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**GRAMMATICAL FEATURES OF AFRICAN
AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH IN LYRICS
AND INTERVIEWS OF \$UICIDEBOYS\$
BA thesis**

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to add to the discussion on the usage of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) by non-African-Americans, specifically white rappers. This discussion is valuable, as it may help to understand the current status of AAVE in the US and elsewhere, as AAVE seems to have spread to different ethnic communities beyond the African American ones. As rap and hip-hop culture have played a major role in this, this thesis focuses on the white rapper duo – \$uicideboy\$. The proposition of this thesis is that \$uicideboy\$ employ more grammatical features of AAVE in their song lyrics than in their interview speech, demonstrating that AAVE usage in their lyrics might have been a conscious decision. Thus, the results of this paper can also contribute to the understanding of rap music as a linguistic register and ascertain the linguistic devices employed in this register.

First, this paper discusses the history of AAVE and presents the features to be used in the analysis. Among other things, it explores the definitions of rap and hip-hop, as well as register and genre. Then, the corpus-based analysis of the grammatical features, conducted with the help of such tools as UNIX and Whisper, is presented and discussed in detail.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAVE – African American Vernacular English

SWE – Southern White English

AI – Artificial Intelligence

INTRODUCTION

Hip-hop culture and music have become a global phenomenon, consumed by people worldwide, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or class (Stapleton 1998: 220). Rap seems to be one of the most popular music genres in the United States, if not the most popular (Araujo 2018: 233). Rap music has presumably emerged from blues, a predominantly African American musical genre, and possibly other classic African American popular music (Rabaka 2012: 1–3; Demers 2003: 41). Hip-hop music as we know it today has its roots in the 1970-s Bronx, New York, and was listened to and created by African Americans, although, today, its success and popularity are a result of a wider, mostly white audience (Jeffries 2011: 1–3; Adedeji 2022: 291). After hip-hop music became more widely recognized, rappers of different backgrounds, including white, emerged in the US and elsewhere. The popularity of rap rose to such a level that it is now considered mainstream and a part of popular music (Hall 1998: 802; Shusterman 1991: 613). Presumably, in response to such an enormous rise in popularity, an ‘underground’ scene has emerged in hip-hop. ‘Underground’ rap is comprised of artists who are self-made and often own their independent record labels (Oware 2014: 60–61; Tofalvy 2020: 59–60). \$uicideboy\$ can also be categorized as an ‘underground’ rap duo. Their independence and authenticity are exactly why they may prove to be a particularly interesting subject for research on AAVE usage, as they are not restricted or censored by a label or corporation.

As mentioned above, some rap music can be considered a part of the pop genre, as the definition of this genre is quite fluid. The genre of pop conforms to the times and changes according to what is popular at a given moment. This musical genre can be influenced by politics, history, culture, and current social and economic issues. (Jiang 2022: 77) This paper, however, discusses register, which refers to a linguistic variation according to an extra-linguistic context. This means that the term register is used to determine a certain non-

linguistic context that influences the way language is used. (Li 2022: 397–398) In this case, the extra-linguistic context is the musical genre. Generally, rap music can be considered a part of the linguistic register of pop music (Werner 2022: 176) since it is attributed to the pop genre. However, rap music seems to employ a certain language to connect with its audience through the notion of being ‘from the streets.’ Therefore, as Kreyer (2016) argues, rap music might be considered its own separate register. This may be clear in the case of African American rappers, as extensive research has been done on their language use, but it is still unclear where to place non-African-Americans in this discussion.

Since rap emerged as an African American genre, it is known to include African American Vernacular (AAVE) features in its lyrics (Morgan 2001: 188). AAVE is a dialect of American English that comes from the Southern regions of the United States (Wolfram 2004: 319); it is, therefore, similar in some respects to white dialects from these regions (Zughoul et al. 2016: 32; Patrick 2006: 159–163; Wolfram 1974: 498; see the list of features in section 1.1).

A study similar to this paper was conducted by Edwards and Ash (2015), and it focused on the comparison of grammatical features of AAVE in Tupac’s lyrics, interviews, and poetry. This thesis partially relies on the study by Edwards and Ash (2015). Most of the features examined in this study are also used in this thesis: copula suppression, *gonna*, *ain’t*, and double negation. However, some features, such as 3rd person singular regularization and contextual possessive morphology (omittance of possessive ‘s), were not chosen for this thesis, as their analysis requires more complex tools or corpus tagging. The results of Edwards and Ash’s study (2015) indicate that Tupac used more grammatical AAVE features in his lyrics and speech than in his poetry and used more AAVE features in his lyrics than in interviews. Since Edwards and Ash’s study (2015) examines these features in the lyrics

and interviews of an African-American rapper, it could prove rewarding to see the differences in usage of AAVE by Tupac and \$uicideboy\$ – non-African-Americans.

