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Portrayal of African American English

in Mainstream Media

TFG Estudis d'Anglès i Francès

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ABSTRACT

In the last decades, the representation of African American people in mainstream media has increased significantly. This demographic group is largely known for the variety of English they speak. This variety, in contrast to what some people might think, is governed by very specific rules. The aim of this study is to analyze African American speech in pieces of mainstream media and determine whether the variety is accurately represented from a syntactic and phonological point of view. Our hypothesis is that if media showed a true representation of African American English, a large amount of their viewership would have trouble comprehending the message. Therefore, we expect a simplified version of the variety that only includes enough features for the audience to identify it. In order to do this, we took the linguistic description of the variety by Green (2002) and extracted the main syntactic and phonological features. We classified the syntactic features in two groups: those which we expected to be attested in our sources and those which we did not, according to our comprehensibility hypothesis. Then, we selected four media sources where black people are heavily represented and analyzed their speech by comparing excerpts to the features that characterize the variety. Our results showed that less than half of the syntactic features are found systematically in all the sources, which is fewer than we anticipated. On the other hand, virtually all phonological features were attested in the analyzed pieces of media. These results suggest that mainstream media represents African American English in a way that, although not accurate, serves as a means to convey the use of the variety without impairing understanding for the average viewer.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Aim and scope of the paper

African American English is the variety of English spoken by American residents with African ancestry. There are four primary theories about its origins (Wolfram, 2006), so these are uncertain. This variety, due to its association to slavery and lower classes, has been the victim of prejudice from speakers of other varieties of English. Nevertheless, this variety has been the focus of many studies that have tried to analyze its features in a scholarly manner and advocated for its legitimacy as a variety of English.

Due to the high percentage of African American citizens in the USA, their presence in mainstream media has increased considerably during the last decades. This phenomenon has forced filmmakers to make a decision on how accurately the language they speak is portrayed. In principle, one would believe they would strive to be as accurate as possible. In contrast, mainstream media tries to cater to the maximum of people, so the use of non-Standard English could be a problem due to lack of understanding from the audience. Even though numerous studies have been conducted in the field of how ethnicity is portrayed in the media and the use of racial stereotypes, not many have focused their attention on the accuracy of the representation of the variety of English that African American communities speak.

The aim of the present study is to determine whether mainstream media portrays an accurate representation of the linguistic features of African American English. In order to fulfill that purpose, the following research questions will be studied: (1) Are there certain syntactic features that appear repeatedly in all the sources analyzed? If so, why those ones? (2) Are there certain syntactic features that rarely or never appear in any of the sources analyzed? If so, why those ones? (3) Are other type of features (e.g. phonological) used more accurately than the syntactic ones?

1.2. A linguistic description of African American English

African American English is the variety of American English that has been most thoroughly researched, according to Schneider (1996). It has been studied from many different points of view: historical, social, educational, linguistic, etc. But the most relevant one for this study in particular is the linguistic approach. For that reason, the main piece of literature that will be used is the one by Green (2002).

Green's (2002) main intention is to provide a comprehensive linguistic description of the variety, proving that it follows in fact a set of rules instead of being a random deviation of Standard English. These rules are phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and lexical. The syntactic features, which will be the ones used for this paper, have been summarized in the tables below. These features show the differences with Standard English in (i) negation elements, (ii) verb tense formation, (iii) change or omission of auxiliaries, pronouns or copulas, (iv) lack of subject-verb agreement, as well as (v) the use of verbal and aspectual markers that are nonexistent in Standard English.

Features (i) to (v) have been classified into two tables according to the hypothesis that some of them are easier to understand by the general public and, therefore, will be found in all the media sources to be analyzed (Table 1), while the others will be absent, as they may lead to communication disruption and linguistic misunderstanding for the audience (Table 2).

Feature	Examples
Multiple negation markers in one single clause (don't, no, nothing, nobody…)	I sure hope it **don't** be **no** leak after they finish. 'I hope there won't be a leak after they finish'
Existential **it** and **dey**	**It's/It got/It have** some coffee in the kitchen **Dey/Dey got/Dey have** some coffee in the kitchen

