

## 3 Syntax Part 2: syntactic and morphosyntactic properties in AAE

**Focal point** For the most part, words in sentences in AAE are arranged in the same order as words in sentences in other varieties of English, but in AAE different combinations are allowed. For example, in AAE, the word order subject-auxiliary-main verb-object occurs in AAE *I didn't see nothing* just as in general American English *I didn't see anything*. The difference is that in AAE both the auxiliary and object can be negative. Also, AAE uses the same words that occur in other varieties of English, but these words can take on different meanings and functions. One case in point is that it can be used to indicate that something exists: *It be just the right amount of decoration on those birthday cakes*.

When I rose this morning, I didn't have no doubt.

[line from a song sung in African American church services]

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a description of patterns in the syntactic and morphological components of AAE. As in chapter 2, I will be concerned with the way words are combined to form sentences, and I will also consider morphology, that part of the system that deals with the function of smaller units of words such as suffixes. Oftentimes negative opinions are formed about AAE and the people who speak it based on the type of data that will be discussed in this chapter. Listeners understand that the AAE features differ in some way from features of general American English, but they seldom understand that the differences are based on specific rules that account for the way words are combined to form sentences in AAE. Our ears have been trained to hear and accept the sentence *There is usually just the right amount of decoration on those birthday cakes* as correct and the sentence *It be just the right amount of decoration on those birthday cakes* as incorrect and used by speakers who have a limited or low-level language repertoire.

Specific standards are established for language use in classrooms and other settings, but these standards are not based on linguistic patterns that are inherently better than other patterns. The standards are simply established norms of English use. This

chapter does not attempt to debate the status of the standard language or to raise questions about the appropriateness of an established English variety. Instead it presents a general description of the rules that apply to AAE constructions and describes systematic differences between AAE and other varieties of English, including the standard.

This chapter, taken together with the syntactic properties presented in chapter 2, gives an introduction to what speakers of AAE know about syntactic patterns in the linguistic system. The syntactic patterns in this chapter range from multiple negation to patterns in question formation. The chapter also considers morphosyntactic properties related to past time marking (*-ed*), verbal *-s* and genitive marking. In addition to explaining the systematic nature of sentence formation in AAE, this chapter presents accurate general American English correspondences for AAE constructions.

## Syntactic properties

### 3.2

#### Negation

Multiple negators such as *don't*, *no* and *nothing* can be used in a single negative sentence. In multiple negation constructions, negation can be marked on auxiliaries (e.g., *don't*) and indefinite nouns such as *anybody* (*nobody*) and *anything* (*nothing*). This pattern is illustrated in the examples below:

- (1) a. I sure hope it **don't** be **no** leak after they finish. (Bm, 60s)  
       'I hope there won't be a leak after they finish'
- b. If you **don't** do **nothing** but farm work, your social security **don't** be **nothing**. (Bm, 60s)  
       'If you only do farm work, then your social security isn't usually very much'
- c. Bruce **don't** want **no** teacher telling him **nothing** about **no** books.  
       'Bruce doesn't want any teacher telling him anything about (any) books'
- d. I **don't never** have **no** problems. I jus' don' like the stuff that be happening. (Bf on national news television interview)  
       'I don't ever have (any) problems. I just don't like the stuff that happens from time to time'
- e. Sometimes it **didn't** have **no** chalk, **no** books, **no** teacher. (Bm, 80)  
       'Sometimes there weren't any chalk, any books or any teacher'
- f. I **ain't never** seen **nobody** preach under announcements. (Bm, 50s)  
       'I have never seen anyone preach while they're giving announcements'

The sentences in (1b, c, e) stop at four, but there is no limit on the number of negators that can be used. A traditional prescriptive 'rule' in general American English states that 'double' negatives are not grammatical because they make a positive. The formula multiplying two negatives yields a positive does not work for AAE. The negative meaning of the sentences in (1) is not affected by the addition of negative elements, that is, they do not become positive; so the sentence in (1e) is no less negative than the general American English gloss that accompanies it. This system of negative marking contrasts with the system in mainstream English in that it allows more than one

negative element in clauses that are interpreted as negative. Researchers have referred to the ‘extra’ negative elements in the AAE sentences as pleonastic, suggesting that they do not contribute any additional negative meaning to the sentences. (See Labov 1972, for a discussion of multiple negation in AAE and Martin 1992, for an account of pleonastic negation in AAE and other varieties of English.) This means that in the sentence in (1e), the first negative marker *didn’t* does all the work of marking negation; *no* in the following three noun phrases simply agrees with the negation on *didn’t* and perhaps adds emphasis, but it does not contribute any negative meaning. According to Labov, Cohen, Robbins and Lewis (1968, p. 288), this type of negative concord or multiple negation “is strongly marked as non-standard, and therefore carries social information.” Labov *et al.* do not discuss exactly what the social information is in relation to negative concord, but it could be related to such social factors as class, education and identity.

Closely related to the phenomenon of multiple negation is negative inversion, in which two sentence or clause initial elements, an auxiliary and indefinite noun phrase, are obligatorily marked for negation. In these constructions, the initial negated auxiliary is followed by a negative indefinite noun phrase, as in the example in (2a):

- (2) a. **Don’t no game** last all night long. (Bf, conversation)  
       ‘No game lasts all night’

This sentence begins with a negated auxiliary verb *don’t* which is followed by a negative indefinite noun phrase *no game*. We call this noun phrase indefinite because it does not name any game in particular. Note that the two negative elements can introduce a clause (in square brackets) as in *I know [don’t no game last all night long]*. The subject *I* begins the main sentence, but the negative inversion construction is ‘embedded’ (that is, it is further within the sentence) in that sentence at the beginning of a clause following the verb *know*.

- b. **Can’t nobody** tell you it wasn’t meant for you. (attested)  
       ‘Nobody can tell you it wasn’t meant for you’  
 c. **Don’t nothing** come to a sleeper but a dream. (Bf, 60s)  
       ‘Nohing comes to a sleeper but a dream’  
 d. **Ain’t nothing** you can do. (attested)  
       (can also be: It ain’t nothing you can do.)  
       ‘There isn’t anything that you can do’  
 e. **Shouldn’t be nothing** happening you don’t know about. (attested)  
       (can also be: It shouldn’t be nothing happening you don’t know about.)  
       ‘There shouldn’t be anything happening that you don’t know about’

As in the sentence in (2a), and in those in (2b, c), a negated auxiliary is followed by a negative indefinite noun phrase, which does not name anyone or anything in particular. The sentences in (2d, e) are multiple negation constructions in existential sentences, which will be discussed in section 3.3.

Negative inversion constructions are noted for their superficial resemblance to yes-no questions in that the auxiliary precedes the subject. Compare the sentences in (3),

noting the similarities and differences between the negative inversion construction (3a) and the yes-no question (3b).

- (3) a. **Don't nobody** want to go to the movies.  
 b. **Do anybody** want to go to the movies?

Both of the sentences are grammatical in AAE, but the first one (3a) has a negated auxiliary (*don't*) followed by a negative indefinite noun (*nobody*), whereas (3b) begins with a positive auxiliary (*do*) followed by a positive indefinite noun (*anybody*). The other major difference between the sentences is that (3a) is not a question; it makes an assertion, but (3b) asks a question. This distinction is reflected in the intonation of the sentences, such that the sentence in (3a) is uttered with declarative intonation or pitch pattern, and (3b) has question intonation, which may vary, to some extent, from the question intonation in other varieties of English. We will return to intonational patterns in AAE in chapter 4.

Set rules are followed in producing negative inversion sentences. The initial auxiliary and indefinite noun must be negative, so the sentence in (4), in which the auxiliary is positive (*do*), cannot be a negative inversion construction:

- (4) \*Do nobody want to go to the movies.

Note, however, that in some special cases if the auxiliary is negative and the following noun is not negative, the sentence is still acceptable, and the meaning is basically identical to that in negative inversion constructions. Consider the following chant (5) that was once shouted in dance halls:

- (5) Freeze! **Don't another person** move! (cf. Freeze! Don't nobody move!)

At some point, while a large group of people were dancing, they would yell in unison: "Freeze!" at which point, everyone stopped in their dance steps. They would then chant, "Don't another person move!" After a few moments of being still, everyone would resume the dance steps. In this sentence, *another person*, is not in the form of a negative indefinite (*nobody*). The sentence is not a negative inversion construction, but has the same type of meaning, and it can be taken to be a variant of negative inversion constructions.

Examples of negative inversion constructions and multiple negation can be heard in songs sung in African American religious services. Consider the lines from two popular church songs, "Can't Nobody Do Me Like Jesus" (6a) and "This Morning When I Rose" (6b), also in the focal point of this chapter:

- (6) a. **Can't nobody** do me like Jesus;  
       **Can't nobody** do me like the Lord.  
       **Can't nobody** do me like Jesus;  
       He's my friend.  
 b. When I rose this morning, I **didn't** have **no doubt**.

