Deconstructing The Wire
A Linguistic Analysis of African American English
on the American Crime/Drama Series

Adarsh Ravichandran
# Table of Contents

Abstract......................................................................................................................................................... 3  
Introduction.................................................................................................................................................. 4 
Theories and concepts................................................................................................................................. 7 
African American English............................................................................................................................. 8 
Social and political context........................................................................................................................... 10 
Previous works........................................................................................................................................... 11 
Design of study........................................................................................................................................... 12 
Data ............................................................................................................................................................... 12 
Method ......................................................................................................................................................... 12 
Discussion and results................................................................................................................................. 13  
   Syntactic features of AAE: ....................................................................................................................... 13  
      Aspectual be .......................................................................................................................................... 13  
      Stressed been and unstressed been ...................................................................................................... 14  
      Copula deletion...................................................................................................................................... 15  
      Steady as an intensifier ......................................................................................................................... 19  
      Irregular pronouns ............................................................................................................................... 20  
Lexicon of AAE and slang on *The Wire* .................................................................................................... 21  
Miscellaneous features............................................................................................................................... 25  
Conclusion................................................................................................................................................... 27
Abstract

*The Wire* is a critically acclaimed TV series which is known for its accurate portrayal of African Americans and the society and institutions they are a part of. By employing real–life personas and foregoing television stereotypes, it aims to accurately represent identities of ethnicity, class, and sexuality and presents a plethora of possibilities for linguistic and sociological analyses. This paper aims to investigate the accuracy of African American English (henceforth called AAE) through a linguistic analysis of scripted dialogue from the first season.

By employing linguistic theory largely from Lisa Green and Maciej Widawski, this paper analyzes scripted dialogue from the series to see how accurately AAE is represented. The paper focuses on the African American characters employing these dialogues to understand how they perform their ethnicity within the world of *The Wire*.

It was found that the existing syntactic and lexical features of AAE are found abundantly in *The Wire* and the characters in the series employ AAE exclusively as a means of representing their identity and asserting their ethnicity. The paper concludes that *The Wire* is indeed an authentic representation of American society when it comes to matters of race, ethnicity, and class, and the language employed in the series is central to this authenticity.

Keywords: African American English, creole, ethnicity, ethnolect, in–group, lexicon, linguistics, slang.
Introduction

*The Wire* is an American crime/drama series created by David Simon which was broadcast on HBO, between 2002 and 2008. Set in Baltimore, Maryland, in the USA, it comprises of 60 episodes spanning across five seasons. Each season focuses on one of several issues plaguing the US – the drug trafficking, the faulty education system, racial segregation, etc., and it links all of these together through law enforcement. This paper mainly focuses on the first season of the series, which is centered primarily around drug trafficking. Drug trafficking is the process of acquisition and distribution of illegal drugs like cocaine and heroin. Apart from being an illegal business, it also breeds drug addiction.

*The Wire* brings to life the struggles of working–class African Americans involved in the drug trafficking in Baltimore, the city with a majority black population, and portrays this in a realistic manner. It achieves realism in terms of being minimal with props, costumes, and cinematography. It does not feature great camera shots or elaborate sets, nor does it feature extensive work on make–up and costumes and makes no attempt to glamorize everyday life. It aims to provide an accurate representation of the society in Baltimore and to make the viewing experience authentic. *The Wire* is a clear looking glass from a common man’s perspective, and ultimately depicts power struggles between different institutions and individuals. The cast is not made of well–known actors and the series uses character actors, many of whom are residents of Baltimore. The series also features several prominent real–life figures from Baltimore which include radio presenters, former police officers, and reporters.

Another striking feature of *The Wire* is that its narrative structure differs from most crime/dramas of the time: the opening title simply displays the names of the cast members without displaying their faces or identifying their roles; the opening shot usually is a close–up of the season’s subject matter (for instance, the drug trade in Season 1) and usually ends with a quote appearing on the screen – a dialogue which would be uttered by a character in the same episode. The series features strictly diegetic music, that is, music emanating from a source within the scene, such as a jukebox, a car radio, or a television. This gives viewers the impression that they are looking at surveillance tapes rather than a scripted television series and it is this authenticity that makes *The Wire* a gold mine for analysis of all kinds.
The creator, David Simon, works with Ed Burns, who served in the Baltimore Police Department for 20 years, and who contributes in bringing credibility to the series. *The Wire* has two major themes as its focus: surveillance and institutional dysfunction. ‘The Wire’ refers to surveillance employed by law enforcement to observe criminal activity, which is central to the show. ‘*The Wire*’ is often used as a metaphor for the viewer’s experience – the police get access to a secret world, much like the viewer through the show. The second theme is institutional dysfunction; many of the institutions portrayed in the series such as the education system, drug trade, law enforcement, all share something in common – they victimize the individuals who often tend to be working class African Americans. The trope which follows throughout the entirety of the series is the power struggles between individuals and the institutions, which are simply held together metaphorically by “the wire”.