Previous studies have shown that there is evidence of AAVE being used by non-African-Americans. The usage of AAVE by white people mostly seems to be associated with the hip-hop identity of youth (Cutler 1999: 429–430). But there are also cases of AAVE usage by Korean-Americans (Chun 2001: 55–57) and Hispanic youth of North Carolina (Dunstan 2010: 191–199). Furthermore, an exceptional study by Julie Sweetland (2022) demonstrated that AAVE can be used by non-African-Americans not only as a stylistic or identity tool but also naturally. Sweetland’s study focused on one white speaker of AAVE who grew up in a predominantly black environment and, as a result, uses AAVE in her natural everyday speech. (Sweetland 2022: 514–536) On the other hand, some researchers regard the usage of AAVE by white people as cultural appropriation and a demonstration of white privilege (Eberhardt, et al. 2015: 321).

This thesis aims to answer the research question of whether \$uicideboy\$ use more grammatical AAVE features in their lyrics than in interviews. Additionally, this thesis aims to ascertain exactly how often they use these features. The hypothesis is that \$uicideboy\$ use more grammatical features of AAVE in their lyrics than in their interview speech. This, in turn, points to the fact that these AAVE features can be a deliberate stylistic or linguistic choice in their rap lyrics. It can then be further concluded that if the duo does not use AAVE (or not as much) in their natural speech in interviews, they might be aware that AAVE is one of the register markers that are used deliberately to connect with the listeners or identify with the culture of hip-hop. One of the purposes of this thesis is to fill the gap in research on the use of AAVE by non-African-Americans in rap.

The findings of this thesis may contribute to the general understanding of the current status of AAVE in the US and the world. The issues discussed in this paper may also show

how AAVE is now used not only in Black communities but also by people of different backgrounds. Moreover, this discussion can contribute to the understanding of the role and status of white rappers by showing how they belong (or do not belong) to the genre and register..

For the purpose of determining whether \$uicideboy\$ use AAVE, this thesis will employ a mixed qualitative and quantitative method to analyze two corpora, consisting of two interviews and 25 song lyrics of \$uicideboy\$. The interviews will be transcribed automatically by Whisper, an AI tool developed by OpenAI for the transcription of spoken language; further proofreading will be done manually. Some grammatical AAVE features will be identified and counted automatically using the commands for the UNIX operating system, but some features require manual processing. The number of specific features in the interviews and lyrics will then be compared, and conclusions will be drawn.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review gives an overview of the topics and terminology relevant to this study. The first subsection explores AAVE's history and classification and describes the dialect variant that this thesis is concerned with. The second subtopic of this section is concerned with musical genre and linguistic register, as well as how the subject of the study relates to these terms.

1.1 History of AAVE and Its Key Features

AAVE (African American Vernacular English) is something that one comes across quite frequently in popular media, and its elements can be found in any kind of pop music. Therefore, it is gradually becoming more frequent in the speech of not only African Americans but also the general American population. There is extensive research that shows AAVE usage by people outside of African American communities, as it has been reported that youth of different backgrounds employ AAVE for various reasons (Cutler 1999: 429–430; Chun 2001: 55–57; Dunstan 2010: 191–199). However, it has not always been so. Thus, it is important to explore the roots of AAVE and its current status.

Kautzsch and Wolfram (2004: 341–354; 2004: 319–340) agree that AAVE can be divided into two categories – earlier African American Vernacular and urban African American Vernacular. The ‘earlier’ category refers to a period from the beginning of colonization in the 17th century to the beginning of urbanization in the first part of the 20th century. Urban AAVE, therefore, refers to contemporary AAVE spoken mostly in urban centers. There is another (sub)category of contemporary AAVE – rural Southern – that is less relevant to this study. The latest research seems to focus on urban AAVE, and this paper is also concerned with this variety. However, to demonstrate how Southern AAVE is different from urban AAVE, the following are the features present in the Southern variety and not found in urban AAVE: 3rd plural *-s* (e.g. *The dogs barks*); past tense *be* leveling

(e.g. *I weren't there*); *a*-prefixing (e.g. *She was a-fishin'*); *for-to* complement (e.g. *I want for to go now*) (Wolfram 2004: 319).

Wolfram (2004: 319) argues it is certain that AAVE has its roots in the Southern parts of the US. However, the most recent developments in the dialect are connected to metropolitan areas. The author argues that although the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North played a role in the development of urban AAVE, it is not the sole factor that explains why urban AAVE is now considered the standard form of AAVE. Other factors, such as cultural and linguistic shifts, also contributed to this development.