The song in (6a), which exemplifies negative inversion, basically testifies to the greatness of the Lord, who can do what no human being can do; that is, there isn't anybody

who can do me like the Lord. The line in (6b), multiple negation without inversion, explains the certainty a person has when the Lord is in her life. In effect, she didn't have any doubt about what the Lord could do. Both strategies of multiple negation, negative inversion and non-inverted negation, are robust in AAE.

The sentences in (2) can also be expressed without inversion of the negative indefinite and the auxiliary, as in the sentences in (7):

- (7) a. No game don't last all night.  
 b. Nobody can't tell you it wasn't meant for you.  
 c. Nothing don't come to a sleeper but a dream.

According to Labov *et al.* (1968), negative inversion "is an optional process which gives additional prominence to the negative, and takes different forms in different dialects. It has a strongly affective character wherever it occurs" (p. 288). The authors suggest that negation in the inversion constructions in (2) is more prominent, but I add that a number of factors in addition to the initial placement of the negated auxiliary can determine prominence. As such, negation in the sentences in (7), in which the negative indefinite precedes the negated auxiliary, can also be prominent, and factors such as stress on the auxiliary can play a role in establishing such prominence. The word order in these sentences is that of regular declaratives in which the negative indefinite noun precedes the negated auxiliary. More advanced analyses of negation and negative inversion can be found in Martin (1992), Weldon (1994), Sells, Rickford, and Wasow (1996), Howe (1997), Howe and Walker (2000) and Green (2001). These analyses discuss the phenomenon in the context of current syntactic theory.<sup>1</sup>

### 3.3 Existential *it* and *dey*

*It* and *dey* occur in constructions in AAE that are used to indicate that something exists. The following six sentences called existential constructions can be used to mean 'There is some coffee in the kitchen':

- (8) a. It's some coffee in the kitchen.  
 b. It got some coffee in the kitchen.  
 c. It have some coffee in the kitchen.  
 d. Dey some coffee in the kitchen.<sup>2</sup>  
 f. Dey got some coffee in the kitchen.  
 g. Dey have some coffee in the kitchen.

The patterns are *it's* (pronounced as [Is], like *it's* without the *t* sound) (8a), *it* followed by *got* and *have* (8b, c), *dey* followed by a noun phrase (8d) and *dey* followed by *got* and *have* (8f, g). The existential constructions in (9) also occur in AAE, but they differ slightly from those in (8) in that they have an "on occasions" reading, indicated by aspectual *be*.

- (9) a. It be too many cars in that parking lot.  
 'There are usually/always too many cars in that parking lot'

- b. It be all kinds of cakes and pies in that store.

‘There are usually/always all kinds of cakes and pies in that store’

Some restrictions are placed on the formation of these existential sentences, and they are important in showing that there is a method in producing these and other constructions in AAE. Speakers adhere to these restrictions in producing grammatical AAE sentences. I cannot stress this point enough, especially in the face of stereotypes about AAE and the concern about strategies used to teach speakers of this variety in reading and language arts courses. These existential sentences can only be constructed with an existential element (e.g., *it*) and a following obligatory form of *be* (inflected or aspectual), *have* or *got*, which will be referred to here as a linker. These elements are called linkers because they function to link the existential to the following noun phrase. The logical subject, noun phrase that the sentence is actually about (or the phrase that is linked to the existential, e.g., *too many cars* [9a]), follows the linker.

The existential constructions that we have seen so far have the following form:

Existential element – linker – logical subject

*It*                      *be*      *too many cars*    *in that parking lot*

The sentences in (8) and (9) are models that are provided to illustrate the different parts that are used to form existential constructions in AAE, but the sentences in (10) were actually produced by speakers. They also take the form discussed above.

- (10) a. **It was** a lot of things going on in this lesson. (Bm, 50s)  
 ‘There were a lot of things going on in this lesson’
- b. **It was** seventy in the family that went down to Israel. (Bm, 50s)  
 ‘There were seventy in the family that went to Israel’
- c. Let’s stand; **it might be** somebody who need to say yes to Jesus. (Bm, 50s)  
 ‘Let’s stand; there might be somebody who needs to say yes to Jesus’
- d. You say there’s a reason for it, and **it could be**. (attested)  
 ‘You say there’s a reason for it, and there could be’  
 (Literally: You say there’s a reason for it, and there could be a reason for it.)
- e. **It be** knives in here. **It be** ice picks in here. (Bf teenager on national news)  
 ‘There are usually knives in here. There are usually ice picks in here’
- f. Sometimes **it didn’t have** no chalk, no book, no teacher. (Bm, 80s)  
 ‘Sometimes there wasn’t any chalk, any book or any teacher’
- g. **It had** some breaded chicken sticks. **Dey had** some good French fries, too.<sup>3</sup> (Bf, 60s)  
 ‘There were some breaded chicken sticks. There were some good French fries, too’

The initial existential element in (10a–g) is *it*. Of particular note here is (10d) in which *it* and the more mainstream English existential *there* are used in the same sentence. This example shows that some of the same forms and constructions that occur in general American English also occur in AAE. The sentence in (10e) was taken from a television news interview in which a student from a large inner city school in New York City was speaking about the dangerous weapons that are brought into the school frequently. She was in essence saying that it is usually/always the case that there are knives and ice picks in the school. Note also that the linker in (10f) is *have*, and it is negated with the

auxiliary *didn't*. In the sentences in (10h–m), the linker ('s) is not a separate verbal form; instead it is attached to *it* (*it's*).

- h. It's very beautiful. It's a lot of history in it. (Bf, 30s)  
'It's very beautiful. There is a lot of history in it'
- i. **It's** one down there. (Bf, 40s)  
'There is one down there'
- j. **It's** nothing you can do but be willing to be used by God. (Bm, 50s)  
'There is nothing you can do but be willing to be used by God'
- k. **It's** a lot of people backstage who say they ready to come out and wreck shop.  
(Bm, disc jockey at 1995 birthday bash in Washington, DC)  
'There are a lot of people backstage who say they are ready to come out and wreck shop (i.e., perform)'
- l. If you still sittin down by the end of this song, **it's** something wrong with you.  
(Bm, 20s)  
'If you're still sitting down by the end of this song, there's something wrong with you'
- m. I don't go out like this. **It's** a shirt that go under here. (Bf, 33, on a talk show)  
'I don't go out like this. There's a shirt that goes under here'

In (10h) in the first sentence, *it's* is used as a pronoun referring to the banner that was displayed in the pulpit area and as an existential form in the second sentence. Obviously, speakers understand the different uses of *it's*; they understand when it is being used as a pronoun and as an existential element. The final existential construction (10n) is formed with an initial *dey got* sequence.

- n. **Dey got** a fly messing with me. (Bf, 15).<sup>4</sup>  
'There is a fly messing with (i.e., bothering) me'

Let's refer to these, as in (10n), as *have/got* existentials. *Have/got* existentials are very interesting, especially when compared to *be* (i.e., all others) existentials. They are formed with an initial *dey* (or *it*) followed by the linker *have/got* and a noun.

From Feagin's (1979) extensive study on the use of language in a white community in Alabama, we find that *be* existentials are used in that variety of English. She provides a number of examples as given below, but she does not include examples of *it* existentials with aspectual *be*:

- (11) a. It's all these people that – I only know through goin to Sunday school.
- b. It was some trouble here once.
- c. It's a big pole in the middle. (p. 239)

Feagin does not include any examples of *have/got* existentials in her study of the Alabama variety of English, and the extent to which such forms occur in other varieties of English is not clear.

AAE may be more similar to creoles in the formation of *have/got* existentials. Bickerton (1981) notes that many creoles express existentials and possessives by using

the same lexical items. Among the creoles with this property are Guyanese Creole (GC), Haitian Creole (HC) and Hawaiian Creole English (HCE):

- (12) a. dem get wan uman we get gyal-pickni. (GC)  
 they have a woman who have young daughter  
 ‘There is one woman who has a daughter’  
 b. gê you fâm ki gê you petit-fi. (HC)  
 have a woman who have a child girl  
 ‘There is a woman who has a daughter’

(Michel DeGraff [personal communication] notes that the standard spelling for the HC example is as follows: Gen yon fanm ki gen yon pitit fi.)

- c. get wan wahini shi get wandata. (HCE)  
 have a woman who have a young daughter  
 ‘There is a woman who has a daughter’ (p. 66)

Note that in (12) *get* (or some form of *get*) is used as the existential linker (first occurrence of *get/have*) and as a possessive verb. In addition, Gibson (2001) includes the following example from Walter Edwards’s earlier research on Guyanese Creole: ii get man a don wan bed wan dee, yu no. yu Ø pee dem faiv daala fu da dee [There are men who usually finish preparing a bed in a day, you know. You pay them five dollars for that day.] p. 195.

