the prison of your **mind**. I thought you were smart.*

The loss of final stop /t/

Malcolm: *women talk too much. To tell a woman not to talk is like telling Jesse James not to carry a gun or a hen not to cackle. And Samson, the strongest man that ever lived, was destroyed by the woman who **slept** in his arms.*

-Ng Lessness

Realization of [ŋ] as [n] is occur 17 times in the movie. Some Afro-American actors in the movie commonly uses [n] as the

realization of [ŋ]. The following dialogue is an example from the movie Malcolm X.

Laura: *Malcolm, you can be anything you want. You got class and you're smart.*

Malcolm: *all them books you read and you still don't know **nuthin'**.*

L-lessness

The deletion of *-l* is a lot happen in Afro-American environment. However, the deletion of *-l* in AAVE is often occur in certain words like the researcher found in the movie. Here is an example of the deletion of *-l* that found in the movie.

Archie: *my man, Red. Come on in, man. (give up from sits up on his bed). Hey, I can't make it. **Help** me with my arm.*

Malcolm: *take it easy, man.*

R-lessness

In AAVE, r-lessness is most common in unstressed syllables, as the researcher found in the movie.

Betty: ***brother minister**, the sister wonders if you know what he did between taking souls to the promises land?*

Malcolm: *uh, no. what is that, sister?*

Mutation of /str/

Another phonological feature of Afro-American Vernacular English is substitution of /skr/ for /str/. The researcher found one Afro-American actor that pronounced *straight* [skreit] instead [stret].

Yod-dropping

Loss of /j/ after coronal consonant such as *new*, *tune*, and *due* is widespread in Standard American English. Thomas (2007) report that some Afro-American speakers show also loss of /j/ after other consonants, as the researcher found in the movie.

Betty: *Somebody call an **ambulance**. Somebody*

*call an **ambulance**.*

Metathesis of /sk/

The next phonological aspect of Afro-American Vernacular English is the substitution of /ks/ for /sk/. The researcher found 7 times Afro-American speakers in the movie pronounced *ask* as [æks]. This dialogue below is one of examples of the use of this feature.

Malcolm: *good Sisters are rare. We need everyone.*

Tell me something: how tall are you?

Betty: *why do you **ask**?*

Types of Morphological Features of AAVE in Malcolm X Movie

The researcher found nine aspects of morphological features of Afro-American Vernacular English in the movie Malcolm X as classified by Green (2002) which are the use of demonstrative *them* 12 times, copula absence 31 times, subject-verb agreement 6 times, completive done 3 times, the use of negative forms *ain't* 30 times, the use of double negation 26 times, the use of negative construction 1 time, the use of phrase *y'all* 2 times and the use of phrase *'em* 9 times. The following definition is described each characteristic of morphological aspects of AAVE.

Demonstrative *them*

The first type of morphological feature of AAVE is the demonstrative of *them*. A non-standard pronoun that appeared in the movie is the objective form *them* for 3rd person plural for the plural demonstrative pronouns *these* or *those*. The researcher found 12 demonstrative *them* that used in the movie by Afro-American speaker, as the dialogue below.

Laura: *Malcolm, you can be anything you want. You got class and you're smart.*

Malcolm: *all **them** books you read and you still don't know nuthin'.*

Malcolm uses the objective form for attributive demonstratives as in “*all **them** books.....*” for “*all **those** books.....*” In Standard English.

Non-standard pronoun *y'all* and *'em*

Next morphology features of AAVE, the use of phrase *y'all* and *'em*. One is related to the use of second person plural *y'all* which is short for ‘you all’, and two is related to the use of third person plural *'em* which is short for ‘them’ or ‘those’.

The use of phrase *y'all*

Malcolm: *How long has this been going on?*

Sidney: *All day since you and Betty left. Malcolm, I have to level with you. They gave me a mission. But I couldn't do it. I love **y'all**.*

The use of phrase *'em*

Barnes: *you want some cigarettes?*

Malcolm: *Take 'em. I don't smoke no more.*

Copula absence

In Afro-American Vernacular English, the copulative verb *be* is absent in situations where Standard English would use it, particularly when it can be contracted in SE then it can't be deleted in AAVE. The researcher found 31 utterance the absence of copula in the movie and below is one of example of this feature

Archie: *come on, baby. **We going** shopping...*

Malcolm: *when?*

Archie: *now.*

Archie, one of Afro-Americans actor in the movie deleted the verb to be **are** in the sentence he said to Malcolm. This is common in the AAVE environment.

Subject-verb agreement

The next indicator of morphology features of AAVE was the subject-verb agreement. The utterances of the movie Malcolm X

displayed the subject which did not parallel with the verb. There were 6 subject-verb disagreement utterances that were discovered in the movie, such as the dialogue below.

Honey: *I thought you said **we was** going to the movies last night.*

Malcolm: *I'm sorry, I say a lot of things.*

Honey: *And like a fool I believe it.*

This feature is used in the sentence “**we was going to...**”. In this sentence, the auxiliary *was* is used as the copula for the plural subject *we*. The Standard English does not tolerate this function in which the auxiliary *was* works in combination with the past forms of first singular subject and the third subject. For the first plural subject, Standard English uses auxiliary *were* for this function.

Completive *done*

The next morphological features of Afro-American Vernacular English was completive *done*. From the data, 3 utterances of completive *done* were found. Here is one of example of the feature completive *done* that found in the movie.