As it may be apparent, some of the grammatical features discussed in this study can be attributed to the slang/vernacular of the general American population. Such features as *gonna* or *ain't* can often be heard from American English speakers of any background. This may be due to the popularity of rap music that frequently uses AAVE. As mentioned above, there is evidence that white youth use AAVE as a means to identify with the hip-hop culture (Cutler 1999: 429–430). Another possible reason for that may be the similarity of AAVE to the Southern White Vernacular (SWE). Most of the studies seem to agree that these two varieties share some phonological, lexical, and syntactical features (Zughoul et al. 2016: 32; Patrick 2006: 159–163; Wolfram 1974: 498). The results of this study may, thus, contribute to the understanding of this phenomenon, as the subjects of the study (i.e. \$uicideboy\$) are from Louisiana and have a European-American background. While the study may show that they do use some of the AAVE features in their speech, if this number is lower than that in their lyrics, the usage in speech may be explained by the influence of SWE.

The features of AAVE relevant to this study will be drawn from two sources – Edwards and others (2015: 169) and Brinton and others (2017: 465). These features were chosen based on the possibility of identifying them using Unix commands. The grammatical

features of AAVE that will be examined in this study are listed below, with examples from the \$uicideboy\$ rap songs in the brackets (also see Appendix 1):

- present tense copula suppression (e.g., “**you boys** refillable” (‘Carrolton’));
- future/prospective *gonna*, also *gon'*, *'a* (e.g., “If I take a bet, you can guess who **gon'** win” (‘Memoirs of a Gorilla’));
- the negator *ain't* (e.g., “**Ain't** no rules to the game, talk how you want” (‘South Side \$uicide’));
- double negative (e.g., “**Ain't nothing** but a pussy if you gon' throw shade” (‘Champion of Death’));
- invariant *be* (e.g., “**I be** that skinny fiend sippin' lean, caffeine with codeine” (‘LTE’));
- the auxiliary *done* (e.g., “**I done** dug myself” (‘...And to Those I Love, Thanks for Sticking Around...’)).

Zero-copula, copula suppression, or copula omission is a linguistic phenomenon where a copular/linking verb is absent in a sentence/clause. A copula or a linking verb is usually a verb without a semantic or syntactic function and is used to link a subject to a predicate (Samarxhiu et al., 2014: 50), the most common linking verb in English is *to be*. In this thesis, the focus is specifically on the omission of *to be* in the present tense. In some languages, such as Russian, zero-copula is the default, while in others, it indicates a certain tone, for example, in Japanese, where it is used to sound less assertive (Ayano 2004: 446). Previous studies have also shown that rappers use copula suppression to emphasize their African American identity, and it can be targeted toward a specific audience, as seems to be the case with Beyoncé (Eberhardt et al., 2020: 74).

Gonna, *gon'*, and *a'* are originally shortened forms of *to be going to*. However, some argue that these forms are increasingly becoming more independent from their source form *to be going to* and extending to various new contexts (Lorenz 2013: 46).

The contraction *ain't* originally was a contraction of only *am not* and first appeared in English in the 18th century as *an't* (Whitley 1983: 126). In contemporary English, it can substitute both auxiliary and lexical *to be* but only auxiliary *to have*. It is present not only in AAVE but also in other non-standard varieties of both American and British English. (Martínez 2010: 549)

The double negative is a linguistic phenomenon where two or more elements express negation in a sentence/clause, but the sentence/clause has an affirmative meaning regardless (Blanchette 2015: 1-2).

Invariant or habitual *be* seems to express habitual actions. Wolfram, a sociolinguist-pioneer in AAVE studies, states that invariant *be* is a feature unique to AAVE. (Wolfram 1974: 516-520)

Auxiliary *done* or completive *done*, as Wolfram calls it, is a feature AAVE shares with SWE. This auxiliary seems to express a meaning that is similar to the meaning of the standard English perfective aspect. However, in AAVE, it is also sometimes used to indicate a change of state or intensify an action. (Wolfram 2000: 119)

1.2 Rap as a register

Werner (2022: 176) considers rap to be a part of the culture of hip-hop, and it is defined as an artful arrangement of verbal rhymes synchronized with musical beats. According to Mitchell (2015: 227), hip-hop as a culture includes other elements, such as MCing, DJing, breakdancing, and graffiti writing, which have existed for over forty years. However, Alim (2004: 388) argues that rap is today's most prevalent aspect of hip-hop.

First, it is necessary to establish what can be considered a register and how it differs from genre. The two terms seem related; however, they also have distinct aspects in their meaning. Most studies agree that genre refers to the classification or categorization of music, and it is deliberate and structured, while register refers to language and how it is used in a specific context (Christie 1991: 203; Green et al. 1998: 147). In this case, the context is the genre of rap music. Nevertheless, genre and register are similar because they reflect language use in particular conditions and cultures (Malcolm 2005: 57-74). Therefore, since this study is concerned with language rather than music or societal concerns, rap will be referred to as a register.

Rap is often regarded as a part of a register of pop music. However, Kreyer (2016), in his corpus-linguistic study, demonstrates that it can be considered a separate register or at least a subregister of pop. He also states that the main aim of rap music is to connect with the listeners by means of a specific language that both the audience and the rapper share, which also points to their shared background or origin ('from the streets'). Thus, this kind of music has a distinct function, which is different from pop music. Linguistic features of this specific language include certain prevalent semantic domains, such as substance abuse, crime, warfare, etc; idiosyncratic spelling, such as word-final *-a* and plural marker *-z*; distinct lexical features, such as taboo expressions and profanities; and grammatical characteristics, such as copula absence.