The series is exquisite in its portrayal of class and ethnicity, and is lauded as a benchmark of modern television, both by critics as well as scholars. It is ripe with representations of class, ethnicity and sexuality, and sees the characters perform these identities primarily using language. As claimed by Lopez and Bucholtz, “*The Wire* has attracted admiring attention not only from fans and media critics but also from scholars. A number of courses on the series have been offered at elite American universities such as Harvard, Duke, and Berkeley; in addition, it has been the focus of academic conferences, journal special issues and sections, theses, and scholarly books and articles in disciplines ranging from media studies to urban studies to journalism to law to rhetoric and beyond” (Lopez and Bucholtz, 2017, p. 4). Above all, the series stands out in its representation of lower class African Americans in the city of Baltimore, and this is done so by carefully “crafted dialogue, which is rooted in the vernacular of its characters, particularly African American English” (Lopez and Bucholtz, 2017, p. 4) and further supplemented by casting local residents in place of well-established small screen actors. This makes *The Wire* a playground for linguistic analysis.
Aim

The aim of this paper is to investigate the representation of AAE on The Wire, through linguistic analysis of the scripted dialogue. As AAE is an integral part of the USA, this paper will explore its presence on The Wire and aims to answer the following two research questions:

1. How does The Wire represent African Americans through scripted dialogue?

2. How do African Americans perform their ethnicity on The Wire?

The paper looks at AAE in two aspects: one, the scripted dialogue which is analyzed with relevant theory to determine how accurately AAE is represented on the series; and two, through the characters themselves as they utter these dialogues. The latter is analyzed with a sociolinguistic perspective as language does not exist in a vacuum and is largely defined by its users. By studying the scripted dialogues as utterances from the characters, the paper aims to understand how African Americans represent their ethnicity, and at the same time, how the overall scripted dialogue represents the speech of black Americans found across the USA.

The paper chooses to focus only on the scripted dialogue (uttered by African American characters) of the first season as this season lays the foundation for the premise of the show and introduces the characters whose development can be followed throughout the series. The first season, centered around the drug trade, provides ample material for analysis of slang used by African Americans on both sides of the law.
Background

AAE has been a part of the USA for more than three centuries and is spoken widely by African Americans. The following section will explore the backgrounds pertaining to AAE – its origins, its role as a marker of ethnicity, and its place in society in a social and political context – all of which are central to the theme of the paper.

Theories and concepts

Ethnicity is an important aspect of sociolinguistics as language is often the best marker for class, gender, and ethnicity. In the modern world where societies are mostly heterogeneous, language is the key to expressing one’s personal as well as group identity. Ethnicity is a social construct and it usually refers to a group of people who share socio–cultural characteristics, which include “a sense of place, ancestry, a common history, religion, cultural practices, ways of communicating, and often a language” (Mooney and Evans, 2015, p. 133). It is quite often confused with race, however, while race is a sum of physical and biological characteristics, ethnicity is constructed socially and often varies from person to person, and region to region. A person can claim a certain ethnicity based on their race, place of birth, or their parents’ place of origin. A person’s claim to ethnicity is often represented by an ‘ethnolect’. An ethnolect is a sum of linguistic characteristics shared by people of the same ethnicity. It includes a lexicon, grammatical and phonological features. An ethnolect is usually a form of non–standard language and is a marker of a person’s identity as language is most often used in expressing identity, to signal members of the same ethnicity (also called an ‘in–group’) and build a sense of community. Ethnolects also lend a sense of prestige to the members of this community by making them feel inclusive, especially in groups, which do not have power in relation to other ethnic groups. According to Labov’s theory of covert prestige, “some speech communities, usually ones which don’t have a great deal of power in relation to other dominant groups, value different kinds of speaking, often involving non–standard varieties (such as AAE). For those communities these non–standard varieties are ‘covertly’ prestigious or valued within the community but not outside it” (Mooney and Evans, 2015, p. 141). AAE is thus an ethnolect, which enables African Americans to express their identity, and lets the members of the community share this prestige.
African American English

African American English or AAE, sometimes also called African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is a variety of English spoken by middle- and working-class African Americans of the United States. It is a combination of lexical, grammatical, and phonological features. It is, however, not merely a set of features which sets it apart as a non-standard variety. As argued by Lisa Green, it “cannot be completely defined by the syntactic, phonological, semantic and lexical patterns alone and one must consider the speech events which are used in the linguistic system to fully grasp its extent” (Green, 2002, p. 2).

The origins of AAE are widely debated. Some linguists believe that it originated as a ‘creole’ in the period of slavery when the slaves were put in an English-speaking environment. A creole is “a language that develops from a pidgin, simplified by means of communication among speakers who do not speak the same languages. Creoles differ from pidgins in that they have native speakers, and they are characterized by a more extensive vocabulary and grammar” (Green, 2002, p. 9). It is believed that the Africans brought to the USA carried with them creoles from Northwest Africa and upon encountering English, started to speak it by imitating their owners, while retaining the phonological and lexical elements of their native languages. Green argues that “the distinctive patterns of AAE are those which also occur in Niger–Congo languages such as Kikongo, Mande and Kwa” (Green, 2002, p. 8). An alternative theory to the origin of AAE is that it uses patterns which are already found in existing varieties of English, especially those spoken in the American south. Linguists of this view argue that AAE bears closer resemblance to varieties of English which the slaves were exposed to rather than the creoles it is believed to originate from. Poplack argues that “the grammatical core of contemporary AAVE developed from an English base, many of whose features have since disappeared from all but a select few varieties (African American and British origin), whose particular sociohistorical environments have enabled them to retain reflexes of features no longer attested in Standard English” (as cited in Green, 2002, p. 10). The resulting hypothesis is one which blends the two beliefs – that slaves who were brought from Africa acquired English from the varieties which were spoken by their owners and that they blended this with lexical and phonological features which they carried with them from their native languages. The “continuing process of adaptation resulted in a certain
degree of substratum influence from other languages spoken by Africans, including African languages and restructured, especially creolized varieties of English” (Green, 2002, p. 10). This means that AAE was never a creole by itself but was created by the slaves blending the creoles that they carried with the varieties of English they were exposed to, a process which took more than centuries to become the AAE we know today.

