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Game done changed: A look at selected AAVE features in the TV series The Wire

1. Introduction and aims: *it ain't TV*

In this essay, we explore the language, specifically the African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), used in the cult television series *The Wire*. The series, written and produced for the premium cable network HBO, which intentionally defines itself in opposition to ordinary network TV as summed up in its famous *it's-not-TV-it's-HBO* catchphrase, and broadcast between 2002 and 2008, pivots around typically interrelated criminal cases worked by the Major Crimes Unit in the predominately African-American city of Baltimore¹. *The Wire* is known for its narrative complexity, its broad and varied characters from all layers of society, its shifting thematic arcs and, not least, its gritty realism and attention to detail. Be it the minutiae of criminal investigations, the spirit-crushing dysfunction of various institutional machines, the rules of 'the game' (incarnated as street life, political maneuvering, the legal system, police loyalty, the school-system, the media, etc.) or the subtleties of various linguistic milieux, *The Wire* uncompromisingly immerses the viewer into the world of its protagonists.

The main author and creative force behind the series is David Simon, who is not only a Baltimorean himself, he also worked for 12 years as a reporter for *The Baltimore Sun* newspaper, primarily on the police beat, giving him an insider perspective to almost all the institutions explored in the show. Simon's goal was to create an engaging, true-to-life portrayal of the city and the streets of Baltimore; it was filmed in Baltimore, many of its characters are based upon real personages from the city, and numerous actors are, in fact, from Baltimore². The language is replete with colloquial speech, slang, non-standard grammar, colorful metaphors and local humor. Ethridge (2008) comments on Simon's choice of Baltimore for the show in the following manner:

Locating *The Wire* in Baltimore gives the show particularity and character, or as locals might say, charm. Baltimore is a poor, second-tier city that has seen rough times since World War II. De-industrialization, suburbanization, segregation and globalization have not been kind to the city. At least 40,000 buildings are now vacant, many abandoned as the population shrank to less than two-thirds of its peak. Also, crime and drugs have besieged the city, and the homicide rate is a constant

¹ According to the 2009 U.S. Census Bureau statistics, the black population of Baltimore, Maryland is 63.2% (quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/24/24510.html).

² Interestingly enough, despite the number of genuine Baltimore residents, several of the main characters are from elsewhere, most notably Dominic West who plays James 'Jimmy' McNulty, and Idris Elba, who plays Russel 'Stringer' Bell, both of whom are from England. In personal appearances and interviews, both West and Elba have clearly British accents which are very different from those of their characters on *The Wire*. West's character is central to the show, but not to this study, so his language is not examined here. Speech delivered by Elba has been avoided if possible, or alternatively, included if the usage is not controversial.

problem. It is also a city with a long, fascinating history and a quirky, vital culture. Yet, stepping back a bit, Simon is as much interested in accurately and caringly depicting the character and difficulties of his city as he is in projecting a criticism of the ideas and myths of America. (pp. 152-3)

Kelly (2009), on a similar note, mentions the relation between the use of local actors and the dialect used in *The Wire*:

... the use of locals within the supporting cast of *The Wire* lends an authenticity to the programme that marks it out as distinctive. The often impenetrable accents and highly specific colloquial vernacular make no concessions to the average viewer but instead demand their attention and commitment.

Given this background and the integral role of AAVE in the series, our main goal is simply to sketch out the different ways in which selected AAVE features are used in *The Wire*. Thereafter, if and when it is appropriate and relevant, we use representative examples as a platform to discuss details of usage, the accuracy of these representations and their relevance in creating credible dialog. In doing so, we address the complex relationship between language and Popular Culture and we also show the usefulness of *The Wire* as a resource in studying AAVE and language in general.

2. Previous work

Despite the show's popularity and its potential as a research resource, there has been little scholarly work done so far on *The Wire* in terms of linguistics or linguistic identity, virtually nothing that examines the language of the show systematically, feature by feature. There is, however, a fairly large (and ever-growing) amount of research on *The Wire* within the paradigm of media studies, typically dealing with the social, literary or cultural aspects of the show; a few examples of such studies that were relevant for the present investigation are Sheehan & Sweeney (2009), which discusses *The Wire* as a systematic critique of capitalism, Ethridge (2008), which examines the political pathos of the show and argues that it has the structural form of a Greek tragedy, and *The Wire Files*, a special edition of the online journal *darkmatter* (available at www.darkmatter101.org), which contains a varied a collection of scholarly articles dealing primarily with race, but also with political and philosophical issues.