Although Kreyer's study (2016) has laid a beginning for the study of rap as a separate register, it is not free of limitations. It does not take into consideration non-African-American rappers and their language use. This is best demonstrated by *nigga*¹ – one of the lexemes indicated as a register marker. The issue is that, at least in the context of the USA, it seems to be controversial and highly negative when used by non-African-Americans. This may be

¹ For the sake of political correctness, further referred to as the *n-word*, as long as it is not a direct quote.

due to the *n-word* being strongly associated with white supremacy and its ability to cause psychic harm to some, as psychoanalyst Rao (2021: 316–317) argues. Thus, this possible register marker cannot be present in white rap.

There is then a question of whether and which register features are used by non-African-Americans and how this usage relates to the ‘rap as a separate register’ theory. For example, Mitchell (2015: 227) claims that the main listeners of hip-hop in the US are middle-class younger people of European ancestry. The author also demonstrates that the hip-hop scene is present all over the world. However, whether AAVE is present in any of these rap scenes has not been studied at all. Keeping this in mind, to get a clearer picture of rap as a separate register, it is possibly necessary to include non-African-American rap in the discussion.

Many of the studies on non-African-American rap focus on the most successful white rapper of all time – Eminem. Some of the studies include “*Guess who’s back, back again*” *Stylistic development in Eminem’s lyrics* by Werner (2022), which also employs a corpus-linguistic approach but is concerned with language style; *Eminem’s construction of authenticity* by Armstrong (2010) which analyses Eminem’s lyrics but also media’s perception of him to determine how his self-constructed identity differs from his image in the media. None of these studies seem to analyze the lexical, syntactic, or semantic features of lyrics, especially in connection with AAVE. One study that tackles AAVE in non-African-American rap is *AAVE and Its Presence and Influence on Rap Music* by Ramos and others (2020), as it briefly mentions the features of AAVE used by non-African-American rappers Lil Pump and Iggy Azalea in their lyrics. However, the study by Ramos is mostly concerned with the social question of whether it is acceptable for white rappers to use AAVE and does not analyze the language itself.

\$uicideboy\$ seem ideal for the study of AAVE in lyrics and interviews. Firstly due to the fact that this duo can be categorized as what is called ‘underground’ in the rap scene. ‘Underground’ seems to refer to such groups in this genre that are independent and unrestricted by corporations, thus having more creative freedom (Oware 2014: 60-61). It also seems to relate to independent groups or labels organized around this kind of music (Tofalvy 2020: 59-60). Both can be attributed to \$uicideboy\$, as they release music under their own label, G*59 Records (G59records.com 2024; Genuis.com 2024). Such artists as \$uicideboy\$ seem not to be subject to any censorship that may otherwise be present in larger music corporations or labels. Thus, their lyrics must be a pure, unfiltered expression of art uninfluenced by other people or any censorship. This kind of linguistic material can be especially valuable to study since it is not altered by any regulations. Moreover, the duo has quite a number of interviews, which cannot be said about many other underground artists. As of 2024, \$uicideboy\$ have many shorter interviews and at least two longer ones (30 minutes and longer).

It is clear from previous research on rap music that the usage of AAVE by non-African-Americans has not been studied enough. There also seems to be a need for further research on rap music as a separate register. Since both artists from \$uicideboy\$ grew up in a predominantly black neighborhood (Allen 2020), it is particularly insightful to analyze their language use in both their speech and lyrics.

2. CORPUS-BASED ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This chapter will discuss the methodology used in this study and present the analysis and its results. The first subsection explains why this study employs both qualitative and quantitative research and demonstrates the limitations of the chosen methodology. The second subsection presents the findings of the analysis. The third subsection discusses the findings and draws conclusions from them.

2.1 Methodology

As already mentioned above, the main purpose of this study is to analyze the interview speech and lyrics of the artist \$uicideboy\$ and determine how much AAVE they use and whether they use more AAVE in their lyrics than in their interview speech. For these purposes, this paper employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches and analyzes two corpora compiled by the author – the lyrics corpus consisting of the 25 most popular songs on Spotify and the interview corpus consisting of two interviews.

\$uicideboy\$ is a rapper duo consisting of cousins Aristos Norman Petrou (main rap name²: Ruby da Cherry) and Scott Anthony Arceneaux Jr. (main rap name: \$crim). The two cousins were raised in New Orleans, Louisiana, in a predominately African American neighborhood, according to the Factory and Allen (2023; 2020). However, the extent of the influence of African American Vernacular on their everyday speech in their childhoods is difficult to determine. As \$crim, the DJ of the group, states in their interview for Nardwuar (see Appendix 2), their music is heavily influenced by African American rappers, such as Partners-N-Crime, Tommy Wright III, La Chat, Project Pimp, and many others.