The origins of AAE may still be debated but what is interesting is why it originated. AAE developed as a cultural self–defense, a secret code for the slaves to talk amongst themselves in order to exclude their owners. It was a voice against oppression and exploitation, a way to seek out identity and build a sense of community – a community which shares a heritage, socio–cultural characteristics, and a common ancestry, and would go on to create a new ethnicity and a new language, one with its own unique lexicon and grammatical features.

Modern AAE is often slang–heavy and is termed ‘home talk’ and it is because of the reasons above. Slang is an informal and colloquial form of vocabulary. It often comprises of ordinary things from daily life which refers to people, items of a certain disposition, or code words which are designed to obscure the true meaning of words. As Widawski claims:

    It is perceived as deeply expressive, attractively catchy, and deliberately undignified. It consists of standard expressions modified in some way or appended with new meanings, and sometimes of entirely novel expressions. Slang is coined chiefly by members of social, occupational, or ethnic groups which are typically separate from mainstream society, yet it is often adopted by larger social segments. It is employed in place of standard expressions to convey some extra information of a psychological, social, or rhetorical nature. It thus provides alternative, highly informal synonyms for referents already named in the language, but sometimes gives names for referents for which there are no standard expressions, or which have yet to be named (Widawski, 2015, p. 8).

AAE slang was developed as a way of obscuring meaning, a code to include the in–group and exclude the out–group, to talk about topics which were not meant for everyone’s ears. For instance, the slaves would talk ill about their owners or plot ways of escaping, or use it for courtship with members of the opposite sex. Slang has come to be an integral part of modern AAE and is deeply representative of black identity. It is used to express exclusivity as speakers of AAE employ several slang phrases which only refer to other members of the community or to
things which are pervasive in their culture. For example, hip hop music, which bears all the markers of African American culture and is central to black identity through its clothing, imagery, makes ample use of AAE slang.

**Social and political context**

Slaves who were brought to the USA against their will created AAE. This was during the period of the British rule, when generations of men were taken captive from northwestern Africa. According to History.com:

> Slavery in America started in 1619, when a Dutch ship brought 20 African slaves ashore in the British colony of Jamestown, Virginia. Throughout the 17th century, European settlers in North America turned to African slaves as a cheaper, more plentiful labor source than indentured servants, who were mostly poor Europeans. Though it is impossible to give accurate figures, some historians have estimated that 6 to 7 million black slaves were imported to the New World during the 18th century alone, depriving the African continent of some of its healthiest and ablest men and women (History, n.d.)

This led to a huge community of blacks in the USA who later became ‘African Americans’. They are a minority in the present–day USA, who have developed their own culture and identity and ethnolect – AAE. Despite the abolishment of slavery, the US continued to segregate African Americans until 1954 (Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Thoughtco, 2019) and this has resulted in a massive divide in the society. It has resulted in a disproportionate number of African Americans being unemployed, uneducated, and incarcerated. According to the NAACP, “African Americans constituted 2.3 million, or 34%, of the total 6.8 million correctional population in 2014. African Americans and Hispanics make up approximately 32% of the US population, however, they comprised 56% of all incarcerated people in 2015” (Criminal Justice Fact Sheet, n.d). It is this social injustice that *The Wire* aims to portray, and this is done by focalizing the narrative through the eyes of African American characters, giving the viewer a first–hand insight into their lives. The African Americans exude their identity through their clothing, their music, and most importantly, through their language – AAE. This phenomenon has generated a great deal of interest from scholars and academics and they have delved deep
into *The Wire* to research on topics pertaining to sociology, psychology, and linguistics, and some of the relevant works are discussed in the following section.

**Previous works**

There has been some academic research carried out on *The Wire*, specifically to seek out linguistic features, identity representation, and analyses of metaphors which reveal traits of urban American life represented in the series. There have also been several works which focus solely on AAE and its myriad features and their relevance in a social context.

Trotta and Blyahher, in their academic paper *Game Done Changed*, explore the features of AAE present on *The Wire* through a Corpus study of the subtitles. They look at the lexicon and grammar of AAE in the scripted dialogue throughout the five seasons and analyze how accurately it represents the identity of African Americans. They conclude that African Americans perform their identity simply by employing certain linguistic features which are not found in other non-standard forms by studying dialogues in isolations, listing individual examples for each of the AAE feature stated. It is worthy to note that this work, though academic, is aimed at TV viewers who consume language on an everyday basis. It is aimed at the middle–class Eurocentric audience, who are assumed to be the primary consumers of *The Wire* and whose knowledge of AAE is minimal. The paper draws a parallel between language and popular culture and draws on HBO’s slogan, “It ain’t tv, it’s HBO” to conclude that it is much more than a TV series, it is a representation of language use in real life. Trotta and Blyahher claim that their “main goal is simply to sketch out the different ways in which selected AAVE features are used in *The Wire*” (Trotta and Blyahher, 2011, p. 16). However, this paper solely focuses on the scripted dialogues in Season 1, focusing on the lexicon of slang terms and other terms pertaining to the world of drug trade, and analyzes AAE to answer the two research questions above.