Compare the Creole examples above to the sentence in (10n) in AAE. Rickford (1987) gives similar examples in his study of Guyanese Creole, in which *had* is used in the first existential, while the second existential construction is formed with *gat*.

- (13) a. an di ad wohn maan yuusu ad o kyaar de tu. (p. 178)  
 and they had a man who used to had a car there too  
 ‘And there was a man who had a car there too’  
 b. dee gat onao leedi laas tu. (p. 188)  
 they got another lady lose two  
 ‘There’s another lady who lost two’

Before ending this section, I want to discuss an additional example of an existential construction that might raise questions about ambiguity:

- (14) A: There’s a brush in the bathroom.  
 B: It is? (Bm, 60s)  
 ‘There is?’

The *it* in B’s response to A’s statement could be interpreted as pronominal *it* that refers to brush, as in *It is in the bathroom*, or, as indicated by the gloss, *it* can be existential as in *It’s a brush in the bathroom* (‘There is a brush in the bathroom’). The latter interpretation is assumed here because it is not clear that B was referring to a specific brush but that rather like A he was referring to the availability of any brush.

The following section gives a description of questions in AAE.



### 3.4 Questions

I have already discussed yes-no and tag questions in chapter 2 in the section on auxiliaries and aspectual markers. Both types of questions were described as questions in which the auxiliary verb precedes the subject; however, you will recall that some yes-no questions are formed without overt auxiliaries in sentence initial position, so the following may also be used:

- (15) a. You know her name?  
       ‘Do you know her name?’  
 b. He sleeping in the car?  
       ‘Is he sleeping in the car?’

In these examples, there are no auxiliaries in the initial position of the sentences indicating that they are questions, but, of course, the intonational pattern used in uttering the sentences marks them as questions. The goal here is not to give a theoretical analysis of the process of question formation because to do so would take us too far afield, and it would lead us into a long discussion about controversial analyses of auxiliaries. I will briefly summarize three accounts of question formation that are relevant for the type of questions I have discussed so far. The first account is one that is given in some introductory linguistics texts. It says that in forming questions, we start with a regular declarative sentence or statement.

- (16) a. Bruce **can** jump.

In the declarative sentence, the auxiliary (the modal *can* in (16a)) follows the subject. In the question, the auxiliary assumes a position in the front of the sentence preceding the subject (16b):

- b. **Can** Bruce— jump?

This analysis works for the kind of questions that we have seen so far. In an earlier discussion of aspectual *be*, we saw that *do* is the auxiliary that occurs at the beginning of sentences with aspectual *be*, such as *Do you be like that?* Following the process above illustrated with (16a, b), I explain the formation of the question in (17b):

- (17) a. It **DO** be dark.  
       ‘It IS usually dark’  
 b. **Do** it be dark?  
       ‘Is it usually dark?’

To form the question, the auxiliary *do* assumes the position preceding the subject *it*, as in (17b).

But what about declaratives in which there is no auxiliary, such as *He sleeping in that car* and *He be sleeping in that car?* How do we use them to form questions? We can form corresponding questions, but auxiliaries are not necessary, as questions can be signaled by intonation: *He sleeping in that car?* *He be sleeping in that car?* But to produce questions in which auxiliaries are used, a different approach must be taken.

To get these auxiliaries, we simply insert them preceding subjects when we need them. This is exactly what I have done in (18), a third way to form questions:

- (18) a. He sleeping in that car. → **Is** he sleeping in that car?  
 b. He be sleeping in that car. → **Do** he be sleeping in that car?

To form the questions in (18), auxiliaries must be present because neither a main verb (i.e., *sleeping*) nor aspectual *be* can occur at the beginning of the sentence in questions. So far, three statements have been made about yes-no question formation: Statement (1): We start with a declarative sentence, locate the auxiliary and place it at the beginning of the sentence, preceding the subject.

Example: He DO be sleeping. (Declarative with auxiliary)

Do he be sleeping? (Place auxiliary in front of sentence)



OR

Statement (2): We start with a declarative sentence in which there is no auxiliary, so we insert the correct one in forming the question.

He be sleeping. (Declarative without auxiliary)

Do he be sleeping? (Insert correct auxiliary in position in front of sentence)

OR

Statement (3): Questions without initial auxiliaries can be signaled with question intonation.

He be sleeping. (Declarative without auxiliary)

He be sleeping? (Questions signaled by intonation, without initial auxiliary)

Now let's consider *wh*-questions, which are introduced by words that begin with *wh*, such as *who*, *what*, *which*, *why*, *when* and *where*. *How* does not begin with *wh*, but it is included in the group of *wh*-words. Yes-no questions and *wh*-questions differ in the content of the response or information that is requested. The former require either a yes or no response, while the latter are requests for content that will answer the *wh*-question.

- (19) a. What did you eat? (Bf, 60s)  
 b. What they was doing? Catching worms or something? (attested)  
 'What were they doing?'  
 c. What we gon get out the deal since we left everything? (attested)  
 'What are we going to get out of the deal since we have left everything?'  
 d. Why y'all want to treat me like this? (attested)  
 'Why do y'all want to treat me like this?'  
 e. Why they ain't growing? (Bm, 50s)  
 'Why aren't they growing?'  
 f. Why you looking like that? (attested)  
 'Why are you looking like that?'  
 g. Why those people don't want to take that car? (Bf, 60s)  
 'Why don't those people want to take that car?'  
 h. How you knew I was here? (attested)  
 'How did you know I was here?'

- i. How long do you be out of school? (attested)  
'How long are you usually out of school?'
- j. Who you be talking to like that? (attested)  
'Who are you usually talking to like that?'
- k. Where your part be at? (Bf, 20s)  
'Usually, where is your part?'  
(Literally: Where do you usually part your hair?)

*Wh*-questions in AAE can be formed in a number of ways. Let us illustrate one way with the sentence in (19a). The subject of that sentence is *you*; the auxiliary is *did*; the verb is *eat* and the object is *what*. The object *what* (*wh*-word) occurs in the initial position of the sentence although it is understood as the object of *eat*. We can think of the sentence in (19a) as being related to the declarative *You did eat what* (cf. *You did eat beans*), where the object *what* occurs after the verb *eat*. This related sentence differs from the *wh*-question in two ways: (1) the *wh*-word is at the end of the sentence, not at the beginning and (2) the auxiliary *did* follows the subject. In forming a *wh*-question from this fabricated declarative, in which *what* is actually represented as an object following *eat*, the following steps are taken:

Fabricated declarative: You did eat what.

Step (1): What you did eat (What assumes position in front of sentence)



Step (2): What did you eat (Did assumes a position immediately preceding the subject)



We can do the same thing with the sentence in (19i):

Fabricated declarative: You do be out of school how long

Step (1): How long you do be out of school



Step (2): How long do you be out of school

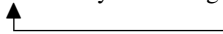


In the remaining *wh*-questions in (19), the auxiliary either follows the subject, or it does not occur in the sentence. The auxiliaries *was*, *ain't* and *don't* follow the subjects in (19b, e and g), respectively. Let's see what happens if we fabricate a declarative and try to form the *wh*-question in (19b) from it:

19b. What they was doing?

Fabricated declarative: They was doing what

Step (1): What they was doing (What assumes position in front of sentence)



Step (2): The auxiliary does not assume the position preceding the subject *they*; it retains its position following the subject. This step in which the auxiliary is placed in the position preceding the subject does not apply.

There is no overt auxiliary in (19c, d, f, h, j and k). We can try the same process for (19j):

19j. Who you be talking to like that?

Fabricated declarative: You be talking to who like that

Step (1): Who you be talking to like that (*Who* assumes position in front of sentence)



Step (2): There is no auxiliary in the fabricated declarative, so this step does not apply.

The three patterns that are associated with *wh*-questions in AAE are as follows:

(1) WH-WORD      AUXILIARY      SUBJECT      (19a)

(2) WH-WORD      SUBJECT      AUXILIARY      (19b)

(3) WH-WORD      SUBJECT      (19j)

In the first type (1), the auxiliary follows the *wh*-word and precedes the subject, and in the second type (2), the auxiliary immediately follows the subject. Finally, there is no overt auxiliary in the third type (3). AAE has three patterns for *wh*-questions, depending on the placement of the auxiliary or whether there is an auxiliary in the question. *Wh*-questions in AAE share similarities with *wh*-questions in general American English and other varieties of English. The pattern in (19b) certainly does not occur in mainstream American English, but it still needs to be determined whether other American English dialects have forms such as that.