The song lyrics corpus was compiled with the lyrics available at Genius.com (2024). The songs were chosen based on the artist's most popular songs on Spotify (Kwordb.net

² Both rappers have many different pseudonyms and alter egos, but Ruby and \$crim are their most well-known rap names.

2024), except for one song that the duo appears on as a featured artist. The lyrics corpus consists of the first 25 songs from this list and amounts in total to 7,464 words. Repetitions, sample parts, adlibs, and some labeling, such as ‘verse,’ ‘chorus,’ etc., were removed. However, if the sampled part was from their own earlier tracks, it was included in the corpus. The parts of other featured artists were removed. It was decided not to differentiate between the two members of the duo as the subject is the group \$uicideboy\$, not the individuals.

The interview corpus consists of two interviews. One is an interview by a YouTube channel, NardwuarServiette, that was posted on YouTube on July 19th, 2023 (see Appendix 2). The length of the interview is 32 minutes and 43 seconds. The interviewer’s questions and remarks were removed from the corpus. The second is the interview by Mass Appeal as a part of the Open Space series, posted on the Mass Appeal YouTube channel on April 21st, 2017 (see Appendix 2). The length of the interview is 9 minutes and 31 seconds. The interviewer’s questions were already not present in the original video. In total, the interview corpus amounts to 7,357 words. Both interviews were produced for YouTube and were not streamed anywhere else. The Nardwuar interview has 2.2 million views as of May 2024. The Mass Appeal interview has 1.3 million views as of May 2024.

The interview speech was transcribed using Whisper, which was developed by OpenAI (2024). This automatic speech recognition AI was trained on 680,000 hours of online speech data. OpenAI claims that the dataset used for training was quite diverse, including different languages, accents, specialized language, and background noise, making the model resilient to these peculiarities. Amorese and others (2023: 5) state that the accuracy of Whisper is 95.1% for English speech. After using the tool and proofreading the transcribed text, this percentage seems to be accurate. Although the accuracy percentage is striking, inconsistencies and inaccuracies still require further correction and manual processing. During proofreading of the interviews transcribed by the tool, the following

errors had to be corrected: missing fillers such as ‘like,’ *-ing* ending transcribed as *-in*’ in some places and as *-ing* where *-in*’ would be more appropriate, the shortened form of ‘little’ – *lil*’ spelled inconsistently (*lil*’ or *lil*), “fifteen grand” transcribed as simply \$15,000, and spelling errors (*shout out* transcribed as *shot out*, *remember* as *a member*, *seeing* as *sing*, *rap* as *wrap*, *the gig’s up* as *the gigs up*). The speech data was also changed to adhere to Genius.com’s standardized spelling system (Genius.com 2024) so that both corpora could be compared easily. For example, Whisper transcribed “okay” as *OK*, which had to be changed to *okay* according to the Genius spelling. Where the tool was inconsistent with the spelling of the short form of “little,” the *lil*’ spelling was chosen.

The corpus analysis was done on UNIX, an operating system that manages and distributes computer resources to users. It is a system that is known to be extensively used in educational institutions and research. (Kernighan 1982: 779) UNIX provides a structured file system, compatible input/output operations, non-synchronous processes, and a system command language that can be chosen based on individual user preferences (Ritchie et al. 1974: 365). The features were identified in the text using such Unix commands as *grep*. For example, the *grep* command presented in Figure 1 was created to find every instance of double negative usage.

```
grep -Ei "\b(don't|doesn't|can't|won't|ain't)\b.*\b(no|not|none|no
one|nobody|nothing|neither|nowhere)\b"
```

Figure 1. The command that was used to identify double negatives.

Since this command outputs sentences that contain a negation word (such as *don't*, *doesn't*, etc.) followed by another negation word (such as *no*, *not*, etc.) anywhere in the sentence, there are inaccuracies in the output. There are some instances of false positives, such as the sentence “I don't, no, this is sick.” – it exhibits two negation words, but it is not considered a double negation since these words appear in different clauses. Such cases of

false positives are removed manually. Otherwise, this command proved to be mostly accurate, with no actual occurrences of double negatives being excluded from the output.

However, some features could not be identified automatically as they are too complex and beyond the possibilities of UNIX commands, and others required a combination of manual and automatic processing. The former refers to the feature of present tense copula suppression. The contexts of its occurrence vary so largely that it is challenging to predict and encode in a simple command. This feature had to be analyzed manually. Such features as auxiliary *done* and invariant *be* were identified by a combination of automatic search using UNIX and manual processing. To demonstrate, Figure 2 contains the command that was employed to find the auxiliary *done*.

```
grep -w 'done'
```

Figure 2. The command that was used to identify the auxiliary 'done.'