Schroder and Mendes’ paper *The Game Is Rigged* is a take on the appearance of ‘the game’ metaphor on the series and how it represents the power relations between law enforcement and members of the drug trafficking. It explores the American culture of conceiving life as a game, in terms of winning and losing. The paper argues that *The Wire* portrays law enforcement and drug
trade as merely games whose rules are predetermined and the participants are merely players, and though the players come and go, the game stays the same, that it is set to portray institutional failure where systems fail regardless of who runs them, and this is analyzed by studying selected conversations in the series.

Lopez and Bucholtz, in their paper *How my hair look?*, have analyzed linguistic authenticity and representation of gender on *The Wire*. They have singled out three African American characters which occur on the series, all of whom are homosexual/queer and analyzed how each of them perform their ethnic and gender identities. Their paper analyzes selected scripted dialogues of the three characters to show how the series subverts Hollywood stereotypes and portrays queers of lower class African American identities in a way which has not been done before.

**Design of study**

**Data**

The primary source of data is the entirety of the first season of *The Wire* from HBO.com along with subtitles from a reliable online source – TV Subtitles. (TV Subtitles, n.d.). The subtitles only serve the purpose of providing accuracy of dialogues. For the secondary sources, I have used works by linguists Green and Widawski to aid me with theory necessary to analyze AAE. The other supplementary sources include online encyclopedias and journalistic articles, which aid in answering my research questions.

**Method**

The method involves listing out selected AAE features (found in Green and Widawski) and finding dialogues uttered by various characters with these features. The format followed is – listing out a feature of AAE, followed by its description, and two to three examples of the same. The dialogues selected occur as numbered examples, followed by the speaker and the episode number in brackets. The characters uttering the dialogues are introduced as they come, and if necessary. Most of the dialogues selected are uttered by recurring characters central to the series, with a few coming from one–off characters. The dialogues, which are listed and analyzed, represent the features of AAE explained in the theory. The lexicon of AAE, especially the slang
employed with examples from *The Wire* which are representative of African American identity as well as a part of the register of drug trade, is discussed later in this paper.

It is important to consider is that while *The Wire* offers a plethora of choices for linguistic analysis, it is still a scripted a show, and the aim of this scripted discourse is primarily to entertain, and hence, certain aspects of the language are emphasized or exaggerated for effect and it will never be a fully accurate representation of spoken language. One must also note that the AAE spoken on the series is native to working class African Americans of West Baltimore and all the features of AAE which exist may not be applicable to it.

**Discussion and results**

The following section lists out the various syntactic features of AAE found on *The Wire* and are analyzed with examples form the series.

**Syntactic features of AAE:**

This section lists out the distinct features of AAE that sets it apart from other non–standard varieties: aspectual be, stressed *been* and unstressed *been*, copula deletion, completive *done*, subject–verb agreement, double modals, irregular pronouns, and intensifiers.

**Aspectual be**

One of the salient features of AAE is the aspectual or habitual *be*, sometimes referred to as an invariant. It is used to indicate a habitual condition. As Green states, “one well established syntactic feature of AAE is the use of the verbal marker *be* to signal the habitual occurrence of an event. The feature is very common and has been used to show how AAE differs from other varieties of English” (Green, 2002, p. 35).

*Be* is also used as a shortened form of *will* or *would*, in sentences like *he be here soon* as opposed to *he will be here soon*. This is a result of phonological assimilation. For example, in *she be there in a minute*, the *be* comes from the loss of /l/ before a labial (*she’ll be > she be*) whereas in a construction like *if they get a DVD player they be happy*, the form is derived from the loss of /d/ (*they’d be >they be*), since /d/ before a labial may geminate to the /b/ and then be lost in a
general phonological process of degemination (e.g. good bye > goob bye > goo 'bye)"). Examples 1. to 3. illustrate the use of the habitual be.

1. Yellow Tops, shit be the bomb. (Dealer, Ep 09)
2. Life just be that way, I guess (Witness, Ep 01)
3. Till he came along, niggas be chewing on drumsticks and shit. (Wallace, Ep 02)

*Yellow Tops* is a slang term for drugs in packages (slang terms will be discussed in detail in a later section). In 1. to 3., *be* is used to indicate an aspect or a habitual condition and can be read by replacing it with *is* or *would be*. The aspectual *be* is not inflected for person or number and is the same for first, second or third person singular or plural, as can be seen. It is one of the most noticeable features of urban AAE and is a strong marker of African American identity.

**Stressed been and unstressed been**

The stressed *been* usually precedes a verb to denote an action which happened a long time ago. It “situates the eventuality or the initiation of the eventuality in the remote past” (Green, 2002, p. 25). It is a unique feature of AAE, and not found in other non–standard varieties. It renders the same sense as *has been*, as seen in 4. and 5.