The final questions that will be addressed in this section are indirect questions, which are introduced by question verbs and sequences of verbs such as *ask*, *wonder* and *want to see*. These sentences are like yes-no questions and *wh*-questions in that they make some type of inquiry, but they do not ask questions directly. The indirect questions are clauses themselves (because they contain a subject and a verb) that are embedded or set within the larger declarative sentence. The yes-no and *wh*-questions that we have seen are not embedded within the overall sentence; they are interrogatives that make direct requests for information. Consider the indirect or embedded questions that are set off by brackets ([ ]) below:

- (20) a. I wonder [if the mailman dən passed].  
       'I wonder if the mailman has already passed'
- b. It's gonna ask you [**do you** wanna make a transfer]. (attested)  
       'It's going to ask you if you want to make a transfer'
- c. And we see [**can't we** make suggestions – according to what the Lord want us to do]. (attested)  
       'And we will see if we can make any suggestions – according to what the Lord wants us to do'
- d. We on our way to Oklahoma. We trying to see [**can we** work out March]. (attested)  
       'We are on our way to Oklahoma. We're trying to see if we can work out March'
- e. I wanted to see [**was it** the one we bought]. (attested)  
       'I wanted to see if it was the one we bought'
- f. Tell me [**do it** make any sense]. (Bf, 20s)  
       'Tell me if it makes any sense'
- g. They don't ask you [**did you** sit on the choir]. (attested)  
       'They don't ask you if you were a member of the choir'
- h. Go over there and see [**did they** bring my car in]. (attested)  
       'Go over there and see if they brought my car in'

- i. I meant to ask her [**did she** want it]. (Bf, 40s)  
'I meant to ask her if she wanted it'
- j. You gotta wonder [**is the fear** based on shame]. (attested)  
'You've got to wonder if the fear is based on shame'
- k. I wanted to know [**could they** do it for me]. (attested)  
'I wanted to know if they could do it for me'
- l. I asked Jean and them [**did they** want to eat]. (Bf, 60s)  
'I asked Jean and them if they wanted to eat'
- m. I wonder [**have you** heard from heaven]. (attested)  
'I wonder if you have heard from heaven'
- n. I wonder [**do it** be like the water we drink]. (attested)  
'I wonder if it is usually like the water we drink'
- o. Then after the scripture, I'm gonna ask Brother Wall [**will he** come and play "Bless Ye the Lord" for us]. (attested)  
'Then after the scripture, I'm going to ask Brother Wall if he will come and play "Bless Ye the Lord" for us'
- p. I wonder [**am I** helping anybody yet]. (attested)  
'I wonder if I am helping anybody yet'
- q. I wonder [**what YOU** doing about it]. (attested)  
'I wonder what YOU are doing about it'

The indirect question *if the mailman dən passed* (20a) is introduced by the verb *wonder*, and the only difference between it and indirect questions in general American English is that the marker *dən* is used here. We would expect questions like this one to occur in other varieties of English such as the Alabama variety that Feagin discusses. These indirect questions are also possible with the word *whether* in place of *if*, as in *I wonder [whether the mailman dən passed]*.

The remaining questions are introduced by question verbs (e.g., *know*, *wonder*, *want to know*), and they do not contain the word *if* or *whether*; instead they are formed the same way direct yes-no questions are formed: by inverting the auxiliary. Consider the bracketed indirect questions and the inverted auxiliaries and subjects in bold print in (20b–p). Look at the question in brackets in (20n), in which the embedded question is actually identical to a yes-no question, with the auxiliary *do* preceding the subject *it*. *Wh*-questions can also be embedded, as shown in (20q). This embedded *wh*-question is identical to the root or direct *wh*-questions that were discussed in (19) (see 19f).

What we have not seen are sentences in which both *if* and the inverted auxiliary are used in indirect questions. For example, we have not seen sentences such as the following:

- (21) \*It's gonna ask you [if do you wanna make a transfer].

This sentence is ungrammatical; it is predicted that speakers will not produce this sentence or sentences like it. The sentence is just another example of how AAE follows certain rules in producing constructions and if these rules are not followed, then the

resulting sentence is ill-formed in AAE. So in indirect questions either option, . . . [if you wanna make a transfer] (with *if/whether*) or . . . [**do you** wanna make a transfer] (with inverted auxiliary and subject), is used. If both options are used simultaneously, then the resulting construction will be ungrammatical, as shown in (21).<sup>5</sup>

Also, we have not seen sentences in which neither *if/whether* nor an inverted auxiliary begins the embedded question, for example: \**It's gonna ask you* [— *you wanna make a transfer*]. The sentence is ruled out because either *if/whether* or an auxiliary must occur in the initial position of the embedded question, and neither occurs. Of course, we could say: *It's gonna ask you* PAUSE “*You wanna make a transfer?*” But in that sentence there would be a pause before the direct quote. There is no pause before the embedded questions in the sentences in (20). Again we see that specific rules have to be followed in producing indirect questions to avoid ungrammatical sentences. This is important in showing that constructions in AAE are formed according to rules.

Other varieties of English permit the inverted subject and auxiliary pattern identified in indirect questions in AAE. Examples from these different varieties are given in O'Grady, Dobrovolsky and Aronoff (1993, pp. 178–179), an introductory text in general linguistics (22a, b), and Radford (1988, p. 299), an introductory text in syntax (22c):

- (22) a. The coach wondered [would the team win].  
 b. A fan asked [will the team win].  
 c. John wondered [would he get a degree].

The general patterns here are identical; in AAE embedded questions, the auxiliary can precede the subject, and in the questions in (22) the auxiliaries (in these examples, modals *would*, *will*) can precede the subject. I will not base any strong claims on these three examples, especially given the fact that I do not know exactly from which nonstandard variety of English they were taken; however, two points can be made about them: They are introduced by either *wondered* or *asked*, which are in the past tense, and the inverted auxiliary is a modal. In comparison, in the AAE sentences in (20), additional verbs and sequences of verbs (e.g., *see*, *tell me*, *want to know*) can introduce indirect questions, and auxiliaries other than modals *would* and *will* can occur in the questions. From the sentences in (22), we see that other varieties of English share with AAE the strategy of producing embedded questions with subject auxiliary inversion. What is not clear is whether, in these other varieties, the verbs that can introduce indirect questions are limited to *wonder* and *ask* and whether the auxiliaries are limited to modals *would*, *will*. McCloskey (1992) discusses such constructions in Hiberno English, and Henry (1995) discusses this inversion in embedded clauses in Belfast English. In both varieties, a range of verbs is used to introduce the indirect clauses, but the range is wider in Belfast English (e.g., *They couldn't work out* [**had we left**]). Henry 1995, p. 107).

### 3.5 Relative clauses

The clauses that will be discussed in this section serve as modifiers or qualifiers of a preceding noun and are referred to as relative clauses. In AAE and in other varieties

of English, these clauses (enclosed in brackets) may be introduced by an overt relative pronoun, *that* or *who*.

- (23) a. They like **the teacher** [*who* graded her assignment].  
 b. That's **the person** [*who* gave me the ticket].  
 c. I know **the person** [(*who*) you talking about].  
 d. It was seventy in **the family** [*that* went down to Israel]. (attested)  
 e. It's **one gospel** [*that* fits all people]. (attested)

The clauses in brackets modify a preceding noun phrase (in bold print) in the direct object (23a, c), predicate nominative (23b, e) or object of the preposition (23d) position. *Who* in (23c) is in parentheses because it is optional; the sentence is grammatical with or without the pronoun (e.g., *I know **the person** [— you talking about]*). In (23b), *the person* is a predicate nominative or a noun linked to the pronoun *that* by the copula *be* form 's.

As shown in the sentences in (24), some relative clauses modifying a noun in predicate nominative or object position are not obligatorily introduced by a relative pronoun. I follow the strategy of using the symbol 'Ø' to indicate that nothing is in the specified position, so 'Ø' indicates that there is no overt relative pronoun:

- (24) a. There are many mothers [Ø don't know where their children are]. (attested)  
 'There are many mothers who don't know where their children are'  
 b. It's a whole lot of people [Ø don' wanna go to hell]. (Bm, 40s)  
 'There are a whole lot of people who don't want to go to hell'  
 c. You the one [Ø be telling me]. (Bm, 30s)  
 'You're the one who usually/always tells me'  
 d. You're the one [Ø ain't got no church]. (attested)  
 'You're the one who doesn't have a church'  
 e. It was a nurse and a nurse's aid [Ø used to stand up at the door]. (attested)  
 'There was a nurse and a nurse's aid who used to stand up at the door'  
 f. You the one [Ø come telling me it's hot]. I can't believe you got your coat on.  
 (Bm, 30s).  
 'You're the one who had the nerve to tell me that it's hot. I can't believe you've got your coat on'  
 g. It's a whole lot of people [Ø got fire insurance]. (attested)  
 'There are a whole lot of people who have fire insurance'  
 h. It's nobody [Ø walk that hard].  
 'There isn't anybody who walks that hard'  
 i. I think Aunt M. had a daughter [Ø lived off]. (Bf, 60s)  
 'I think Aunt M. had a daughter who lived far away'  
 j. We got one girl [Ø be here every night]. (attested)  
 'There is one girl who is usually here every night'

In the sentences in (24a–h), the relative clause introduced by a Ø relative pronoun (call it a zero relative pronoun) modifies a noun in the predicate nominative position, and

the clauses in the sentences in (24i) and (24j) modify the object of the sentence, so in (24i) [lived off] modifies direct object *daughter*.<sup>6</sup> Relative clauses that modify nouns in the predicate nominative or object positions are not obligatorily headed by relative pronouns. (See Tottie and Harvie 2000, for a discussion of relative clauses in AAE, other varieties of English and creoles.)