	'There is some coffee in the kitchen'
Yes/No questions without auxiliary verb	You know her name? '**Do** you know her name?'
Present copula **be**: Elimination of present copula **be** in 1st person plural, and 2nd and 3rd person (except **it**) in non-emphatic contexts. Substitution of **are** for **is** in emphatic contexts.	You tall. You **is** tall. 'You are tall.' You **ain('t)/not** tall. 'You aren't tall.'
Omission of relative pronoun in relative clauses	There are many mothers don't know where their children are. 'There are many mothers **who** don't know where their children are.'
Lack of 3rd person singular -s in Present Simple	She run. 'She run**s**.' She do run. 'She do**es** run.'
Past Progressive: Substitution of auxiliary **were** for **was** in all plural persons. Use of **wadn't** for all negations.	They **was** eating. 'They were eating.' They **wadn't (wasn't)** eating. 'They weren't eating.'
Substitution of **didn't** for **din** or **ain('t)** in Simple Past negative clauses	I **din** (**didn't**) eat. I **ain('t)** eat/**ate**. 'I didn't eat'
Future **be going to** to **gonna**	**I'ma/I'm gonna/I'monna** eat. 'I'm going to eat' You **gon/gonna** eat. 'You're going to eat' **I ain't gon/I'm not gon** eat. 'I'm not going to eat' **You ain't gon/not gon** eat. 'You are not going to eat'
Present Progressive: Elimination of auxiliary **be** in 1st person plural, and 2nd and 3rd person (except **it**) in non-emphatic contexts. Substitution of **are** for **is** in emphatic contexts.	We eating. We **is** eating. 'We are eating.' We **ain('t)/not** eating. 'We aren't eating.'
Preterite **had** (vs. pluperfect): Same meaning as Simple Past	The alarm at the detailing place next door **had went off** a few minutes ago. 'The alarm at the detailing place next door

	went off a few minutes ago.'
Verbal marker **dən**: Denotes an event has ended	I told him you **dən changed**. 'I told him that you have changed.'

Table 1. Syntactic features expected to be attested (Green, 2002)

Feature	Examples
Future simple and future progressive: Use of **'a** instead of **will** in non-emphatic context	I**'a** eat. 'I **will** eat' I**'a** be eating. 'I will be eating'
Aspectual marker **be**: Implies meaning of usually, always	Bruce **be** running. 'Bruce is usually running' or 'Bruce usually runs'
Be dən → habitual resultant state	She gotta be there for 9, so they **be dən gone** to school. 'She has to be there [at work] at 9, so they [the children] have usually already gone to school by then'
Be dən → future resultant state	They'a **be dən growed** out that by then. 'They will have already grown out of that by then'
Be dən → modal resultant state	Boy, I make any kind of move, this boy **be dən shot** me. 'If I move, this boy will shoot me'
Remote past **BIN**: An action happening for a long period of time	She **BIN** running. 'She has been running for a long time'
BIN dən → remote past resultant state	You should'a **BIN dən called** me down there. 'You should have called me down there a long time ago'
Preverbal marker **finna**: The event is imminent	I don't know about you, but I'm **finna leave**. ' I don't know about you, but I'm getting ready/about to leave'
Preverbal marker **steady**: Activity carried out in an intense or consistent manner	They want to do they own thing, and you **steady talking** to them. 'They want to do their own thing, and you're continuing to talk to them'
Preverbal marker **come**: Shows indignation	You the one **come telling** me it's hot. I can't believe you got your coat on.

	'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'

Table 2. Syntactic features not expected to be attested (Green, 2002)

The set of features in Table 1 are the ones expected to be attested in the chosen pieces of media. In the first place, the multiple negative elements should not cause any trouble, as it is a feature attested in virtually any non-standard variety of English (Kortmann et al., 2004). Regarding the existential "it" and "dey", because "there" lacks actual meaning in this instance, the substitution by any of the former should not be a problem. Similarly, the lack of auxiliary verb in yes/no questions, the omission of the present copula "be", relative pronouns, and final –s in 3rd person singular simple present verbs are not expected to hinder understanding because of their absence of substance. In the case of "ain't" and "gonna", they are very common constructions in nonstandard varieties of English, so the general public should be able to comprehend them. Present progressive verbs should be understood as long as the main verb is in the gerund form, rendering the auxiliary verb meaningless. Likewise, the adding of "had" to a simple past only adds another note of past to the verb, which does not alter the meaning in a significant way. Finally, the verbal marker "dən" could be interpreted as "done", which also implies the meaning of finality.

Table 2 contains the features presumed not to be included in the texts due to the difficulties in understanding they may cause to the general viewer. The first feature in this table might be a cause of confusion for the general audience due to the lack of similarities between "'a" and "will". Somebody not familiar with the variety would not be able to see the connection. On that same note, the listener has no explicit cue on the second one that shows the meaning of "usually, always" that it has, so it could be easily misunderstood as a present progressive. This misinterpretation of progressiveness added to "dən" in the next three features, and their similarity in form but difference in meaning,

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should make them very complicated to decipher to a spectator unfamiliar with African American English. The next one, "BIN", could be confused with "been" and be interpreted as a recent event, instead of something that has been happening for a long time, making it a troublesome feature to add to a mainstream piece of media. This problem is extended to "BIN dən", since it carries the same sense of long period of time. Lastly, the preverbal markers "finna", "steady", and "come" imply meanings that are not easily understood without an explicit explanation.