4. Where Wallace been at, man? (Bodie, Ep 07)
5. Wallace *been* fucked up (Poot, Ep 07)

Bodie, Poot, and Wallace are ‘corner boys’, the youths who work for the drug dealer and help them sell drugs. In 4., Bodie means to ask where Wallace has been lately and in 5., Poot implies that Wallace has been in some trouble lately and uses the stressed *been* to convey this. Note that the *been* in example 4. is unstressed and *been* is marked with an underline in 5. to denote the stress. The unstressed *been* is used to indicate a perfect aspect, that is, a more straightforward use of the word, it is usually followed by an adverbial of time or place, as seen in the example of Bodie. This usage is prevalent among younger speakers of AAE.
Copula deletion

While AAE features the aspectual *be*, it is known for the deletion of the copula *be* and its auxiliary forms of *is* and *are*. The difference is “the auxiliary *be* occurs in the environment preceding V–*ing*, and the copula *be* occurs in the environments preceding an adjective, adverb, noun and preposition” (Green, 2002, p. 38).

6. Got to. This America man. (Street witness, Ep 01)
7. So? Your money good right? (Donette, Ep 05)
8. Hurry up, nigger. People looking. (D’Angelo, Ep 10)

In 6. to 8., the copulas *is*, and *are* in 8. are clearly missing. The street witness in 6. is an unnamed African American character, while Donette and D’Angelo work in the drug dealers’ ring. The presence of extras along with the regular caste adds credibility to the series as the AAE employed pertains to the streets of Baltimore.

Compleitive **done**

*Done* is very frequently used in AAE as a marker of an action which is completed in the recent past. It is usually followed by a verb. It renders a perfective sense, the same as *has* or *has been*, however, this is not always the case and is largely dependent on context.

9. The Knicks done fucked up their draft again. (Wee–Bey, Ep 08)
10. It don’t make sense to ace this motherfucker after he done testified. (Bunk, Ep 02)
11. It’s all right, you done good. (Bunk, Ep 07)

Wee–Bey and Bunk operate on different sides of the law, Bunk being a detective and Wee–Bey a right hand man to the leaders of the gang, yet they both employ the same level of slang in their AAE, especially Bunk, who does not switch to a formal register in official settings, thus asserting his identity.

In examples 9. to 11., it is important to note that there is a subtle difference between *done*, which “marks a completed eventuality or an eventuality that is over” (Green, 2002, p. 25), and *been*.
done, which “marks an eventuality as having ended by some point in the remote past” (Green, 2002, p. 26). There is some ambiguity, however, though the action that done is referring to is recent, it may not necessarily be so. Done can also be used to highlight a change of state or be used as an intensifier, as in done fucked up in 9. The sequential be done is used exclusively in AAE, which denotes a future perfect tense which renders the sense of will have. This resultative done is often associated with warnings or threats, as in example 12.

12. …and get some ribs before they done ate all the ribs up. (Avon, Ep 02)

Avon is the leader of the drug operation and his idiolect is unique throughout the series and is strongly representative of black identity. In 12., he’s offering a warning to get him some ribs before they’re gone.

**Subject–Verb agreement**

AAE has a non–standard form of subject–verb agreement, in that, it sees the absence of a third person suffix –s for the verb. Conversely, it also features the –s suffix where not needed or expected. It is safe to say that in AAE, the “number distinction between singular and plural verbs is neutralized, resulting in the use of one form in both singular and plural contexts. It is often the case that the plural verb form is used as the default form, so, for example, the plural form may occur with third person singular” (Green, 2002, p. 100), as seen in 13. to 15.

13. The king stay the king (D’Angelo, Ep 03)
14. That nigger don't play. (Omar, Ep 02)
15. He don't need no last name. (Omar, Ep 02)

In 13. to 15., note the absence of the suffix –s in the present form of the word. In standard English, the above sentence would be the king stays the king. This feature is especially prominent among younger speakers of AAE.

The addition of a suffix –s in the present form of verbs denotes habituality or something which occurs regularly. In an infamous line in his trial (much later in the series), Omar says I robs drug
dealers. The significance of this line is that Omar seems to confirm his stance as some sort of Robin Hood who adheres to his code of ethics and bears loyalty to no one beside himself and claims to rob drug dealers merely out of habit, a deed which occurs regularly. Green adds that the verbal –s “may have a number of different functions: third person singular agreement marker, narrative present marker and habitual marker” (Green, 2002, p. 100). Another feature of subject–verb agreement is the leveling of be for the forms *is, was, and were*, as seen in 16.

16. About them police, though, they was on your ass after the game? (Stringer, Ep 10)

The use of singular *was or is* remains consistent while replacing their plural forms *are and were* in AAE, as illustrated by Stringer, who is Avon’s right–hand man and uses AAE exclusively.

**Double modals and future indicators**

AAE features the occurrence of double modals, i.e. the use of two modals in place of one, as in 17.

17. I got a little move we might could do. (Orlando, Ep 07)

In cases like these, it is generally the second modal which is the real one which is considered. Though it occurs scarcely, it is still an important trait of AAE and is represented in the series.

The future tense in AAE is usually expressed with *gonna*, though it is not characteristic in any way, as it occurs in several other variants of non–standard English and is usually preceded by *be*. As argued by Green, “future is also marked with *gonna or gon*, which does not occur with first person singular” (Green, 2002, p. 40).

18. Now, look, I be down later sometime. (Wallace, Ep 08)

19. You ain’t even gonna be serving no more. Your ass be out on the bottom end of Vine street...sucking on a 40, yelling ‘5–0’. You hear me? (D’Angelo, Ep 01)

In 18., Wallace contracts *I will be to I be* and uses *be* alone as a future marker. In 19., D’Angelo does the same, as he contracts *your ass will be to your ass be*, thus making *be* as the sole marker of future tense. The constructions of phrases with *ass are explained below.
Urban AAE makes ample use of the slang *ass*. Though non-black speakers extensively use it, it is still a prominent marker of African American speech, especially the youth. *Ass* has two forms in AAE – the first use to literally conceive the sense of ‘self’, as seen in 20. and 21.