Though linguistic research on *The Wire* may be lacking, there has been a vast amount of interest in, and research on, African-American English, resulting in many scholarly publications, both prescriptive and descriptive. There are far too numerous to list in any detail, though it is worth mentioning that the present investigation is primarily informed by the work of many of the most well-established authorities on AAVE such as Labov 1969, 1972; Dillard 1972, Wolfram 1974; Wolfram & Thomas 2002; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 2006; Smitherman 1986, 2000; Rickford 1999, 2000 and Green 2002.

3. Why non-standard English? Why scripted AAVE? Why *The Wire*?

The problems of defining terms like 'standard' and 'non-standard dialect' are well-noted in the literature (see, for example, Bex et al. 1999, Crowley 2003 and Battistella

2005); in the succinct words of Parker and Riley 2009, '[i]t is no simple matter to define the difference between a standard and a nonstandard variety of language' (p. 148). In this context, the authors astutely go on to note that '[i]t is important to understand that identifying a dialect as standard or nonstandard is a sociological judgment, not a linguistic one' (p. 149).

Questions of style, register and medium can also confuse the issue, i.e. one can speak of 'informal' Standard English or standard 'spoken' English (cf. Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 2006: 9-17), which many speakers may mistakenly view as non-standard. Considering the limited scope of the present study, it is not necessary, desirable or practical for us to define our own version of SE or NSE, but rather we take as our starting point a commonsense definition of SE as the (officially or unofficially) recognized 'prestige' dialect used primarily in written language and formal speech situations. It is typically the variant which has been codified in school grammars, usage books, dictionaries and other reference works and perpetuated in schools and other formal institutions as the norm to which language learners should aspire³. NSE can then be defined in opposition to SE; broadly speaking, non-standard English is any dialect (e.g. regional, social, ethnic) that differs from Standard English.

A number of previous studies have highlighted the importance of scholarly research on the language of Popular Culture and television in particular (e.g. Rey 2001, Trotta 2003 and 2010 and Quaglio 2009, to name only a few. See Trotta 2010 for a brief overview of research on Popular Culture and language). The use of non-standard English dialects as a literary device, from both a diachronic and synchronic perspective, is discussed to great extent in Taavitsainen et. al (1999), who remark in their introduction that '[i]n fiction nonstandard forms are mostly found in dialogues and they are used as a powerful tool to reveal character traits or social and regional differences' (p. 113). The relevance of examining the various representations of non-standard dialects in Popular Culture is also duly noted by Fraley 2009 who writes that '[p]opular media representations, serving as sites of contestation regarding the social construction of race, play a key role in shaping, communicating, and understanding racial identities' (p. 1). Highly noteworthy in this context is Lisa Green's 2002 textbook *African American English* in which she devotes two whole chapters to the use of AAVE in literature and the media (pp. 164-215), presenting the considerable research on this topic along with discussions and comments on the various intentions behind fictional/artistic representations of AAVE.

As noted above, much of the dialog in *The Wire* is delivered in AAVE, which, in the most concise terms possible is 'a form of American English spoken primarily by African Americans' (McLucas 2009, see, among others, Rickford 1999 and Green 2002 for more detailed definitions). Though this expedient definition can provide a practical starting point for this study, it is well worth noting that not all African Americans speak AAVE and for many who do, it is a scalar phenomenon, to be understood in degrees of

³ Having said that, we emphasize that we do not view SE as a linguistically superior, more correct or more logical form of English. Its prestige status is the result of social, historical and economic factors and is not due to any inherent superiority.