As seen above, because of the amount of characteristics that differentiate this variety from Standard English, there might be complications of understanding for non-speakers of African American English.

One study has been selected to show that these difficulties in understanding do actually exist (Beyer, Edwards and Fuller, 2015). In Beyer et al. (2015), 24 adult Standard English speakers and 24 adult African American speakers were tested on their understanding of the verbal marker BIN. This marker, typical of the latter variety, indicates remote past when stressed. The results of the experiment show that while none of the Standard English speakers understood the meaning of BIN, all of the African American speakers did.

This study suggests that, in fact, there is a difficulty in understanding by speakers of other varieties, which would be a reason to simplify the features of the variety when portraying it in the media. This could also lead to featuring more prominently other features that are less likely to impair comprehensibility, such as phonological features. Green (2002) defends that the phonology of African American English is "systematic and governed by rules" (107). Therefore, one can assume that an accurate representation of the variety should follow these features. This study will focus

on the ones Green (2002) pays the most attention to, which have been summarized in Table 3.

Feature	Phenomena
Consonant cluster reduction	[st], [sp], [sk] pronounced [s] [ft] pronounced [f] [pt] pronounced [p] [kt] pronounced [k] [nd] pronounced [n] [ld] pronounced [l]
Devoicing of final voiced consonants	Final [b], [d], and [g] pronounced [p], [t], and [k]
Pronunciation of *th*	Voiceless *th* ([θ]) pronounced [t] or [f] in final or medial position Voiced *th* ([ð]) pronounced [v] (in final or medial position) or [d] (in any position)
Liquid vocalization	*r* and *l* pronounced [ə] or even not pronounced after vowel
-in	*-ing* pronounced like [n] instead of [ŋ]

Table 3. Main phonological features of African American English (Green, 2002)

These five features are the ones that the present study intends to find in the selected sources.

To sum up, by analyzing the sources both syntactically and phonologically, the research questions presented in Section 1.1. will be answered. In particular, our analysis will allow us to determine whether it can be concluded that mainstream media portrays this variety in an accurate way or not.

2. METHODOLOGY

In order to assess the accuracy of the portrayal of African American English in the media, an analysis of dialogues from television series and movies has been conducted by a search of syntactic and phonological features characteristic of the variety of English studied.

The excerpts to be analyzed were extracted from one television series (*Orange is the New Black*) and three movies (*Boyz n the Hood, The Help* and *Precious*). In order to select the subjects for this study, there were two requirements that had to be fulfilled by the television series or movies. First, they should have dialogues between exclusively African American people, since the presence of a speaker of a different variety of English could interfere with the speaking of the former by transforming it into a more Standard English in order to make themselves understood. Second, the African American people participating in the dialogues should belong to the lower social and economic class. The reason for this criteria is that middle to higher classes have more possibilities at higher education, which could also be a source of interference to the variety of English spoken.

The syntactic features characteristic of African American English that were looked for in the excerpts are the ones extracted from Green (2002), shown previously in Tables 1 and 2. In the book, there are very specific explanations of the difference in verbal constructions, verbal markers, aspectual markers, and other syntactic peculiarities of this variety, which will allow for an objective analysis of the data obtained from the pieces of media. As seen in the Tables, the features were divided in two groups: those that are expected to be used in excess in an attempt to highlight the fact that the characters are not speaking Standard English, and those expected to be underused, or even completely ignored, because of the difficulty of understanding they might cause to non-speakers of the variety.

The procedure consisted of a number of steps. First, the episodes of the television show and the movies were watched, and the lines selected. These dialogues containing the lines had to fulfill the same requirements stated above for the subjects of study. They needed be dialogues between lower class African American people only.

Once the excerpts were picked, they were transcribed and examined in comparison with the features representative of the variety, which would answer research questions 1 and 2, which are concerned with the presence of absence of the features in Tables 1 and 2 in the sources. After that, the most representative phonological aspects of African American English, listed in Table 3, were compared with the dialogues selected to find an answer to research question 3, where we ponder whether features other than syntactic ones, phonological in this case, are represented with more accuracy in order to portray the variety. From the results collected, a conclusion will be drawn on whether African American English is accurately represented in media.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Syntactic features

In this subsection, the results have been compiled in tables, one for every syntactic feature found in the sources, with one example of its use from each of them. First, there are the features from Table 1, which were the ones expected to be found in the analyzed sources, as they are not assumed to be problematic for the audience's comprehension. Later, the features from Table 2 are presented. These were hypothesized to be absent from the analyzed material, as they were assumed to hamper understanding.