### 3.6 Preterite *had*

One pattern in AAE that is not discussed in earlier studies is the preterite (i.e., past tense) use of *had* in certain environments. In Rickford and Théberge-Rafal (1996), preterite *had* is characterized as a new syntactic feature that is used mainly by pre-adolescents; however, data – some of which will be presented in (26) – show that this *had* also occurs in the speech of adolescents to young adults. The use of preterite *had* has sparked some interest mainly because the speakers use it in a way that is markedly different from the use of the pluperfect (past perfect) in AAE as well as in other varieties of English. The pluperfect is used to mark the past before the past, as in the following sentence (25), in which the seeing the movie event occurs at some time prior to the arriving event.

- (25) They had seen the movie by the time the large group arrived.

The preterite *had* sequence and pluperfect sequence in AAE are superficially identical; they are both formed with *had* + past tense verb form. The main difference between the two is in meaning, as will be explained in consideration of the sentences in (26):

- (26) a. That's why at W. E. we had discussed a lot. (Bm, 12)  
 'That's why we discussed a lot [of information] at W. E.'
- b. The alarm at the detailing place next door had went off a few minutes ago. (Bf, 30s)  
 'The alarm at the detailing place next door went off a few minutes ago'
- c. I had went to the city last night and the only Affirm they had was super, so I didn't get it. (Bf, 20s)  
 'I went to the city last night and the only Affirm they had was super, so I didn't get it'
- d. I was playing basketball, and I had went up for a lay up and then I came down and sprung my ankle. (Bm, 12)  
 'I was playing basketball and I went up for a lay up and then I came down and sprained my ankle'
- e. We talked about this last year. That's the test I had failed. (Bm, 13)  
 'We talked about this last year. That's the test I failed'
- f. A: I don't know if Leslie coming today.  
 B: Why not?  
 A: I think she had left yesterday. (Bm, 13)  
 'I think she left yesterday'



- g. A: You had to wear jeans?  
 'Did you have to wear jeans?'  
 B: Un un. I had wore my dickey pants. (Bm, 12)  
 'No. I wore my dickey pants'
- h. They ain't paid me for two days that I had took. (Bf, 20s)  
 'They haven't paid me for two days that I worked'/'They didn't pay me for two days that I worked'
- i. My mother had cooked fish last night when I had got my clothes together. (Bf, 15)  
 'My mother cooked fish last night while I got my clothes together'  
 (Literally: My mother was cooking fish last night when I was getting my clothes together, or my mother had cooked fish before I got my clothes together.)
- j. I had got strep throat on the last day of school. (Bf, 11)  
 'I got strep throat on the last day of school'

The general statement about these examples is that the *had* + verb (verb-*ed*) sequence is not used to indicate action that took place in the past before the past; this sequence basically refers to an event in the simple past. In the sentences in (26a) and (26b), the speakers use *had* in the narration of an event that happened in the simple past. In (26a), the speaker is conveying the point that at his school, they discussed a lot of information in preparation for the next school year, and in (26b), a young adult begins a telephone conversation by saying the alarm at the place next door went off a few minutes ago. A hairdresser uses the sentence in (26c) to relay her account of having gone to New York City the night before an appointment with a client to purchase a hair product called Affirm. Because the supply store had super strength as opposed to regular strength Affirm, she did not get any product at all. Here the going to New York City event (indicated by *had went*) is not in relation to any other event, yet the speaker uses *had* to mark the pastness of that event. The case in (26d) is also interesting in that the speaker refers to a number of events in the sentence (playing, went up and came down), but chooses to mark the going up event with *had*. The speaker introduces the playing event and continues the narration with *had went*, which does not actually precede the playing event, that is, it is not situated farther in the past than the playing event. It is, in fact, included in the playing event.

In (26e) the adolescent notes that he failed the test, but there is no obvious event in the conversation that the failing event precedes. He also refers to having talked about the information, but it would appear that the talking about the information event is actually farther in the past than the failing the test event, so **had failed** is not the pluperfect. The same speaker uses *had* in (26f) to mark the pastness of the leaving event. It is clear that *had* does not mark the past before the past as the other time is yesterday, when Leslie actually left. The leaving event cannot be situated farther in the past than yesterday. The speaker in (26g) marks the wearing event with *had* although there is no obvious past time against which the event is evaluated. The sentence in (26h), which is actually uttered by a young adult, might be analyzed as being ambiguous because it could be argued that the event of having taken two days may be marked by *had*, in that it is situated farther in the past than the event of not having been paid. The ambiguity arises in part because of the possible interpretations of *ain't* as a perfect or simple

past marker. There are two events in the sentence (26i), the cooking fish event and the getting clothes together event, which appear to have taken place simultaneously, or the time of one has overlapped the time of the other. Finally, in (26j) the getting strep throat event is marked by *had*, but it cannot be situated farther in the past than the last day of school. The time of the getting strep throat event is situated within the time of the last day of school.

Some patterns are identified in particular as marking speakers as being associated with the African American ethnic group or being members of some African American speech community. It can be argued that one of the goals of the use of preterite *had* in the media is to mark the speaker as ‘sounding black.’ Montana Taylor, a comedienne (African American) who appeared regularly on *Comic View* (a comedy show on Black Entertainment Television), stated that text books will have to be written to reflect the new Ebonics. As a result, children will be able to read books with the following types of sentences:

- (27) Y’all seen how fast Jane **had ran** across the street? (*Comic View*, 1997)

The use of preterite *had* is not the only pattern, but it is definitely one of the patterns that is associated with Taylor’s new language, Ebonics.

In considering the description in this and the preceding chapter, we find that AAE has a number of different types of past and different ways of marking past events. The six types of past time are indicated by simple past, preterite *had*, pluperfect (past perfect), remote past, remote past perfect and resultant state. Each type has been discussed, and I end this section with a general summary of these past categories:

(28) **Summary of past marking**

Type of past	Marker and verb form	Meaning
Simple past (chapter 2)	<i>drunk</i>	time before the present (i.e., event culminates before now)
Preterite <i>had</i> (chapter 3)	<i>had drunk</i>	time before the present, often used in narrative contexts (i.e., event culminates before now)
Remote past (chapter 2)	<i>BIN drunk</i>	remote past
Pluperfect (past perfect) (chapter 3)	<i>had drunk</i>	past before the past
Remote past perfect (chapter 2)	<i>had BIN drunk</i>	past before the remote past
Resultant state (chapter 2)	<i>dən drunk</i>	state of having ended or having been finished, can occur with some states in special contexts

## Summary

The first part of this chapter characterizes syntactic properties of negation, existential constructions, questions, relative clauses and preterite *had* in AAE. In the discussion of negative inversion, it was noted that the order of the auxiliary and subject (indefinite noun phrase) is inverted, but the construction is not interpreted as a question. Existential constructions indicate that something exists. In the general scheme, these constructions require an existential element (*it/dey*), a verbal linker and a noun. These constructions in AAE share properties with corresponding constructions in other varieties of English and in creoles. Because the *have/got* existential uses either *have* or *got* as a linker, the sentences are sometimes taken as indicating possession; but there are ways of showing that they are existential in nature. Yes-no questions, *wh*-questions and embedded or indirect questions were identified. Although one of the hallmarks of yes-no questions is subject-auxiliary inversion, in AAE such inversion does not obligatorily occur, and in these cases, questions are marked by intonation. Using intonation to mark questions is not unique to AAE; but the type of intonation in these questions might prove to be characterized by unique properties of AAE.

It was also noted that inversion occurs in indirect questions in AAE, as in varieties such as Belfast and Hiberno English. Finally, three patterns for *wh*-questions were identified. They were characterized by the position of the *wh*-word, subject and auxiliary. One of the identifying characteristics of relative clauses in AAE is the zero relative pronoun that modifies a noun in predicate nominative position or object. This section ended with a discussion of preterite *had* and its position in the six-way system of past marking in AAE. Preterite *had* constructions are identical in shape to pluperfect (past before the past) sequences, but they have different meanings.

The constructions in each of these syntactic categories must be formed in accordance with the rules of AAE. If they are not, the sentences in which they occur will be ungrammatical.