20. Get your ass over here. (Bodie, Ep 03)
21. First, you put a cop in the hospital, damn near kill his ass with that punch. (Det. Carver, Ep 05)

In 20, *your ass* literally means *yourself* and Bodie is saying *get yourself over here*, the same as D’Angelo’s line above, *your ass be out on the bottom end of Vine street*. In 21., it is used by Carver, who is a detective in the Baltimore Police Department. Here, Carver, who is interrogating D’Angelo, is using *ass* to assert his position as a police officer, yet this is representative of his African American identity as his speech permeates formal and informal registers alike.

The second usage of the word *ass* is to intensify an adjective by placing it as a suffix. According to Widawski, “the very productive suffix word *ass* is used to form adjectival compounds to indicate a high degree of a specified characteristic or nature” (Widawski, 2015, p. 24). This usage has led to the formation of some very creative adjectival phrases. Widawski adds, “although used in general slang, this suffix word is more frequently used in African American slang. Its popularity may stem from its audacious and crude humor, as well as from the relative ease with which it can be attached to nearly any adjective” (Widawski, 2015, p. 24). Examples 22. and 23. illustrate more uses.

22. Damn, man, in that case use a big-ass condom, all right? (Bodie, Ep 05)
23. I’ll beat your fuckin’ monkey ass. (Det. Carver, Ep 05)

Since “the suffix word *ass* can be used in another, less productive way to form nominal compounds denoting a person who has a high degree of a specific characteristic or nature” (Widawski, 2015, p. 24), it can be seen in 23. (a continuation of Det. Carver interrogating D’Angelo) where he employs *fuckin’ monkey ass* to represent both the sense of “self” as well as an intensified adjective.
**Steady as an intensifier**

In urban AAE, *steady* is used to indicate an activity which occurs persistently or continuously. It “has a function of indicating that an action or process specified by the verb is carried out in an intense, consistent and continuous manner” (Green, 2002, p. 71). Since it is indicative of an intense and consistent activity, “it must precede a verb that names an activity. As such, *steady* does not usually precede verbs which name states such as *have*, *own* and *know*” (Green, 2002, p. 71).

24. You know, me and Poot, we been steady working it, you know? (Wallace, Ep 05)
25. …and this motherfucker’s steady kicking my ass trying to get away. (Kima, Ep 10)
26. …the nigger that steady rollin’… that’s the nigger I want to hear about. (Stringer, Ep 05)

The usage of *steady* is consistent with all three speakers in 24. to 26. Example 24. also features an unstressed *been* and 26. features a deleted copula. The informal tone and use of slang sets apart Kima from her white colleagues, as well as some African American colleagues who use a formal register. Kima’s speech is much like the gang members and is a marker of her ethnic identity, and despite being a female police officer, she asserts her black identity the most through her speech.

**Negation in AAE**

AAE frequently uses double negation to convey a single negation and is a widespread occurrence. The use of *ain’t* is another characteristic trait of AAE, seen abundantly on *The Wire*. *Ain’t* is a contracted negative form for present tense *be* – *am not*, *is not*, and *are not*, as well as the perfect tense – *have not and has* not, and there is seldom a difference between the tenses. AAE also uses *ain’t* for *did not* and *does not* as well. Ain’t “may be used in present perfect paradigms, it is not used solely in that context. Ain’t also occurs in past contexts in which it serves as a negative marker and is not overtly marked for tense. That is, the form ain’t does not have distinct past and non–past forms” (Green, 2002, p. 39) as seen in 27. to 29.
27. This city ain’t that big. (Avon, Ep 09)
28. I ain’t seen so many of these faces in so long, thought they were dead. (Bubbles, Ep 07)
29. Y’all that paranoid? You ain't even been up in there before. (Brianna, Ep 13)

In 28., Bubbles is a civilian investigator employed by Kima, to provide information on the daily activities of the gang members. Brianna Barksdale is Avon’s sister and D’Angelo’s mother, an older black woman who speaks AAE exclusively. Examples 27. to 29. illustrate how ain’t is used to contract is not and have not from Standard English. The three characters above conform to their identities by the heavy usage of ain’t as well as other AAE features.

Apart from the examples 27. to 29., AAE constantly features double or multiple negations by negating the modal can or by adding a negative no to an already present ain’t in the sentence, as in 30. to 32.

30. …can’t be playing checkers on no chess board. (D’Angelo, Ep 03)
31. I mean, ain’t like nobody holding no gun to his head or nothing. (D’Angelo, Ep 08)
32. Yeah, but he ain’t about nothing else. (Poot, Ep 08)

**Irregular pronouns**

AAE frequently features irregular pronoun y’all, a shortened form of you all, to address a second person when there is more than one involved. As argued by Green, “a characteristic of AAE is that a single verb form may be used with both singular and plural subjects, second person singular and plural (you, y’all) and third person singular and plural (she, they) in the present tense” (Green, 2002, p. 38).