Feature	Sources	Sentences
Multiple negations markers in one single clause	*Orange is the New Black* (Season 1 Episode 6)	Taystee: "You **ain't never** gonna change that shit."
	Boyz n the Hood	Doughboy: "I **ain't** got **no** brother. Got **no** mother, **neither**."
	The Help	Minny: "But now I **ain't** gonna **never** get **no** job again."

	Precious	Mary: "You **ain't** told me **nothing** about **no** damn school today."

Table 4. Instances of multiple negation markers in one single clause

Table 4 shows that multiple negation markers in the same clause were found in all the sources that were analyzed. It was also observed that this feature was used as often as the sentence constructions permitted it.

A feature related to this previous one is the substitution of *didn't* for *din* or *ain('t)* in Simple Past negative clauses. This was not found in any of the sources. The use of *ain't* was frequent, but it was only used as a substitute to *haven't, hasn't, am not, isn't* or *aren't.* In no instance was it used as a Simple Past negative auxiliary.

Another feature that was not found was the existential *it* and *dey*, in spite of having been described in the literature as a common African American English feature (Green 2002) that was not really problematic for the general audience.

Feature	Sources	Sentences
Yes/No questions without auxiliary verb	*Orange is the New Black* (Season 1 Episode 2)	Sophia: "You know how often I come by new weave?"
	Boyz n the Hood	Tre: "I gotta clean that tub?"
	The Help	Minny: "You remember to check the thighs?"
	Precious	Mary: "You hear me talking to you?"

Table 5. Instances of yes/no questions without auxiliary verb

Table 5 shows that the lack of auxiliary verb in yes/no questions was also found in all the movies and the TV show selected for this study.

However, the elimination of similar elements void of meaning, such as the omission of the relative pronoun in relative clauses, was not found in any of them.

Feature	Sources	Sentences
Lack of 3rd person singular -s in Present Simple	*Orange is the New Black* (Season 1 Episode 3)	Janae: "This **go** here. That **go** there."
	Boyz n the Hood	Doughboy: "**Seem** like they punched the wrong clock on Rick, though."
	The Help	Minny: "I done something terrible awful to that woman, and now she **know** what I done."
	Precious	Precious: "He **like** me, too, I know it."

Table 6. Instances of lack of 3rd person singular –s in Present Simple

Table 6 above shows examples of the use of 3rd person singular in Present Simple without the final -*s*, which was very prominent across all sources.

Feature	Sources	Sentences
Elimination of present copula *be*	*Orange is the New Black* (Season 1 Episode 11)	Poussey: "Hate to break it to you, son, but we the birds."
	Boyz n the Hood	Tre: "Like it or not, you from Africa."
	The Help	Aibileen: "She always mad about something."
	Precious	Mary: "Your daddy dead."

Table 7. Instances of elimination of present copula *be*

As shown in Table 7, the elimination of the present copula *be* was also in all of the analyzed media, although it was not as prominent as other features.

Feature	Sources	Sentences
Elimination of auxiliary *be* in Present Progressive	*Orange is the New Black* (Season 1 Episode 3)	Taystee: "That's why she doing so much time."
	Boyz n the Hood	Girl: "Nigga can't fight, so

		he always trying to find some excuse to shoot somebody."
	The Help	Woman: "Honey, we clapping for you!"
	Precious	Precious: "He always looking at me and smiling at me."

Table 8. Instances of elimination of auxiliary *be* in Present Progressive

Similarly to the previous feature, the elimination of auxiliary *be* in Present Progressive was present in all sources. This is shown in Table 8. This case was significantly more common than elimination of present copula *be*, though.

Feature	Sources	Sentences
Past progressive: Substitution of auxiliary *were* for *was* in all plural persons	*Orange is the New Black* (Season 1 Episode 2)	Crazy Eyes: "People forget we **was** all new here once."
	Boyz n the Hood	Furious: "All of my friends **was** dropping out of high school, hanging out in corners, in front of liquor stores, getting drunk, getting high."
	The Help	Aibileen: "And the young white ladies of Jackson... oh Lord, **was** they having babies."
	Precious	Mary: "Where **was** you at this morning?"