(non-)standardness, rather than a ridged, all-or-nothing usage.⁴ The series reflects this well; for example some black characters (on both sides of the law), like police lieutenant Cedric Daniels, Mayor Clarence Royce or Brother Mouzone, speak virtually no AAVE, while on the other end of the scale, characters like Snoop, Avon Barksdale or Wee-Bey speak almost exclusively in AAVE.⁵ Yet other characters shift dialects seamlessly depending on the situation, the most notable figure being the corrupt Senator Clay Davis, who typically makes good use of his extraordinary rhetorical skills and supreme AAVE proficiency to garner himself a type of downhome street credibility with voters.

Moreover, AAVE is not an exclusively black phenomenon; some white Baltimoreans, especially the younger members of the working-class, pick up the argot of their fellow blacks, thus it is no surprise that some white drug-dealers in *The Wire* use AAVE grammar along with typical black slang and jargon, living and 'working' in the same environment. Green (2002) claims that 'Language, in connection with other devices, helps to create different types of images in films. Linguistic features from the area of speech events as well as from other parts of the grammar contribute to creating images of blackness, but it also creates images of socioeconomic, and social and ethnic class' (p. 214).

To our knowledge, there is no sizable, commercially available, searchable corpus of spoken AAVE, which makes *The Wire*, despite the fact that it is scripted rather than 'naturally occurring' language, a particularly valuable resource for examining this ethnolect and the question of linguistic representation.⁶ It is immediately obvious when reviewing the series that many of the protagonists of show are indisputably proficient at AAVE; in a city where blacks are in the majority, many of them use AAVE almost exclusively, especially people associated with the drug trade, who have no need to use formal, Standard English and would be ostracized if they did. Moreover, *The Wire* as a corpus of AAVE and NSE, though perhaps somewhat unorthodox, is remarkable in that the show itself provides much needed information on the social and situational contexts (albeit scripted) of the utterances.

4. Material and Methods

The primary material for this study is the complete DVD collection of all the five seasons of *The Wire* (comprising 60 episodes, equivalent to roughly over 60 hours of viewing time), together with the closed-caption transcripts of the show (available in srt format from tv.subtitles.net). The collected transcripts were converted into text docu-

⁴ This is typically the case with any non-standard dialect (see, for example, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006: 9-17 for further discussion)

⁵ Similar observations could be made about gender (compare Snoop, Delonda and Nerese, for example), sexual orientation (as seen in the characters of Omar and Kima), and other social variables.

⁶ There are, of course, other possible popular culture resources available in AAVE, for example Hip-Hop and Rap lyrics, which could be collected and studied systematically. These kinds of materials, however, even though they are typically generated by an 'in-group' of AAVE users, can often be, depending on variables like subgenre and artist, often exaggerations or caricatures of AAVE. These kinds of representations of AAVE are certainly worth of study in their own right, but they are not suitable or relevant in the context of the present study.

ments and then organized into a corpus of approximately 360,000 words.⁷ Information about the production of *The Wire* was obtained principally from the series' homepage (HBO online), along with interviews and articles from various newspapers and journals such as Stephen Daly's (2007) *Barbed Wire*, Nina Lakhani's and Andrew Johnson's (2009) '*The Wire*': *Get on the burner to your corner boy* and Rose 2008, *The Wire*.

The present paper is basically a straightforward observation study, i.e. an episode-by-episode, close analysis of the speech throughout the series. During the viewing process, notes were taken on any use of AAVE in accordance with our knowledge of previous scholarship on the grammar and lexicon of that dialect. Furthermore, the transcript material was analyzed using the *Wordsmith* corpus tool (Scott 2008); selected searches were conducted and the relevant phenomena were noted, verified with the video version and then categorized.

Naturally, due to the limited scope and the specific aims of this investigation, not every non-standard use of the English language in *The Wire* is presented. One immediately obvious exclusion is AAVE pronunciation (including stress, rate of delivery, pauses, hesitations, prosody, etc.), which is highly relevant and important in an examination of AAVE, but would require a study of equal length or longer. Also, none of the extremely important nonlinguistic signals such as facial expressions and body language can be covered here. For the present purposes, i.e. a 'broad strokes' account of AAVE grammar and vocabulary as a tool in a fictional medium, only the most salient and/or frequent phenomena are discussed below.