This command outputs every instance of the occurrence of the word 'done,' regardless of its grammatical function. It also excludes any instances where the string 'done' is a part of another longer word. After receiving an output of all occurrences of *done*, instances where it functions as an auxiliary had to be identified manually.

Despite the challenges posed by the imperfect accuracy of the transcription tool and UNIX commands, this methodology allows for a comprehensive and objective analysis of the artist's use of AAVE.

2.2 Findings

As indicated earlier, the six features used in this analysis are present tense copula suppression; future/prospective *gonna*, *gon'*, *'a*; the negator *ain't*; double negative; invariant *be*; and the auxiliary *done*. This analysis aims to answer whether \$suicideboy\$ use AAVE in their lyrics and interviews and, if so, which features and how many exactly. The data

received during the analysis can be compared directly without the need for normalization due to the similar size of the corpora, as each corpus amounts to about 7000 words. Table 1 demonstrates the number of occurrences of each feature in interviews and lyrics and the total number of occurrences in interviews and lyrics.

	Copula suppression	<i>gonna</i> , <i>gon'</i> , 'a	<i>ain't</i>	Double negative	invariant <i>be</i>	Auxiliary <i>done</i>	Total
Interview	0	9	1	1	1	0	12
Lyrics	23	16	19	4	6	2	70

Table 1. The number of AAVE features present in the lyrics and interviews of \$uicideboy\$.

Based on the findings, it is clear that \$uicideboy\$ use significantly more AAVE features in their lyrics than in their interviews – 70 features in lyrics and 12 in interviews, which is more than 5 times more features in their lyrics than in interviews. The most striking difference is copula suppression, as it was used 23 times in lyrics and was not used in interviews at all. The next most remarkable difference is *ain't*, as it was used 19 times in lyrics and only once in interviews. Double negative (4 in lyrics, 1 in interviews), invariant *be* (6 in lyrics, 1 in interviews), and auxiliary *done* (2 in lyrics, 0 in interviews) were not used as much, but the pattern is still present – there are more of those features in lyrics than in interviews. For charts demonstrating the percentage distribution of the features in the lyrics and interviews separately, see Appendix 3.

Since the feature *gonna* has three different phonological variants – *gonna*, *gon'*, and 'a, Table 2 demonstrates the number of occurrences of each variant in lyrics and interviews.

	<i>gonna</i>	<i>gon'</i>	'a	Total
Interview	9	0	0	9
Lyrics	3	5	8	16

Table 2. Distribution of the three phonological variants of 'gonna' in lyrics and interviews.

As indicated by the findings, there is a pronounced difference in which variants are used in the lyrics compared to the interviews. Only the variant *gonna* occurs in the interviews, while all three variants are present in the lyrics. Another notable difference is that *gonna* is the variant that occurs the least (3 times) in lyrics, while it is the only one occurring in the interviews – 9 times, and the variant ‘a, which most often occurs in lyrics (8 times) is not present in the interviews. *Gonna* is the most used feature overall in the interviews and lyrics combined (25 times). While it can be said that *gonna* is also extensively used in the natural speech of \$uicideboy\$, it lacks the phonological variants otherwise present in their lyrics.

These findings do uphold the hypothesis that \$uicideboy\$ use more grammatical AAVE features in their lyrics than in their interviews. This, in turn, might indicate that AAVE is a deliberate stylistic or linguistic choice in the lyrics of \$uicideboy\$.

2.3 Discussion

Referring to the study by Edwards and Ash (2015: 172) mentioned in the introduction, the results of this thesis uphold the proposition that AAVE is a deliberate linguistic choice since, similarly to Tupac, \$uicideboy\$ also use more grammatical AAVE features in their lyrics than in their interviews.

The results of this paper can also contribute to the proposition of Rolf Kreyer (2016) that hip-hop can be considered a sub-register of pop and should be studied separately. As Kreyer studied only popular rap from the charts, this might not be so apparent in his study, but this paper examined white rappers that are considered ‘underground’ and have never appeared on the Billboard Hot 100 chart (Robinson 2021). Seeing that they also use AAVE features, some of which were named register markers (e.g., copula suppression) in Kreyer’s study, can contribute to the understanding of where the register of rap ends and pop begins.

Although this thesis paper contributes to the idea, it is necessary to acknowledge that the features used in this thesis are insufficient to demonstrate beyond doubt that rap can be considered a separate register. This is partly due to these features being also present in other American vernacular varieties, such as the aforementioned SWE. To further contribute to this discussion, it might be necessary to include not only grammatical AAVE features but also lexical features and possibly semantic domains or replicate Kreyer's study (2016) on a larger sample of white rappers. As it became apparent that most of the features selected for the study are also present in other Southern vernacular varieties, it could also be rewarding to select features based on their uniqueness to AAVE if at all possible. The *n-word* and whether it can be considered a register marker can also be discussed separately and in more detail since it is a central and common topic in discussions involving African American culture. Moreover, it might be necessary to explore further whether AAVE features in lyrics are used for linguistic, stylistic, or identity-related purposes. To further develop the idea of rap as a separate register, it might be imperative to compare the language usage in the two registers: pop and rap music.