Malcolm: *I done told the man what he could do with his train.*

Archie: *when?*

Malcolm: *just now.*

Malcolm used one of AAVE feature which is completive *done*. It must be “**I have been told the man.....**” in Standard English.

Negative forms *ain't*

The use of negator *ain't* as the negative auxiliary or negative copula is commonly used in Afro-American society. The use of auxiliary + not which is also called negative auxiliary. This feature is one of the most popular features in AAVE. The following example below showed the used of this feature in the movie.

Malcolm: *You've seen Archie?*

Shorty: ***I ain't*** seen Archie, but the vine tells that he's living somewhere in the Bronx. If you can call it living.

The expression that Shorty said shows the use of nonstandard negative marker *ain't* as "***I have not*** seen Archie,....." in Standard English.

Double negation

The use of double negation

Bembry: *quit taking the white man's poison into your body: his cigarettes, his dope, his liquor, his white woman, his pork. God didn't like those things.*

Malcolm: God ***ain't*** got ***nothing*** to do with this.

It shows a negative marker *ain't* as the copula for the subject and the indefinite pronoun *nothing* which stands for the predicate noun. So, the function of *ain't* in the sentence is refers to *had not* in Standard English. In the Standard English the sentence should be written as "God had nothing to do with this".

Negative construction

The negative construction *don't/nothing + but* is sometimes used in AAVE to indicate "only". As the researcher found in the movie.

Malcolm's voice: *I wish **nothing but** freedom, justice and equality: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all people.*

Malcolm says *nothing + but* in his speech to show that he is using one of the AAVE features, which means "only". In SE it would be "***I only*** wish freedom, justice, and equality."

DISCUSSIONS

Through the analysis, the researcher describes phonological and morphological features of AAVE in the movie Malcolm X, the lesson in another variation of American

English. The researcher uses theory from Thomas (2007) in classifying data of the phonological aspect of AAVE, and theory of Green (2002) in classifying data of the morphological aspect of AAVE. From the data, the researcher found 135 utterances that served as phonological feature and 120 utterances that served as morphological feature of AAVE.

AAVE is a dialect that has emerged from the linguistic and cultural experiences of African-Americans in the United States. According to Beobide (2021), AAVE features can occur for several reasons, they are:

1. African linguistic influences

AAVE has been influenced by the languages spoken by African slaves brought to America. It incorporates some grammatical structures and vocabulary from West African languages.

2. Creole origins

AAVE has roots in the creole languages that developed during the period of slavery. Creole languages arise when people who do not share a common language are forced to communicate and develop a simplified form of communication. AAVE retains some features of these creole languages, such as simplified verb conjugation and the absence of verb inflections.

3. Historical isolation and segregation

Afro-Americans faced social and educational segregation for many years, which led to their speech patterns developing independently from Standard American English. Limited access to quality education and cultural isolation contributed to the distinct linguistic features of AAVE.

4. Cultural identity

AAVE serves as an important marker of African-American cultural identity. Speakers of AAVE often use the dialect to express solidarity, community, and

shared experiences within their cultural group. The features of AAVE may be consciously or unconsciously retained and passed down through generations.

However, the researcher found eight features of phonological feature of AAVE in the movie which include consonant aspect, they are; the loss of final stop /d/, the loss of final stop /t/, realization of [ŋ] as [n], deletion of /l/, deletion of /r/ after vowel, substitution of /str/ for /skr/, the absence of /j/ and the substitution of /sk/ for /ks/. Then the most frequently used phonological feature in this study is *r*-lessness which occurs 91 times. And also, the researcher found that there are eight features of morphological feature of AAVE in the movie, they are; the use of demonstrative *them*, copula absence, subject-verb agreement, completive *done*, negative forms of *ain't*, negative construction, the phrase of *y'all*, and the phrase of *'em*. Then the most frequently used morphological feature in this study is the use of negative forms of *ain't* which occurs 30 times.

CONCLUSION(S)

Based on the data findings, it can be concluded that Afro-American Vernacular English is a variety English which shares some distinctive phonological and morphological features different from Standard English. In order to conduct the research, the movie adaptation of Spike Lee entitled *Malcolm X* was utilized.

1. Phonological features of AAVE used by Afro-Americans in *Malcolm X* movie

The results showed that the occurrence of *r*-lessness as phonological aspect were found as a primary indicator of the characteristics of AAVE in this movie as in "Brother minister". The researcher is also realized that in movie also shows

deletion of -ng or \neg ng-lessness feature frequently, some Afro-American actors used the ng-lessness feature continuously, such as in "you got to eat somethin' Red". However, the researchers did not find any vowel aspect of the phonological features of Afro-American Vernacular English.

2. Morphological features of AAVE used by Afro-Americans in *Malcolm X* movie

The results showed that the occurrence of negative forms, namely the combination of *ain't* and multiple negation as morphological aspect were found as a primary indicator of the characteristics of AAVE in this movie. The movie also shows deletion of copula or auxiliary significantly, especially in interrogative sentence, such as in "*What you want?*" for "*What do you want?*" in Standard English. The researcher also noticed the use of *them* that used has the function of demonstrative determiners "those", such as in "all *them* books you read" for "all *those* books you read" in Standard English. However, these morphological features are useful markers that notify the audiences regarding the language variation of AAVE being practiced.

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