5. Features of AAVE grammar in *The Wire*

Not all the different cases of non-standard English grammar in *The Wire* are necessarily typical AAVE grammar and not all the AAVE in *The Wire* is 'global' AAVE (if such a thing exists, see Wolfram 2007) but rather a representation of the more local variant spoken in Baltimore. The grammatical constructions listed herein were identified and selected through careful scrutiny of the series or through specific searches of the corpus, which were later compared with studies and detailed examinations of AAVE such as Labov (1972), Spears (1998), Rickford (1999), Green (2002), and Sidnell (2002), among others.⁸ This approach, though pragmatic and practicable, is by nature reductionist; it is intended to provide a sense of some of the basic mechanics of AAVE and to explore the question of how a racial identity is portrayed linguistically in the language of fictional characters. We do not claim that AAVE (or any other dialect for that matter) can be reduced to a list of a few grammatical features. On this issue, it is worth men-

⁷ The exact corpus size is 361,138 tokens with 13, 819 types. We also wish to mention that although a corpus methodology was used to glean examples and present some sense of frequencies, it is not our goal to present a statistical analysis of the material here, but rather we leave such research to future projects.

⁸ Admittedly, our decision to include or exclude features was not based on systematic principles and some well-known AAVE constructions, such as AAVE word order in interrogatives (in main and subordinated clauses) as well as existential constructions are not discussed here and must therefore be left to further research.

tioning Wideman (1976), who stresses the difficulties of categorizing and deconstructing the AAVE dialect (see also Alim 2004, who further develops this topic):

There is no single register of African American speech. And it's not words and intonations, it's a whole attitude about speech that has historical rooting. It's not a phenomenon that you can isolate and reduce to linguistic characteristics. It has to do with the way a culture conceives of the people inside of that culture. It has to do with a whole complicated protocol of silences and speech, and how you use speech in what's other than directly to communicate information. And it has to do with, certainly, the experiences that the people in the speech situation bring into the encounter. (p. 34)

The organization of the remainder of this section lists each AAVE feature separately for practical purposes, but in an attempt to compensate somewhat for the disjointed nature of this inventory-like presentation, in section 7 we provide an extended extract from the series which illustrates the use of AAVE in a contextualized, natural and coherent whole.

5.1 Subject-Verb Agreement

Non-standard subject-verb agreement is a typical aspect of AAVE which is frequently used in *The Wire*. Ignoring verbs like *be* and *have* for the meantime, it can typically appear in one of two ways: the absence of the inflectional suffix *-s* where it would be expected for 3per. sg. agreement in SE, as in the examples in (1) below, or the addition of an *-s* where it would not be expected in SE, as is shown in (2).

- 1) a. The king stay the king. (D'Angelo, 1.3)⁹
b. That boy want Omar bad. (Cheese, 5.3)
c. Do officer Walker go to that club on Stockton, the one where the western police party? (Michael 4.11)

It seems reasonable to assume that absence of the 3per. sg. *-s* is probably a matter of neutralization of forms (or some other well-established process of grammatical change like rule extension or regularization, which occurs in other English dialects, cf. Trudgill 1988, Wright 2001), whereas the addition of an *-s* is less straightforward. On this topic, Green (2002:100) states that 'verbs may be marked with a verbal *-s*, which may have a number of different functions: third person singular agreement marker, narrative present marker and habitual marker' (for further discussion of *-s* as a narrative marker, see also Labov 1987 and Butters 1989: 78-84). Consider now the examples below:

- 2) a. I robs drug dealers. (Omar, 2.6)
b. You wanna be my nigger, you gots to deliver for real. (Frog, 2.5)

⁹ All references to the dialog in *The Wire* are given according to the following format: Character, Season.Episode, thus (1a) is spoken by the Character 'D'Angelo' in Season 1, Episode 3. For more specific details, e.g. approximate time of the utterance in the episode, please contact the authors.