33. Right now I need some assistance from y’all. (Omar, Ep 10)
34. Fuck both y’all. (Cheryl, Ep 13)

Examples 33. and 34. show the varied uses of y’all. Omar, in the first case clearly means you all, referring to a group of people, in this context the police force, which Kima and Jimmy McNulty
(the two officers he is talking to) represent. Cheryl who is Kima’s lesbian partner, is using y’all specifically to refer to the two people in context. Y’all is also used in the place of the generic you, for example, you don’t what awaits you – y’all don’t know what awaits y’all as well as a genitive in the form of y’alls. As stated by Green, “speakers also use genitive pronouns such as yours, youn, y’all’s, hern and mines.” (Green, 2002, p. 249).

Lexicon of AAE and slang on The Wire

As stated earlier, AAE is strictly slang–ridden and features a host of words absent in other forms of non–standard English. The scripted dialogue on The Wire features slang and lexical terms native to the city of Baltimore as well as terms which adhere to the register of drug trade and crime. The slang terms which occur in the series are unique to these groups and are not representative of all the African Americans in the USA, as argued by Widawski:

the degree of slang usage and competence is largely conditioned by several sociolinguistic parameters such as age, habitat or socioeconomic status: younger, inner-city working class African Americans are naturally more prone to use slang than their older, upper-class counterparts from wealthy suburbia. Such is the case with general American slang, or any slang in any language, for that matter. However, for African Americans, more than any other ethnic group, slang is a unifying factor and displays important social functions, serving as a verbal tool for voicing African American sentiments as well as expressing African American identity and experience (Widawski, 2015, p. 14).

The following is a list of slang terms rather than uttered dialogues, as they simply represent the register of drug dealers and the police, all of whom are African American. These slang terms are used to convey information relevant only to the institutions of drug trade and law enforcement and many of them are loan words used in standard English but bearing different meanings. They are used “for transmission of specific information among specialists rather than for casual communication” (Widawski, 2015, p. 55), the specialists in this case being the African Americans involved in the drug trade in Season 1. These slang terms have a “characteristic of enhancing solidarity and group identification rather than any attempt at being cosmopolitan”
(Widawski, 2015, p. 55). The following terms recurring slang terms throughout the entirety of the series and are cited from The Wire Glossary (The Wire Glossary, 2009).

**Burner** – a disposable cellphone used by dealers. Dealers often use these to have unmonitored conversations as the phones are untraceable.

**Cheese** – money, usually obtained from drug trade.

**Civilian** – An ordinary person, someone not involved in the drug trade or law enforcement.

**Cops/5–0** – A reference to the police, 5–0 pronounced “five–oh” is a reference to the American series *Hawaii 5–0*.

**Fiend** – a drug addict, also called a *dopefiend*.

**Joint** – a common term for a place of illegal business, as in “the Barksdale joint.”

**Corner** – a street corner where drugs are bought and sold.

**Corner boy** – a lower level employee who works at the corner, i.e. Bodie, or Wallace.

**Crew up** – a group of youngsters running a corner – D’Angelo along with Bodie, Wallace, and Poot.

**Mope** – a term used by the police to refer to drug dealers.

**Stash** – a stockpile of drugs which is usually hidden away.

**Stash house** – a place where the stash is stored, usually well–hidden and guarded.
Walk-around money – a term used by members of the working class to refer to the money spent by politicians in Election Day for persuasion.

G-Pack – a package of $1000 worth of drugs, though it is also used to refer to a package which contains 100 vials of cocaine.

Muscle – armed men who serve as bodyguards or hired killers.

These slang terms are used extensively throughout the first season as it revolves around the drug trade in Baltimore, which is primarily composed of younger African Americans. These slang terms are representative of their identity as gang members, but more importantly as working–class blacks native to Baltimore.

AAE uses other different terms as referents for people based on gender, age, or status apart from those slang terms mentioned earlier. Many of these would be categorized as slurs in standard English, but through the process of ‘melioration’, these words have developed a positive connotation. Melioration is a process which “involves an ‘improvement’ in the meaning of a word whose connotations become more favorable over time” (Widawski, 2015, p. 79). This process is extremely common in AAE. Widawski adds, “this is because much of slang is negative and involves taboo references to sexual acts, body parts and bodily functions. However, through increased use, these expressions lose their shock value and become more positive” (Widawski, 2015, p. 79).

Some common slang words used are homes and homeboy which refer to someone hailing from the same neighborhood as the speaker, as in, someone the speaker is acquainted with. The term brother is used widely by African Americans to refer to other members of the same race to assert a sense of solidarity. The words ho (short for whore) and bitch are commonly used to refer to women. Bitch, however, is not gender specific, as it is also used as a slur to refer to someone who is effeminate, or inferior in some way. The term motherfucker (phonetically spelled muthafuckah) is another recurring slang on The Wire. The word is entirely context dependent and
can serve to express a positive, negative, or neutral stance toward the person it is used on, as seen in 35. to 37.

35. How stupid is this motherfucker? If you see a bitch in the car, change it up. (Avon, Ep 11)
36. The guns are in the sewer, Bey's a rock, so that's cool. But it's the bitch cop. (Stringer, Ep 11)
37. You know, the one that dimed on Omar's bitch. (Stringer, Ep 12)

In 35. Avon is using *motherfucker* with a negative connotation to refer to someone who works for him and has committed a mistake. Both Avon and Stringer in 35. and 36. use *bitch* to refer to a woman – a female police officer, in this case Kima. The word does not carry a negative or positive connotation as it is simply used to refer to someone who is a female. However, in 37., Stringer is using *bitch* with a negative connotation to refer to someone who is inferior, in this case, inferior to Omar. The three examples illustrate the process of melioration in AAE.