Another necessary acknowledgment is the issue of cultural appropriation and white privilege. While both members of \$uicideboy\$ were born and raised in a black neighborhood (Allen 2020), it is uncertain whether they use AAVE naturally in their everyday lives and whether they grew up using it, or it was a later influence of African American music and culture. Thus, there are certain aspects of AAVE usage by non-African-Americans that can be addressed by possible future studies. Such questions as, for example, whether the usage of AAVE is a cultural appropriation when used in non-African-American rap for stylistic or identity-building purposes or whether cases of natural AAVE usage by white people, such as the subject of Sweetland's study (2002), are also problematic.

CONCLUSION

The first section of this thesis dealt with the existing literature on the history of AAVE and the grammatical features used in this study. It became apparent that the main limitation of this thesis is that all the selected AAVE features, except for one, are not unique to AAVE. Additionally, this section explored the issues of register and genre in connection to rap music. This discussion ascertained that there is a research gap in the topic of AAVE usage by non-African-Americans in rap. The second section discussed the methodology and tools used for the analysis. During the analysis, the transcribing tool Whisper demonstrated that it is remarkably accurate but still allows for some errors. Some of the UNIX commands similarly had to be complemented by manual processing, as they were not accurate enough.

In light of the findings of this thesis, it can be argued that the initial hypothesis that \$Suicideboy\$ use more grammatical AAVE features in their lyrics than in their interview speech holds true, and therefore, AAVE features present in their lyrics can be a conscious stylistic or linguistic choice. Moreover, this can indicate that rap music is a separate register, as it involves the usage of a specific language that is not necessarily found in a general pop register.

As became evident from previous research, the AAVE usage by African Americans in their rap lyrics has been studied extensively, and based on those studies, it can be concluded that even African Americans use more AAVE when writing the lyrics for their rap songs than in their natural speech. This might be due to the awareness of the register-specific language that rap music implies. Thus, Kreyer (2016) proposes that rap should be regarded and studied as a register separate from the register of pop music, as it seems to exhibit linguistic features (including AAVE features) not present in pop lyrics. Kreyer's proposition is presented based on a corpus of rap songs from the charts. This paper, however, focuses on white rappers who have not appeared in the chart. Therefore, this paper may add

to the theory, broadening its focus to include rappers of different backgrounds – white American and independent from large labels and censorship.

It has also become apparent during the study that most of the grammatical AAVE features examined in this thesis are also present in other Southern vernacular varieties. The only grammatical feature unique to AAVE seems to be invariant or habitual *be*. Due to this, it might be necessary to examine only unique AAVE features in future studies.

The previous studies clearly demonstrate that some people of non-African-American descent use AAVE in their speech as a means to identify with hip-hop culture. Even though \$Suicideboy\$ grew up in New Orleans, with some sources arguing that they were raised in a black neighborhood, it is challenging to ascertain whether AAVE use is natural to their speech or is related to their hip-hop identity.

This thesis develops the notion of rap as a register independent from the register of pop music. This proposition also implies that some AAVE features can be considered register markers in the case of rap music and be inseparable from hip-hop culture. Furthermore, it shows how AAVE is no longer a variety spoken by African Americans only, but it seems to now be used by people of different backgrounds. Regardless of whether this usage can be regarded as cultural appropriation, it is apparent that it should be studied more to gain a deeper understanding of contemporary AAVE and its development.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Discography