In example (2a), Omar, a ruthless, low-level but independent street criminal with an idiosyncratic code of ethics and an eccentric ‘Robin Hood’ appeal, is giving evidence in a court case. Though this setting could suggest the use of the *-s* as a narrative marker, it is clear from the context and the preceding question that Omar is emphasizing habituality. The use of an extra *-s* on *got* in example (2b) is particularly eye-catching. In SE, *got* is the past participle or past form of *get*, and therefore would never require the 3pers. sg. *-s* inflection. *Gots* is used in *The Wire* exclusively in the sense of the modal verb *have* in phrases like *have to*, *have got to*, etc. (note also the similarity to ‘*gotta*’, see 5.7 below):

- 3) a. Mr. P., Ashante Graham. Gots to know him. He was a player, for real. (Classroom student 4.4)
b. I’m sorry, I gots to leave up outta here before I lose my damn mind. (Clay Davis 4.2)

In both examples of *gots* above, it directly precedes the infinitive marker *to* and not a noun phrase, which may just be coincidence, but it could indicate that *gots* is considered, at least by some AAVE speakers, to be a kind of modal marker in itself, a type of emphatic alternative to ‘*gotta*’.

Consider now the subject-verb agreement with irregular verb *be*:

- 4) a. I mean, they is hard to get off. (Dukie 4.11)
b. Yo, them bitches is on steroids, word. (Namond, 4.3)
c. Naw, man, we was just hangin’. (Poot, 3.2)
d. About them police, though, they was on your ass after the game? (Stringer 1.10)

As examples (4a-d) show, if the verb *be* is not contracted or deleted (see 5.2 below) in AAVE, it is often leveled to the single form *is* for the present tense, or *was* for the past tense, regardless of the concord (cf. Wolfram 1993: 14, Rickford 1999:7). Green (2002: 100-101) notes that even the verb *have* can sometimes take an *-s* ending in AAVE, e.g. *The devil haves us in a state of sin*, though no examples of that kind were found in the material.

As a final observation on this subject, we note how the contraction of *does + not* for the 3pers. sg, i.e. *doesn’t*, is regularly as rendered as *don’t*:

- 5) a. Yeah. She a hard lady. She don’t ever give a brother no play. (Donut 4.5)
b. No wonder the boy don’t like me. (Omar 4.9)
c. Said he gonna get more of our muscle if Marlo don’t come to the street and step to him. (Michael 5.8)

This type of invariant *don’t*, especially if the subject is a pronoun (as in 5a), is a feature of other NSE dialects (like, for example, Metropolitan New York English, see Trotta 2003), the main difference being that in AAVE it can occur not only with a pronoun subject, but also with a full noun phrase (5b) or a proper noun (5c).

5.2 Copula deletion

The deletion of the copular verb *be* is perhaps the most obvious and frequent expression of AAVE in *The Wire*, as can be seen in the following representative examples:

- 6) a. Got to. This America, man. (Street witness, 1.1)
- b. You a soldier, Bey. (De'londa 4.2)
- c. So? Your money good, right? (Donette, 1.5)
- d. He deader than Tupac today. (Anonymous man, Town Hall meeting, 3.4)
- e. They big, they fat, and they gorgeous. (Radio DJ, 5.9)
- f. Vinson say Marlo willing to talk if he can keep his corners. (Phil Boy, 3.10)
- g. And he's thinkin' Avon weak right now. (Vinson, 3.9)

Studies on copular deletion in AAVE typically include the deletion of the progressive auxiliary *be* as part of the same phenomenon (e.g. Green 2002: 38, 47-54; Rickford 1999: 61-89, see also Bender 2001:49-50 for a discussion of this matter), as in the following:

- 7) a. Hurry up, nigger, people looking. (D'Angelo, 1.10)
- b. Oh, they thinkin' short when they should be thinkin' long. (Clay Davis, 5.7)
- c. I don't know though, Joe. You think old Marlo gonna give it up? (Omar, 4.13)
- d. - I'm trying. - You trying, huh? (exchange between Namond and De'londa, 4,12)
- e. The fish be fine. I mean, they fish, right? (De'londa 4:2)

Based on the received wisdom of previous research and for the sake of simplicity, we include the progressive and the copular verb *be* in the same category.