The second part of this chapter deals with morphosyntactic patterns in AAE.

## Morphosyntactic properties

### 3.7 Morphosyntactic patterns in AAE

So far this chapter has presented a discussion of issues in the syntax or sentence structure of AAE. It will end with a brief review of related issues from the morphological and morphosyntactic component of the language system. Morphology is that part of linguistics that is concerned with morphemes, the smallest units of meaning that are put together to build words. The word *jumped* consists of two morphemes, *jump* and *-ed*. Both units contribute meaning in forming the word. *Jump* expresses the action, and *-ed* indicates that the action is in the past. The word *teacher* consists of two morphemes, and *water* consists of one. In *teacher -er* is a morpheme meaning agent or one who does something, but *-er* in *water* is not a morpheme. The focus in this section will be on suffixes that do not change the meaning or part of speech of the word but that serve some other function in the sentence, such as that of marking tense or number and genitive relations.

3.7.1 *Past morphology*

The first type of morphology that will be considered is that which is used to indicate some type of past activity. As noted in the paradigms that were discussed in chapter 2, there is usually no distinction with respect to form between simple past and past participles in AAE. For the most part, the same form or identical morphology is used in simple past and participle environments. In mainstream terminology, the participle forms are used with helping verbs such as *have*, as in *I eat, I ate, I have eaten*. The participle or *-en* form is *eaten*. Consider the summary of past marking at the end of the preceding section, in which the participle form *drunk* is used across the board, in both the simple past and the pluperfect. Likewise the participle form is often used in the past and past participle environments with the following verbs: *ring (rung), see (seen), sink (sunk), and sing (sung)*. In these verbs, the change from non-past to participle is indicated by a change in the vowel (e.g., *i* to *u*, *drink/drunk; sink/sunk*). For other verbs, it is the simple past form that is used in all contexts. This is the case with *ate*, as in the simple past *I ate yesterday* and the pluperfect *I had ate a snack by the time they delivered the pizza*. Still in other verbs, the past and past participle forms are indicated by a final *-ed*, as in *jump/jumped (I jumped on the trampoline. I had jumped on the trampoline).*<sup>7</sup>

In considering the data that have been presented, we find that many of the verbs that are used are regular verbs, so they form the past and past participle by adding *-ed* to the present form of the verb (e.g., *jumped, walked, cooked, plugged*). However, a morphological distinction is made between some past and past participle forms; that is, the past is formed by adding *-ed* to the verb, and the past participle takes some *-en* form. The past and past participle forms, respectively, of some irregular verbs are *broke/broken, grew/grown, sang/sung, sank/sunk, saw/seen, threw/thrown, took/taken, tore/torn* and *went/gone*. We can ask two questions about the situation with these verb types and forms in AAE. The first question is the following: Does AAE make a morphological distinction, using both past and past participle forms in the case of irregular verbs, or is the past form used in all environments? We have already seen that there is no past/past participle distinction in AAE for verbs such as *drink*. However, there may be a distinction where other verbs are concerned, such that both the past and past participle forms are used. Secondly, if both forms are used, is the past used in one environment and the past participle restricted to another, or are the two forms used interchangeably? There is evidence to show that both forms are used. Verb forms in *BIN* constructions that are interpreted as meaning ‘for a long time’ or ‘a long time ago’ usually take simple past morphology, but there are some instances in which the verbs are in their participle or *-en* forms.

- (29) a. ... look like she would’a BIN called my name. (Bm, 70s)  
       ‘... looks as if she would have called my name a long time ago’  
 b. A: Can I take this book home?  
       B: I gotta think if anyone else asked me to take it home.  
       A: I BIN asked you to take it home.  
       ‘I asked you a long time ago to take it home’ (Bf, 9)

- c. I'd say, "Well, Baby, she BIN passed. (Bm, 60s)  
'I'd say, "Well, Baby, she passed a long time ago" (i.e., died a long time ago)'
- d. I thought they should'a BIN did that. (attested)  
'I thought (i.e., in my opinion) they should have done that a long time ago'
- e. I could'a BIN went back. (attested)  
'I could have gone back a long time ago'
- f. Aw, he BIN gone – married a ready-made family.  
'Aw, he's been gone for a long time . . .' or 'Aw, he left a long time ago . . .' (Bf, 60s)
- g. A: They tore down Superior? So they don't have it anymore.  
B: No. That's BIN gone. (Bm, 60s)  
'No. That's been gone for a long time'

The verbs following *BIN* in (29a, b, c) are regular verbs, so they end in *-ed*. The past tense form (*did*) of the irregular verb *do* is used in (29d). The sentences in (29e, f, g) show that both past and past participle forms of *go* (*went*, *gone*, respectively) are used. Notice that some *BIN* + verb sequences modify the subjects, that is, they describe the state that the subjects have been in for a long time. This is the case in (29g), which expresses that that place has been in the state of being gone for a long time. Perhaps this is why *gone* instead of *went* is used. Now, consider additional *BIN* constructions and the verb forms and meaning.

- (30) a. The mirror BIN broke.  
(1) 'The mirror has been broken for a long time'  
(2) 'The mirror broke a long time ago'
- b. His pants BIN tore.  
(1) 'His pants have been torn for a long time'  
(2) 'His pants tore a long time ago'
- c. The soup BIN cooked.  
'The soup has been cooked for a long time'
- d. That stew BIN gone.  
'That stew has been gone for a long time'

First consider the adjectival readings in (30), in which what is being referred to is the broken state of the mirror (30a), the torn state of the pants (30b) and the cooked state of the soup (30c). The state of the stew, being no longer there, is also described in (30d). I refer to these as adjectival meanings because they describe the mirror, pants, soup and stew. The verbs *broke* (30a) and *tore* (30b) also have a use that is not descriptive, that is, one that does not focus on describing the state of the subject. This second use is more verbal in nature in that it refers to an activity. In the second reading of (30a), the activity is that the mirror broke a long time ago, and in the second reading of (30b), the activity is that the pants tore a long time ago. In these second readings, what are referred to are the breaking activity in the case of the window and the tearing activity in the case of the pants, not the description of the state of the window and pants. It is the first type of reading (descriptive/adjectival reading) that might show a preference for the past participle verb form *gone* as in (29f, g) and (30d). There is no real evidence

for such a distinction with other verbs so far, but additional examples of participles will be given.

Verbs following *dən* (including *be/BIN dən*) bear simple past morphology as well as *-en* morphology, as is the situation with *BIN*.

- (31) a. You won't even take the trash out, and she *dən* worked all day just like you. (Bm, 70s)  
'You won't even take the trash out, and she has worked all day just like you'
- b. We got three Dollar stores. A new one *dən* opened. (Bf, 60s)  
'We've got three Dollar stores. A new one has (just) opened'
- c. I say, "Now you *dən* lived in California and you cain' drive." (Bf, 50s)  
'I say, "Now you have lived in California before and you can't drive"'
- d. You *dən* got this far. (attested)  
'You have already gotten this far'
- e. That snake *dən* bit me again. (attested)  
'That snake has just bitten me again'
- f. I should'a *dən* went by now. (Bm, 30s)  
'I should have already gone by now'
- g. But He *dən* already said what He'a bless. (attested)  
'But He has already said what He'll bless'
- h. A: Let me know when you wash your towels.  
B: I *dən* washed them. (Bf, 60s)  
'I have already washed them'
- i. I *dən* done all you told me to do. (attested)  
'I have already done all you have told me to do'
- j. A: How many y'all got? Fifty?  
B: Oh, no. We *dən* progressed. (Bm, 50s)  
'Oh, no. We have progressed (i.e., made progress)'
- k. You *dən* been here a year. (attested)  
'Yell, you have already been here a year'
- l. I know where y'all *dən* come from. (Bm, 30s)  
'I know where you two have come from'
- m. I be *dən* drove up there, but I have to drive back. (Bf, 50s)  
'After I have driven up there, I always have to drive back' or  
'It's usually the case that I drive up there, and I have to drive back'
- n. Candy go over there every time she come, if he be *dən* cooked. (Bf, 50s)  
'Candy goes over there every time she comes, if he has cooked'

In all of the sentences, the meaning is quite similar to that of the present perfect in mainstream English. All the sentences in (31) indicate that some activity has ended or is in the resultant state, as in the opening activity in (31b) that has been completed. The sentence in (31k), the having been there for a year is in its resultant state.

So far it has been shown that both simple past and *-en* forms (of irregular verbs) (see 31i) are used in AAE. It is not clear that a distinction is always made such that the simple past is used in one environment while the *-en* form is always used in the other.

One verb to study in determining whether such a distinction is made is *go* (*went/gone*). It may be that in AAE *gone* is restricted to more adjectival uses and *went* is reserved for more verbal uses.