Table 9. Instances of substitution of auxiliary *were* for *was* in all plural persons

As can be seen in Table 9, the substitution of the auxiliary *were* for *was* in plural sentences appeared in all sources. It is also worth noting that this phenomenon was

observed not only in auxiliaries, but also in the copula form, as seen in the example from *Orange is the New Black.*

Feature	Sources	Sentences
Future *be going to* to *gonna*	*Orange is the New Black* (Season 1 Episode 2)	Sophia: "You probably **gonna** look like this till Christmas."
	Boyz n the Hood	Furious: "You **gonna** see how they end up too."
	The Help	Aibileen: "And, Lord, I worry she **gonna** be fat."
	Precious	Precious: "Every day I tell myself something **gonna** happen."

Table 10. Instances of future *be going to* as *gonna*

As expected, and as shown in Table 10, the future *be going to* was contracted to *gonna* without any exception in all the sources.

Feature	Sources	Sentences
Verbal marker *dən*: Denotes an event has ended	*Orange is the New Black* (Season 1 Episode 6)	Taystee: "I **dən** seen it about 10 times already today."
	Boyz n the Hood	-
	The Help	Aibileen: "I **dən** raised 17 kids in my life."
	Precious	Mary: "The welfare **dən** called here saying they gonna remove you from my budget 'cause you ain't been attending school regularly."

Table 11. Instances of verbal marker *dən*

As for the verbal marker *dən,* it was found in 3 out of the 4 sources analyzed. This is reflected in Table 11.

Finally, the last feature that was hypothesized to appear was the use of the preterite *had* with same meaning as Simple Past, which was not found either. By contrast, Table 12 below shows that the aspectual marker *be*, which was thought to be problematic, and consequently, should have been omitted in mainstream media, was actually present in all the sources. The other syntactic features specified on Table 2 as not expected to appear were, in fact, absent from the analyzed pieces of media.

Feature	Sources	Sentences
Aspectual marker *be*: Implies meaning of usually, always	*Orange is the New Black* (Season 1 Episode 3)	Janae: "She'll see what she **be** messing with."
	Boyz n the Hood	Doughboy: "That's why fool **be** getting shot all the time."
	The Help	Minny: "Don't **be** taking those women any more pies, you understand?"
	Precious	Precious: "Y'all **be** watching Oprah?"

Table 12. Instances of aspectual marker *be*

3.2. Phonological features

In this subsection, the results are summarized in four tables, one for each analyzed source. Each table contains one or two excerpts, their transcription, and the phonological features from African American English, described in Table 3, found in each of them.

Source	*Orange is the New Black*		
Excerpt 1	Sophia: "Ain't my fault you went all UFC over a King Cone." (Season 1 Episode 2)		
Transcription Excerpt 1	[ˈeɪn ma ˈfɑːltʃʊ wen ɑːl ˈjʊ ˈef ˈsiː ˈoʊvɚ ə ˈkɪŋ ˈkoʊn]		
Features Excerpt 1	Ai<u>n't</u>	[eɪn]	Consonant cluster reduction

	Went	[wen]	Consonant cluster reduction
Excerpt 2	Janae: "This go here. That go there. This is how you be wiping your bunghole." (Season 1 Episode 3)		
Transcription Excerpt 2	['dɪs goʊ 'hɪə | 'dæt goʊ 'deə | 'dɪs haʊ jʊ bɪ 'waɪpɪn jɔː 'bŋ̩hɔː]		
Features Excerpt 2	This	[dɪs]	Pronunciation of *th*
	Here	[hɪə]	Liquid vocalization
	That	[dæt]	Pronunciation of *th*
	There	[deə]	Pronunciation of *th* and liquid vocalization
	Wiping	['waɪpɪn]	–in instead of –ing
	Your	[jɔː]	Liquid vocalization
	Bunghole	['bŋ̩hɔː]	Liquid vocalization

Table 13. Phonological features found in *Orange is the New Black*

Source	*Boyz n the Hood*		
Excerpt 1	Furious: "I don't have to do nothing around here except for pay the bills, put food on the table, and put clothes on your back, you understand?"		
Transcription Excerpt 1	[a ɾon 'hæf tʊ dʊ 'nʌθɪn əraʊn 'hɪə ɪkˈsept fɔː 'peɪ də 'bɪɫẓ | 'pʊt 'fuːɾ ɒn də 'teɪbl̩ | ən 'pʊt 'cloʊðz ɒn jə 'bæk | jʊ ˌʌndəˈstæn]		
Features Excerpt 1	Don't	[ɾon]	Consonant cluster reduction
	Nothing	['nʌθɪn]	–in instead of –ing
	Around	[əˈraʊn]	Consonant cluster reduction
	Here	[hɪə]	Liquid vocalization
	For	[fɔː]	Liquid vocalization
	The	[də]	Pronunciation of *th*
	And	[ən]	Consonant cluster reduction
	Your	[jə]	Liquid vocalization
	Understand	[ˌʌndəˈstæn]	Liquid