The deletion of the copular is not a completely straightforward matter; there is a great deal of agreement that copular deletion in AAVE can occur when it would correspond to *is* or *are* in Standard English and then only in environments in which contraction would be possible in SE (see for example Labov 1969; Rickford 1999:62 and Sidnell 2002:11, but see also Bender 2001:77-95 for counterarguments). Expressed another way, this means that copula deletion in AAVE does not occur with the first person singular (*I'm here*), non-finite forms (like those following a modal, *They can be here by noon*) or past tense forms (*She was/They were here this morning*). In addition, certain grammatical environments (e.g. whether the preceding subject is a pronoun or not and what type of element follows the (deleted) copula, see Baugh 1980, Rickford 1999: 61-89 as well as phonological conditions (e.g. avoidance of consonant clusters or a vowel + vowel combination), see Labov 1972: 106, Sidnell 2002:13-14) are said to favor or disfavor deletion. It would not be fruitful within the restricted framework of this study to examine these finer points in detail, but we can say that none of the examples of copula deletion which we encountered in our material were extreme or unlikely uses; all were used authentically and well within the grammatical rules of AAVE as we understand them.

5.3 Invariant/aspectual/habitual *be*

The term 'Invariant *be*' refers to the universal usage of the copula verb (*be*) in AAVE with first, second, and third person. This form of copula often indicates habituality or a permanent state, as in example (8):

- 8) a. Shit, half the neighborhood be up here week before check day. (Bubbles, 5.7)
- b. The pawns, man, in the game...they get capped quick. They be out of the game early. (D'angelo 1.3)

- c. Money be green. (Bubbles, 1.1)
 - d. You be asking for me? (Omar, 2.4)
- 9)
- a. Omar be dead. (Anonymous woman outside shop, 5.8)
 - c. Yellow tops, shit be the bomb. (Corner dealer 1, 1.9)
 - d. Death grip be the fucking bomb. (Corner dealer 2, 2.5)

Examples (8a-b) show invariant *be* used in a phrase to express an action that happens regularly or often, in (8c) it refers to a permanent state. In addition, sometimes, invariant *be* indicates repetition, as in example (8d).

The examples in (9) are not quite as clear-cut. In (9a), Omar has just been killed and a group has gathered outside the shop where it took place. The habituality reading is not possible and the permanent state (given the actual circumstances of the utterance) is not very likely. In both examples (9c) and (9d), the subjects in both sentences are different kinds of drugs housed in different vials, these drugs constantly change name, consistency and effect. ‘Habitual’ *be* would therefore seem illogical in this context, though it is clear that by using it, the drug dealers in a way advertise their products by claiming that they are always, or usually of good quality.

The use of invariant *be* is considered by many as a key element in creating African-Americanism and thus has a Shibboleth-like significance in representing AAVE speech. Green (2002: 214) states that ‘[t]he marker aspectual *be*, which is often considered to be one of the unique features of AAE [African-American English], alone suggests something about black images...’ (see also pp. 47-50 for notes on the use of invariant *be*). Jack Sidnell (2002: 8) explains that ‘*be* is an item of AAVE grammar that people are very much aware of and therefore it tends to get discussed a lot and is one of the things that non-native speakers of AAVE pick up on and use when they are consciously trying to use AAVE’.

Significant in this context is the fact there were very few examples like (9a) in which the use of invariant *be* was unclear or possibly inaccurate. Further research on the topic is necessary in order to provide a more definitive answer on how this grammatical phenomenon is used in *The Wire* and whether there are in fact examples in which its sole function is to create a sense of ‘blackness’ (see Trotta, forthcoming).

5.4 Stressed (or ‘remote’) *been* and unstressed *been*

In AAVE, a stressed *been* precedes a verb and indicates that the state or action started or took place long time ago (cf. Rickford 1999:19ff). According to Sidnell (2002: 4) this feature is unique to AAVE and does not exist in other dialects of the English language, though other sources, e.g. Kortmann 2006:607, say that it belongs to several other varieties as well.