The sentences, especially those in (29) and (30), show that the combinations of aspectual markers and verbs bearing past morphology can yield a range of meanings. AAE does not regularly use past participle forms, but the language system does have a way of indicating meaning that is expressed by using the participle forms in mainstream English. For example, in some cases, a marker such as *BIN* or *dən* may be used with a verb in the past form.

Another verb that will be useful in answering the question about whether there is a past tense/past participle distinction (e.g., *saw/seen*) is *see*. One case in point is that *seen* (not *saw*) is consistently used in the past participle context in the sentence *She just want to be seen* / \**She just want to be saw* (Green 1993). More extensive research should be conducted on the uses of *gone* and *seen* in AAE.

There are also some environments in which the simple past tense and *-en* forms of the verb in its adjectival use occurs with aspectual *be*. Actually, the type of adjectival (descriptive) and verbal (activity) readings that are associated with the *BIN* and *dən* sequences in (30) and (31) are also available with aspectual *be* sequences. The sentences in (32), in which *be* sequences have both adjectival and verbal readings, show that the marker does indeed take the same kinds of past verb forms that occur in *BIN* and *dən* sequences:

- (32) a. I be told in my sleep to go to church. (Bm, 60s)  
       ‘I am usually told in my sleep to go to church’  
       (Literally: Something tells me while I am asleep (dreaming) to go to church.)
- b. I just be broken down. I be tired. (Bf, 30s)  
       ‘I am usually broken down. I am usually tired’
- c. It be done before I think about it. (Bf, 60s)  
       ‘It is usually finished before I think about it’  
       (Literally: The rinse cycle has already finished by the time I think about adding liquid fabric softener to the wash.)
- d. Any comments right quick before I be thrown out? (attested)  
       ‘Are there any comments before I’m taken out of the class?’
- e. Breakfast be cooked at 8 o’clock.  
       ‘Breakfast is usually cooked at 8 o’clock’  
       Two readings are possible here:  
       (1) It is the case that someone usually cooks breakfast at 8 o’clock.  
       (2) Breakfast is usually in a cooked state (i.e., ready) at 8 o’clock.

The sentence in (32a) has a verbal passive reading, and the focus is on the telling event. The object (the person being told) ‘I’ has become the grammatical subject. Consider the corresponding active sentence *Something tells me in my sleep to go to church*, in which *something* is the subject. Note that in mainstream and other varieties of English, the past participle form is used in passive sequences, but in AAE, a simple past form can also be used (e.g., *drove*, not *driven* in (31n)). *Be broken down* in (32b) is

adjectival in that it describes the state that the speaker is usually in, that of being broken down (or that of being tired). Note that the speaker uses the past participle (*broken*) not the simple past (*broke*). Likewise the sentence in (32c) has an adjectival reading, so the rinse is already in a finished state during particular times. The participle *done* (not simple past *did*) is used. The following scenario provides the context in which the sentence in (32c) was used. In this sentence, the speaker was referring to the rinse cycle that occurs when laundry is washing in a washing machine. While walking down the aisle of a large wholesale store, the speaker commented on the different laundry detergents and fabric softeners that were displayed on the shelves. In comparing the liquid fabric softeners and softener sheets, she said that, in general, she does not like the liquids because they must be put into the wash at a precise time. Fabric softener sheets, on the other hand, can be tossed right into the dryer along with the laundry. The speaker felt that the liquid fabric softener required more work because it had to be added to the washer during a particular cycle. Furthermore the liquid is an inconvenience because the washer has usually already finished the entire cycle by the time she thinks about adding the liquid softener during the rinse cycle.

In the way the sentence in (32d) was used, it has an activity reading. The lecturer who used the sentence had already exceeded his allotted time, so in a joking manner, he said that whoever was in control would have him thrown out because he didn't dismiss the class when time was up. Again, the past participle verb form (*thrown*) is used, not the simple past (*threw*). Finally, the sequence in (32e) has a verbal reading, so on the one hand, *be cooked* can mean that someone usually cooks at a certain time, while on the other, it has an adjectival reading in environments in which *cooked* modifies the state of the breakfast. In such a case, the breakfast is described as being in a cooked state. The verb *cook* is a regular verb, so it takes *-ed*.

One of the goals of this section has been to show that both simple past and past participle verb forms are used. Further research will help to determine whether past participle forms such as *seen* and *gone* are indeed restricted to certain environments. Also, as has been demonstrated, aspectual *be* and *BIN* + past verb sequences have verbal (activity) and adjectival (descriptive) readings, and *dən* + past verb sequences have verbal readings. The verb form that is used with *be*, *BIN* and *dən* in these environments is often identical to the simple past, but in some instances irregular verbs in the past participle form (*-en*) are used. Another point is that in AAE, both the simple past and past participle can be used in the passive. It is certain that whether or not the simple past and/or past participle form is used is related to a number of factors such as particular verb, meaning (i.e., adjectival or verbal reading) and speaker. Not much has been said about background of speakers; however, because speakers may participate in a variety of speech situations and belong to different networks, they may use verb forms in different ways.

### 3.7.2 Verbal -s

One point that is made in the discussion of the paradigms in chapter 2 is that 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. As a result, speakers often produce sentences such as (33), in which the verb that occurs with the third person singular subject is not marked with an *-s* (e.g., *come* vs. *comes*):

- (33) When he come down here, I be dən talked to him. (attested)  
 ‘When he comes down here, I have usually already talked to him’

However, verbs may also be marked with verbal *-s*, which may have a number of different functions: third person singular agreement marker, narrative present marker and habitual marker. Some researchers who have considered data produced by speakers of earlier varieties of AAE have argued that the third person singular *-s* was used with verbs that occurred with third person singular subjects in much the same way that the marker is used in other varieties of English. Poplack and Tagliamonte (1989) consider verbal *-s* inflection in AAE with the goal of determining whether the variation in the use of this marker in early and modern AAE “has a precedent in the history of the language, or is rather an intrusion from another system” (p. 47).<sup>8</sup>

Speakers may use this verbal *-s* as a narrative present marker on verbs that occur in the narration of events. Butters (1989) and Labov (1987) address the use of verbal *-s* as a narrative marker. An example from a television court program illustrating this narrative *-s* (on *gets*) is given below. During the show, a nineteen-year-old African American female used the third person singular *-s* when she was recounting her experience with the plaintiff:

- (34) Judge: What happened?  
 Woman: He had called me Wednesday afternoon and asked, “Do you want to go the movies” . . . so I gets in the car. (January 2000, *Judge Joe Brown*)

In the context of answering the judge’s question and telling her story, the woman uses verbal *-s* with the verb *get* although the subject is *I*, which usually takes plural verb forms (e.g., *get*). (This use of *-s* occurs in other English varieties as well.) Another environment in which verbal *-s* has been argued to occur is in habitual contexts, as illustrated below:

- (35) a. I can show you some of the stuff we tesses them on.<sup>9</sup> (Bf, 30s)  
 ‘I can show you some of the stuff we test them on’  
 b. A: You have to get your rest.  
 B: I dos that. (Bf, 80s)  
 (Note: *Dos* is pronounced as ‘doos,’ not as ‘does.’)  
 ‘I do that’  
 c. When I think about Palm Sunday, I gets excited. (attested)  
 ‘When I think about Palm Sunday, I get excited’  
 d. I sits and rides. (Bm, 60s)  
 ‘I sit and ride’  
 e. Nobody don’t be there when it throws water everywhere? (Bf, 80s)  
 ‘Nobody is usually there when it throws water everywhere?’  
 (Literally: Is anybody usually there when it throws water everywhere?)

- f. The devil *haves* us in a state of sin. (attested)  
 ‘The devil has us in a state of sin’
- g. That’s really all that’s important, that he come around and bes with us. (attested)  
 ‘That’s really all that’s important, that he comes around and spends time with us’
- h. Well, that’s the way it bes. (attested)  
 ‘Well, that’s the way it usually is’

The subjects of the sentences in (35a, b, c, d) are first person plural (*we*) and first person singular (*I*), but the verb form still ends in *-s* (*tesses, dos, gets, sits, rides*). All of these sentences communicate some habitual meaning. Take for example (35c). The speaker begins the sentence with *When I think about Palm Sunday*, which expresses particular occasions (some notion of habituality) during which he gets excited. In (35b) when B says, *I dos that*, she means that she rests regularly. In the remaining sentences, the subject is third person singular (*it, the devil, he*). The *-s* morphology on *throws* (35e) may also serve as a habitual marker, in which *throws water everywhere* is an event that occurs on different occasions. The case of *throws* may be argued to be ambiguous between habitual marking and third person singular marking. Because the subject of the verb is third person singular (*it*), it is possible that the verbal *-s* morphology is also an agreement marker, dually marking number (third person singular) and habitual aspect. Consider also the case in (35f), in which *have* is actually marked with the verbal *-s*. As a habitual marker, *haves* may be used to indicate that the speaker is referring to situations in which the devil occasionally puts us in a state of sin.<sup>10</sup> However, *-s* on *have* may also be used to mark duration, focusing on the sinful state in which we live due to the wiles of the devil. It might also be argued that *-s* on *have* has multiple functions, including agreeing with the third person singular subject *the devil*. It would be useful to collect further data to determine whether *haves* would also occur with plural subjects. I predict that it would also occur with plural subjects.