			vocalization and consonant cluster reduction

Table 14. Phonological features found in *Boyz n the Hood*

Source	*The Help*		
Excerpt 1	Aibileen: "And it must have come out of her like the 11th Commandment"		
Transcription Excerpt 1	[æn ɪt 'mʌs hə cʌm 'aʊɾ ə hɜ: 'laɪk də ə'levən kə'mænmən]		
Features Excerpt 1	And	[æn]	Consonant cluster reduction
	Must	[mʌs]	Consonant cluster reduction
	The	[də]	Pronunciation of *th*
	Eleventh	[ə'levən]	Consonant cluster reduction
	Commandment	[kə'mænmən]	Consonant cluster reduction
Excerpt 2	Minny: "Now she gone to putting pencil marks on my toilet paper."		
Transcription Excerpt 2	['naʊ ʃɪ 'gɒn ə pʊɾn̩ 'pensɪl 'mɑːks ɒn mə 'tɔɪlə peɪpə]		
Features Excerpt 2	Putting	['pʊɾn̩]	–in instead of –ing
	Marks	[mɑːks]	Liquid vocalization
	Paper	['peɪpə]	Liquid vocalization

Table 15. Phonological features found in *The Help*

Source	*Precious*		
Excerpt 1	Precious: "l never said nothing like that."		
Transcription Excerpt 1	[aɪ 'nevə sed 'nʌθn̩ laɪk 'dæt]		
Features Excerpt 1	Nothing	['nʌθn̩]	–in instead of –ing
	That	[dæt]	Pronunciation of *th*
Excerpt 2	Mary: "You ain't told me nothing about no damn school today."		
Transcription Excerpt 2	[jʊ 'eɪn 'toʊl mɪ 'nʌʔn̩ əbaʊt 'noʊ 'dæm 'skuː t'deɪ]		
Features Excerpt 2	Ain't	[eɪn]	Consonant cluster reduction
	Told	[toʊl]	Consonant cluster reduction
	Nothing	['nʌʔn̩]	Pronunciation of

			th and –in instead of –ing
	School	[skuː]	Liquid vocalization

Table 16. Phonological features found in *Precious*

Tables 13 to 16 show that four out of the five features (consonant cluster reduction, pronunciation of *th*, liquid vocalization, and –in instead of –ing) were attested in all of our media sources. It is worth noting that the use of these phonological features seems to change from speaker to speaker. We can see a good example on Table 16, where Precious does not change the pronunciation of *th* in *nothing,* while Mary does.

The one feature that was not found, devoicing of voiced stops in final position (-b, -d, -g), was only observed in utterance border position or in contact with a voiceless phoneme. However, those phonemes undergo the process of devoicing in those contexts in Standard English as well (Roach, 1983). There was no instance where devoicing of the consonants -b, -d, or -g occurred in any other context. Therefore, it was decided not to include the cases of devoicing in the tables.

3.3. Discussion

Table 17 below summarizes the results of the syntactic feature analysis that was conducted in detail in the previous subsection. This table indicates whether each feature was expected to be attested in the sources according to our original hypothesis, and whether it was actually attested during our analysis.

Feature	Attested	Expected to be attested
Multiple negation markers in one single clause (don't, no, nothing, nobody…)	Yes	Yes
Existential **it** and **dey**	No	Yes
Yes/No questions without auxiliary verb	Yes	Yes
Present copula **be**: Elimination of present copula **be** in 1st person plural, and 2nd and 3rd person (except **it**) in non-emphatic contexts. Substitution of **are** for **is** in emphatic contexts.	Yes	Yes
Omission of relative pronoun in relative	No	Yes