Another term, *shorty* is used to refer to a female acquaintance (and sometimes a partner). It is also sometimes used to refer to someone younger than the speaker.

38. Shorty was a cop, and she ain't dead. (Stringer, Ep 11)

In example 38., Stringer refers to Kima as *shorty* as she is well known as a police officer, which makes her an acquaintance in a passive sense. Kima may not be younger to Stringer, but he uses *shorty* (phonetically spelt *shawty*) to indicate he knows her, as well as signal his sense of superiority. It is normally used to convey a sense of superiority, both in age and status.

**Use of Nigger/Nigga’**

The origin of the word *nigger* was in 1786, then spelled *neger*, (1568, Scottish and northern England dialect), from French *nègre*, and from Spanish *negro*. From the earliest usage it was "the term that carries with it all the obloquy and contempt and rejection which whites have inflicted on blacks" (Etymonline, n.d.). For the longest time in history, *nigger* has been a racial slur aimed at Africans and African Americans the world over. The term has been reclaimed by the African American community, and is widely used amongst one another as *nigger or nigga’*. 
*Nigger* is often used in a friendly, casual, or ironic way. It is used to emphasize the African American identity and signal members of the in–group and to exude a sense of ‘blackness’, however, African Americans would take grave offence if the term were used to address them by someone of another ethnicity. As Widawski claims, “certain racial expressions which are commonly considered offensive may not be so perceived when used by African Americans among themselves” (Widawski, 2015, p. 14). He adds, “when used by people other than African Americans, the connotation is extremely racist and offensive. However, when used by African Americans themselves, it becomes perceptibly less so, and can in fact be used with affection” (Widawski, 2015, p. 27). *Nigger* is used to nullify the slur, which was used by racist white people. *Nigger* or *nigga ’* can be used to refer to an individual, a group of persons, to a collective. It can also be used in place of the English *one* and to form compounds which are pejorative.

39. That nigger in the winds, man. (Stringer, Ep 09)
40. If we going to have two dozen niggers saying that we on our way. If you want us to hunt that nigger, we going to hunt. (Stringer, Ep 09)
41. Look here, man, you a smart little motherfucker. And you got a good heart in there, too. Not like the rest of these niggers. (D’Angelo, Ep 09)

Examples 39. to 41. represent how Stringer and D’Angelo (in different contexts) talk about someone who is black and known to them as well blacks in a general sense. The relationship the speaker has with the referent seldom matters as *nigger* is used to refer to an African American exclusively.

AAE also employs certain unique verbs like *pimp* and *punk* as verbs. *Punk* means to trick or deceive someone, and it involves telling on someone to the authorities, and *pimp* means to bribe someone to buy their silence or agreement. These are frequently used by the younger members of the drug trade, like Bodie, Wallace, and D’Angelo as they represent and assert the identity of a young African American gang member.

**Miscellaneous features**

There are several adjectives used in AAE whose meanings differ from those of Standard English. For example, *right, tight, bomb, phat* are all synonyms for good. *Off the hook* is a superlative
used to express something which is excellent, as expressed by Wallace in example 42., referring to McDonald’s Chicken Nuggets:

42. Whoever invented these, man, he of the hook! (Wallace, Ep 02)

Note that these words are used predominantly by younger African Americans and are representative of age and not just ethnicity.

AAE also features question tags and discourse markers which makes it unique. For example, agreement or approval is often expressed using word, _damn straight, for real, I feel you_ and _mos def_ (a short for _most definitely_). Speakers of AAE frequently employ question tags which seek approval or confirmation. Some of these include – _you feel me?, aight?_ (short for _all right?_), and _know what I’m saying?_

43. You feel me? It ain’t on you. (Avon, Ep 02)
44. But I’m talking about some old straight-out-of-the-academy-type scared. You know what I’m saying? (Kima, Ep 03)

In example 43. Avon is talking to D’Angelo and asking him to not blame himself, he is seeking confirmation with the use of _you feel me?_ In 44. Kima is doing the same while explaining something, seeking confirmation so she can proceed. These tags are employed in African American speech regardless of the register.
Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to investigate AAE on *The Wire* and it has been found that the lexicon and the syntactic features found in the series adhere to the established features of AAE. Through its scripted dialogue, *The Wire* portrays African Americans as authentic and this authenticity is enacted by the characters using language. Similarly, through their use of slang and said features of AAE, the characters in the series perform their ethnicity and represent their identity as African Americans. Whether it’s the members of the drug trade or the police force, the characters assert a sense of ‘blackness’ through their use of language and come across as authentically black, meaning their primary identity is one of race and not of profession, gender, or class.

This paper has focused on Season 1 of *The Wire* and used the dialogues to answer the research questions, however, *The Wire* offers vast possibilities of deeper research throughout its five seasons. The themes it focuses on vary with each season and they offer a host of contexts, situations, and linguistic diversity in terms of scripted dialogue. There is ample material to analyze in sociolinguistics, lexicon, syntactic features, as well as phonetics and phonology. *The Wire*, through its characters, not only represents AAE in an authentic manner but also represents American society through its themes of drug trade, law enforcement, prisons, and the education system and raises questions about injustice and inequality.
References