In (35g, h), *be* forms are marked with verbal *-s*. As has been explained in the discussion of aspectual *be*, the marker is not like other verb forms in that it cannot be conjugated into different person and number forms (e.g., *is, am, are*), so it remains invariant, uninflected in its paradigm, regardless of the person and number of the subject: *I/we be, you be, he/shel/it/they be*. If aspectual *be* is not marked for person or number, then what is the role of the *-s* that is attached to it in (35h)? It may very well be that the verbal *-s* is functioning here as a habitual marker, and because aspectual *be* is an inherent habitual marker, verbal *-s* is redundant; it is doing what aspectual *be* already does. It is worth noting that the sentence *It bes that way* is commonly used. In fact, the title of one of Smitherman’s popular articles is “It Bees Dat Way Sometime”: *Sounds and Structure of Present-Day Black English* (1985). The common use of *bes* with the subject *it* may account for the sentence in (35h). The examples in (35) make good cases for arguing that the verbal *-s* also functions solely as a habitual marker in some environments in AAE. This is one difference between AAE and general American English. Verbal *-s* in general American English will always occur in third person non-past singular contexts, which may also have habitual interpretations (e.g., *Bruce runs two races [every week]*). Of course, in mainstream English (as well

as in other varieties of English, including AAE) this habitual reading occurs with the simple present, so the verb that occurs with plural subjects can also have a habitual reading (e.g., *They handle the outgoing packages*) although it is not marked with *-s*. Also, in light of the questions that have been raised, this verbal *-s* may have other functions.

The process of marking habitual with verbal *-s* is optional in AAE, as we see in (36a, b):

- (36) a. Carl, you know what I notice about this? When it be making ice, a lot of water fall in it. (Bf, 60s)  
 ‘Carl, you know what I notice about this? When it is usually making ice, a lot of water falls into it’
- b. They be mad at me cause when the news come on, they got to get up. (Bf, 60s)  
 ‘They are usually mad at me because when the news comes on, they have to get up’

These sentences have habitual interpretations even without verbal *-s* on the verbs. In (36a) the *when* clause (*when it be making ice*) specifies the occasions on which a lot of water falls into it. The verb *fall* does not need to be marked habitual by verbal *-s*. Similarly, the verb *come* (36b) is also within a *when* clause (*when the news come on*) that specifies the occasions on which an activity occurs. *Come* does not have to be overtly marked for habitual. Note also that aspectual *be* in (36a, b) is not marked with *-s*.

### 3.7.3 Genitive marking

As has been shown, some elements are not obligatory in marking certain types of syntactic and grammatical relationships in AAE. The morphosyntactic marker genitive *-s* falls within this category in that it is not required in possessive or other genitive contexts. It has been argued that word order is sufficient for marking the possessive relationship in AAE, so possessive *-’s* need not be present (see the discussion in Smitherman 1977). In the sentences in (37), no possessive (*-’s*) marker is used, but the ownership relationship is expressed by the order, in which the possessors *my mama*, *Rolanda* and *church* precede the possessed, *house*, *bed* and *responsibility*, respectively.

- (37) a. I always get bites cause we be hanging out at my **mama house**. (Bf, 9)  
 ‘I always get bites because we usually hang out at my mama’s house’
- b. Sometime **Rolanda bed** don’t be made up. (Bm, 70s)  
 ‘Sometimes Rolanda’s bed isn’t made up’
- c. That’s the **church responsibility**. (Bm, 40s)  
 ‘That’s the church’s responsibility’

The process of genitive marking is definitely variable in that speakers may or may not use the *-’s* in such contexts.

- (38) a. I'll be dən reached across that counter and pulled that **woman's hair** out. (Bf, 40s)  
 'I'll reach across that counter and pull that woman's hair out'  
 (Literally: If she takes certain actions, I will immediately reach across that counter and pull that woman's hair out')
- b. She say, "Y'all be so good in here and in **Miss Brown's class**, y'all be the loudest things in here." (Bm, 13)  
 'She says, "You are usually so good in here and in Miss Brown's class, you are usually the loudest things in here"'
- c. I give the Lord **his money**, but it don't be from here. (Bf, 60s)  
 'I give the Lord his money, but it isn't usually from here'
- d. They want to do **they own thing**, and you steady talking to them. (attested)  
 'They want to do their own thing, and you're continuing to talk to them'
- e. If they wanna go out and do something else with it, that's **they business**. (attested)  
 'If they want to go out and do something else with it, that's their business'

Speakers also use the *-s* marker as well as pronouns such as *his*, *hers* and *they* in genitive contexts.<sup>11</sup>

## Summary

The focus in the final part of this chapter is on morphosyntax, in particular morphology for marking past, habitual and genitive. AAE does not make a morphological distinction between the past and past participle forms across the board; however, there may be a distinction between these forms when certain verbs are used, in particular *went/gone* and *saw/seen*. *Gone* and *seen* may be the preferred forms in adjectival or descriptive readings.

A theme throughout this chapter is that AAE is systematic, so speakers follow set rules in forming sentences. These rules cover areas such as verbal sequences, negation, questions, relative clauses and existential constructions, so when speakers know AAE, they know rules governing the use of sequences from these different categories. These patterns have been presented separately in different sections, but speakers can put them together to form grammatical sentences such as the following:

- That's the class that don't nobody be signing up for. (Embedded negative inversion and aspectual *be*)
- Why you think she BIN went to Texas? (*Wh*-question without subject auxiliary inversion, *BIN* with past verb form *went*)

## Exercises

1. In AAE genuine yes-no questions can be formed without placing an auxiliary at the beginning of the sentence. In what other way could the following question be produced: Did she want to go to the basketball game?

2. There are two possible tag questions for *Bruce be dən washed his car*.
  - (a) What are the two tag questions?
  - (b) Why are the two tag questions possible?
  - (c) Explain the process you used to form the tag questions.
3. As noted, at least six distinctions in the past are made in AAE. Illustrate the examples with the verb *write*. Be sure to identify each example with the appropriate label.
4. Explain the similarities and differences between the following pairs of sentences:
  - (a) Don't nothing happen in this small town./Nothing don't happen in this small town.
  - (b) Nobody don't want to go to the movies./Nobody don't want to go to no movies.
  - (c) I know what you talking about. That's the magazine I had read during enrichment period./I know what you talking about. That's the magazine I read during enrichment period.
5. Consider the negative inversion or near negative inversion constructions in (a–c) and the corresponding existential constructions:
 

(a) Wasn't nobody there.	'Nobody was there'
Existential: It wasn't nobody there.	'There wasn't anybody there'
(b) Ain't nothing in that purse.	'Nothing is in that purse'
Existential: It ain't nothing in that purse.	'There is nothing in that purse'
	'There isn't anything in that purse'
(c) Don't be nobody on that corner.	'Nobody is usually on that corner'
Existential: It don't be nobody on that corner.	'Usually there is nobody on that corner'
	'Usually there isn't anybody on that corner'

Now consider the negative inversion constructions in (d–f), which do not have corresponding existential constructions. Ungrammatical examples of existentials are provided for your information. They are flagged by '\*'.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| (d) Can't nobody say nothing about that article.              | 'Nobody can say anything about that article' |
| Existential: *It can't nobody say nothing about that article  |  |
| (e) Won't nothing stop me from drinking tea.                  | 'Nothing will stop me from drinking tea'     |
| Existential: *It won't nothing stop me from drinking tea.     |  |
| (f) Don't nobody listen to the five o'clock news.             | 'Nobody listens to the five o'clock news'    |
| Existential: *It don't nobody listen to the five o'clock news |  |

Explain why it is possible to form corresponding existentials for the sentences in (a–c) but not for the sentences in (d–e).

6. In our discussion of relative clauses, we noted that the relative pronoun (e.g., *who*, *that*) is not obligatory in all environments. Now consider the following sentences:
  - (a) The dog [that bit me] is brown.

(a') \*The dog [—bit me] is brown.

(b) The pens [that ran out of ink] will be put in the empty box.

(b') \*The pens [— ran out of ink] will be put in the empty box.

The sentences in (a, a') and (b, b') show that the relative pronoun must be present. Why are the sentences in (a') and (b') ungrammatical; that is, why are the sentences ungrammatical when the relative pronoun is absent? You might begin by considering what the relative clause (in brackets) modifies.