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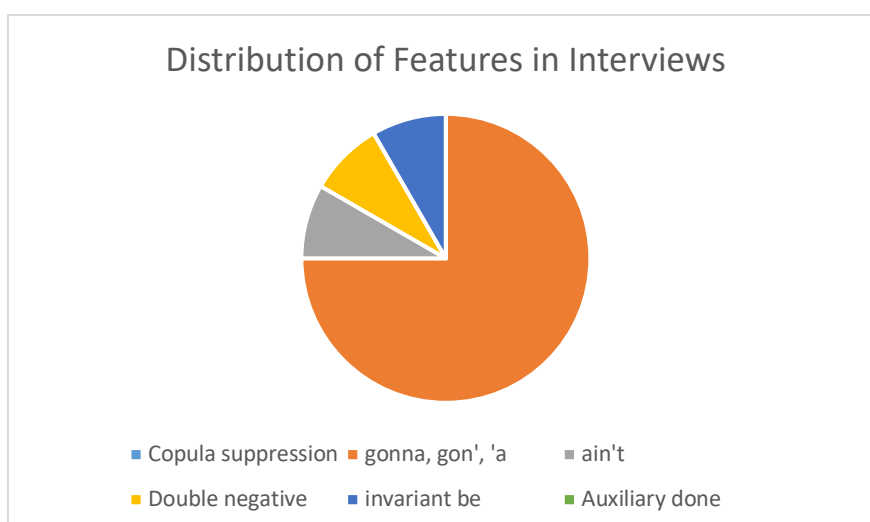
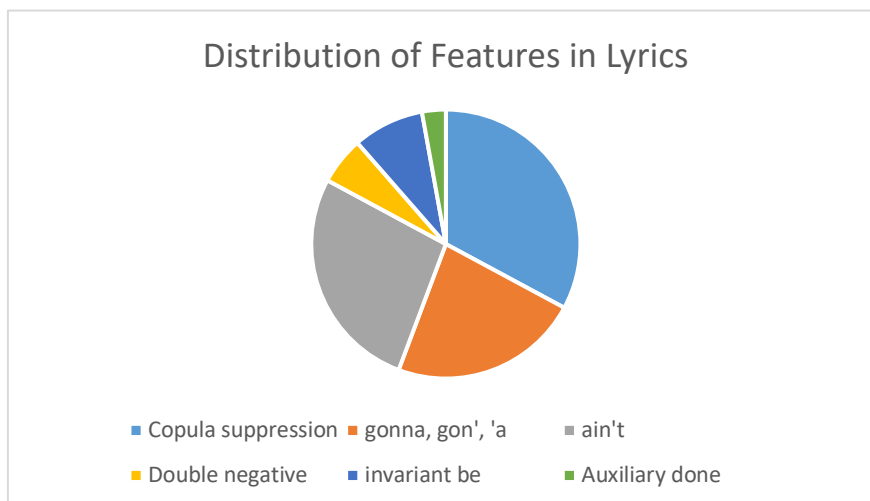
Appendix 2

Videography

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Appendix 3

Distribution of AAVE in lyrics and interviews separately by percentage.



RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Daria Zimarin

Grammatical features of African American Vernacular English in Lyrics and Interviews of \$uicideboy\$. Afroameerika inglise keele grammatilised tunnused \$uicideboy\$ räpparite laulusõnades ja intervjuudes.

Bakalaureusetöö

2024

Lehekülgede arv: 30

Annotatsioon:

See lõputöö uurib afroameerika keele kasutust valgete räpparide duo \$uicideboy\$ lauludes ja intervjuudes. Töös võrreldakse afroameerika keele grammatiliste tunnuste sagedust laulusõnades ja intervjuudes eesmärgiga uurida, kas räpparid kasutavad afroameerika keele tunnuseid oma lauludes ettekavatsetult. Eelduseks on, et \$uicideboy\$ kasutavad rohkem afroameerika grammatilisi tunnuseid laulusõnades kui intervjuudes, seega afroameerika keele tunnused nende laulusõnades on nende teadlik stiililine või keeleline valik. Ühtlasi panustab uurimus teoreetilisel tasandil, arutledes teemal, kas räpp on eraldi allkeel ehk register, kuna räpplaulusõnade loomises kasutatakse eri keelelisi vahendeid, sh afroameerika keele tunnuseid. Selline uurimus on kasulik, kuna see võiks aidata aru saada, mis on afroameerika keele staatus USA-s ja maailmas, ja millist rolli on mänginud selles räpp.

Töö koosneb kahest osast: kirjanduse ülevaade ja korpuspõhine analüüs. Esiteks käsitletakse töös afroameerika keele ajalugu, päritolu ja klassifikatsiooni eelneva kirjanduse baasil. Siis selgitakse terminoloogiat, sh räpp ja hiphop ning žanr ja register. Töö eesmärkide saavutamiseks on uurimuse jaoks loodud laulusõnade ja intervjuude tekstikorpused. Intervjuukorpus koosneb tehisintellekti Whisper abil transkribeeritud intervjuudest. Valitud afroameerika grammatilised tunnused leitakse operatsioonisüsteemi UNIX käskude abil. Seejärel võrreldakse tunnuste esinemissagedust laulusõnades ja intervjuudes.

Tulemuste järgi kasutavad \$uicideboy\$ rohkem afroameerika keele tunnuseid laulusõnades kui intervjuudes. See võib tähendada, et nad on teadlikud, et räpil on oma erikeel, mis nõuab afroameerika keele tunnuste kasutamist. See võib ka tähendada, et afroameerika inglise keel on nüüd kasutusel mitte ainult afroameeriklaste seas, vaid ka teisest rahvusest keelekasutajate seas.

Märksõnad: afroameerika inglise keel, korpusuuring, räpp, hiphop, register

Lihtlitsents lõputöö reprodutseerimiseks ja lõputöö üldsusele kättesaadavaks tegemiseks

Mina, Daria Zimarin,

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Afroameerika inglise keele grammatilised tunnused \$uicideboy\$ räpparite laulusõnades ja intervjuudes,

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Tartus, 21.05.2024

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/allkirjastatud digitaalselt/

Daria Zimarin

Tartus, 21.05.2024

Lõputöö on lubatud kaitsmisele.

Jane Klavan

Tartus, 21.05.2024