clauses		
Lack of 3rd person singular -s in Present Simple	Yes	Yes
Past Progressive: Substitution of auxiliary **were** for **was** in all plural persons. Use of **wadn't** for all negations.	Yes	Yes
Substitution of **didn't** for **din** or **ain('t)** in Simple Past negative clauses	No	Yes
Future **be going to** to **gonna**	Yes	Yes
Present Progressive: Elimination of auxiliary **be** in 1st person plural, and 2nd and 3rd person (except **it**) in non-emphatic contexts. Substitution of **are** for **is** in emphatic contexts.	Yes	Yes
Preterite **had** (vs. pluperfect): Same meaning as Simple Past	No	Yes
Verbal marker **dən**: Denotes an event has ended	Yes (in 3 out of 4 cases)	Yes
Future simple and future progressive: Use of **'a** instead of **will** in non-emphatic context	No	No
Aspectual marker **be**: Implies meaning of usually, always	Yes	No
Be dən → habitual resultant state	No	No
Be dən → future resultant state	No	No
Be dən → modal resultant state	No	No
Remote past **BIN**: An action happening for a long period of time	No	No
BIN dən → remote past resultant state	No	No
Preverbal marker **finna**: The event is imminent	No	No
Preverbal marker **steady**: Activity carried out in an intense or consistent manner	No	No
Preverbal marker **come**: Shows indignation	No	No

Table 17. Results of the syntactic feature analysis

Table 17 answers our research questions 1 and 2, which were concerned with establishing which syntactic features were found repeatedly in all our sources, which ones were systematically absent, and the reason behind it. As shown in Table 17, our hypothesis that some features would be present and others would not was proven to be true. However, we obtained some conflicting results in need of consideration.

Firstly, research question 1 inquired whether there were some syntactic features that appeared repeatedly in all our sources. We hypothesized that, because of the

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different reasons developed in the Introduction, 12 of them were not likely to hinder comprehensibility and would be present in the movies and TV shows analyzed. However, from these 12 features, 4 were not attested during our analysis. These are (i) the existential *it* and *dey,* (ii) the omission of relative pronouns in relative clauses, (iii) the substitution of *didn't* for *din* or *ain('t)*, and (iv) the use of the Preterite *had* with the same meaning as Simple Past. This suggests that these features might have been considered an impediment for comprehension by the creators of the media sources. Alternatively, screenwriters might have decided to include only the most representative syntactic features of African American English in order to give viewers the feeling that the black speakers were using this variety, and to discard other features that, while adding authenticity to the speech, are not considered essential for the identification of the variety.

Secondly, research question 2 questioned whether some syntactic features were completely absent from our sources because of the difficulty in understanding they could cause to the average viewer. From the syntactic features that this study originally classified as likely to not be present, one was actually attested in all the analyzed sources: the aspectual marker *be*. Nevertheless, this specific use of *be* was very uncommon in all sources and was only detected once or twice in each piece of media that constituted our corpus. Additionally, the excerpts included in Table 12, which focused on this feature in particular, show that the meaning that is being transmitted does not always align with the one described by Green (2002), which carries an implication of "usually, always" (i.e. habituality). In particular, the example from *Orange is the New Black,* "She'll see what she **be** messing with", seems to have a Present Progressive meaning. Also, the example from *Boyz n the Hood,* "That's why

fool **be** getting shot all the time", suggests that the time expression "all the time" was probably included to clarify the habituality implication associated to *be*.

In Figure 1, the results are displayed in a pie chart in order to give the reader a more visual idea of the facts that our analysis unveiled.
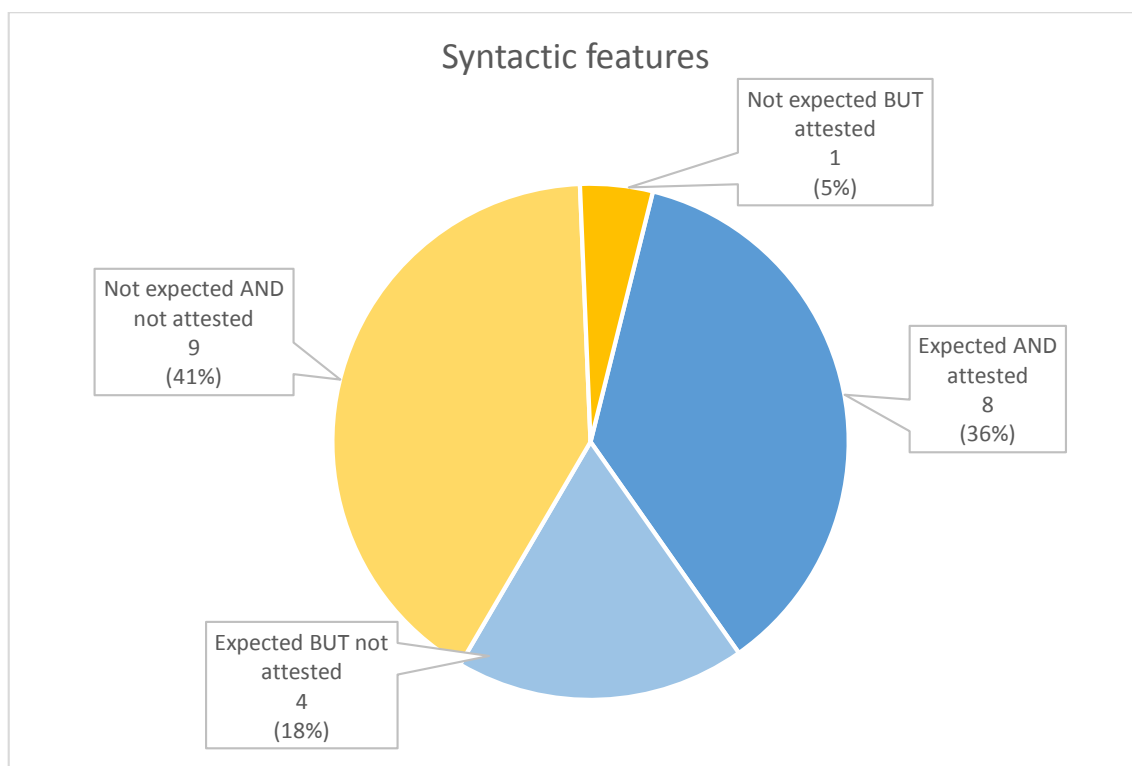

Figure 1. Chart of results of syntactic feature analysis

As can be seen in Figure 1, 12 out of 22 syntactic features were hypothesized to be used in our sources. Out of these, only 7 were actually found in all of the pieces of media, and 1 was present in three of the four sources. In contrast, from the 10 features that were considered to possibly cause a difficulty in understanding and, therefore, were not expected to be found in the analyzed media excerpts, one was actually attested in all of our sources. This shows that only 41% of the syntactic features that have been reported in the literature characteristic of African American English were attested. These results confirm our hypothesis that a big percentage of the syntactic features would not be attested.

In regards to the phonological features, all of them were attested in all sources, with some degree of variation, except for the devoicing of final voiced stops, as explained in the previous subsection. This analysis serves as a response to our research question 3, which aimed at evaluating whether phonological features were represented more prominently than syntactic ones in order to give some reality to the use of the African American English variety by characters of this ethnic group.

Indeed, it seems that phonological features were exploited a lot more than syntactic ones. This might be due to the fact that while syntactic features give a different nuance to the meaning of the sentence, phonological features do not. Therefore, the latter will provide the viewer with the information that the speaker is using African American English without causing any major misunderstanding of the message that is being communicated.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This TFG has analyzed four pieces of media in order to determine whether African American English is portrayed accurately in mainstream media. From the results obtained we determined that, according to our syntactic analysis, less than half of the syntactic features characteristic from African American English according to the literature are attested systematically in mainstream media. This conclusion collided slightly with our hypothesis, which theorized that the number of syntactic features from the variety attested in the sources would be higher, but it confirmed our belief that there is a good number of syntactic features that are completely absent from mainstream media. Additionally, our phonological analysis has demonstrated that most phonological features specific to African American English are attested in the sources.

We can extract from the difference in use of syntactic and phonological features that the former are used less prominently because they can cause misunderstanding, while the latter are less likely to do so. These results prove that accuracy in the representation of African American English is lost in favor of a larger target audience. However, the use of some syntactic features and virtually all phonological features suggests that screenwriters might make an effort to have a balance between being as accurate as possible without impeding comprehension to a significant part of their viewership.

It is also important to point out the limitations that the present study has had. First and foremost, the limited time frame represented a severe impediment. This problem was mainly reflected in the amount of media sources that were analyzed. It is fair to say that we cannot generalize the results obtained from four pieces of media to the whole industry of media entertainment. However, this study may offer some insight into general trends that affect this sector in terms of ethnic representation.

Due to the limited size of our corpus, a larger scale study should be conducted in order to confirm the results obtained. On the same note, this study was focused very narrowly on the features that characterize African American English exclusively. For future research, it would be of great interest to consider other factors aside from ethnicity alone (e.g. age, gender, geographical situation) that would affect the features of speech of a specific character that would make the variety they speak diverge from pure textbook African American English.

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6. MOVIES AND TV SHOWS

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Kohan, J. (Executive producer), and Tannenbaum, N. K. (Producer). (2013-2016). *Orange is the New Black.* [Television series]. New York, NY: Netflix.

Nicolaides, S. (Producer), and Singleton, J. (Director). (1991). *Boyz n the Hood* [Motion picture]. USA: Columbia Pictures Corporation.