- 10)
- a. James been dead. (Bodie, 3.4)
 - b. But, y’all been broke up, right? (Bodie, 4.1)
 - c. Omar been gone. (PropJoe, 5.3)
 - d. Shit, I been kept you in Nikes since you were in diapers. (De’londa, 4.12)

In example (10a) Bodie indicates that James has been dead for many years, in example (10b) the same speaker asks a question to confirm that a specific relationship ended a long time ago – in Standard English it could be expressed as ‘but you two broke up a long time ago, right?’. Similarly, in (10c) Proposition Joe packages his message in a way to convey that Omar has been gone for a long time (and he likes it that way).

Example (10d) shows an unusual and somewhat unclear use with *been* preceding the past form *kept* – here De’londa is expressing dissatisfaction with her son Namond, who she feels should be contributing money to the household. Our hesitation at categorizing this example unambiguously as stressed *been* is because it includes an adverbial of time (*since you were in diapers*), something which Rickford (1999:6 & 23-27) and (Green 2002: 59) say indicates an unstressed *been*, i.e. a straightforward use of *been* (with *have* deletion¹⁰) to indicate the perfect aspect and not remoteness.¹¹ Nevertheless we include it here since the context and the intonation used would otherwise be appropriate for this type of string.

5.5 Perfective (or completive) *done*

According to Labov (1998:124) ‘AAVE has always possessed the perfect particle, *done*, which is found both in white Southern states English and in Caribbean creoles. In AAVE, *done* precedes a verb that makes reference to an action completed in the recent past’.

- 11) a. ...we done gone so far from Baltimore. (Bodie, 2.1)
- b. it don’t make sense to ace this motherfucker after he done testified. (Bunk, 1.2)
- c. You done had the stick-up. (Wee-Bay, 1.7)
- d. Game done changed. (Cutty, 3.4)

It is clear, however, from other work on the subject that *done* (unstressed) simply indicates completion and, though it is likely that this completeness is recent, it is not necessarily recent (see, for example, Baugh 1983: 74-75, Smitherman 1986: 24, Rickford 1999:6 and Green 2002:60-63). In examples (11a-c) the construction is used where one could expect *has/have just*, though *done* in (11b-c) could also conceivably simply be emphasizing completeness, recent or otherwise. In (11d) it is uttered by Dennis ‘Cutty’ Wise, who has just been released from prison – here it could be replaced with *has been*, and it is more likely used to emphasize a completed process, and much less likely a completeness in the recent past.

5.6 The use of *steady* as an intensified continuative marker:

According to Green 2002: 71, ‘[s]teady is used to convey the meaning that an activity is carried out in an intense or consistent manner’, which is compatible with the examples given in (12):

¹⁰ Unfortunately, *have* deletion is not covered in the present investigation (see Sidnell 2002: 3-4 for a note on this), nor is the use of the participle form to indicate the simple past tense, e.g. *I seen him* meaning ‘I saw him’ (see Rickford 1999:7, or for a discussion of this in New York English, see Trotta 2003).

¹¹ It is not clear to us whether this discrepancy is due to our analysis, some flaw in the narrow definition of the usage or an inaccurate use of the construction in the show.

- 12) a. You know, me and Poot, we been steady working it, you know? (Wallace, 1.5)
b. Now them Eastsiders are back up in there steady slinging. (Bubbles, 2.12)
c. ...but he bringing shit in here, steady slinging on the side. (Wee-Bay, 2.2)
d. ...and this motherfucker's steady kicking my ass trying to get away. (Kima, 1.10)
e. ...the nigger that steady rollin' [...] that's the nigger I want to hear about. (Stringer, 1.5)
f. You seem like you steady runnin' this shit here. (Cutty, 3.1)

Because of its meaning, intensive *steady* can only be used together with dynamic verbs (here *work*, *sling*, *kick*, *roll*, *run*) and should not combine with stative verbs like *know*, *have* or *own*. The above examples are the only unambiguous ones found in the corpus, all six are perfectly possible and natural in AAVE.

5.7 Got instead of have

Now consider the examples in (13) below, where the verb *got*, which denotes 'obtaining or gaining possession of something', replaces the verb *have* or *have got* to indicate possession or ownership.

- 13) a. It's like eight, nine motherfuckers up there. And they all got nines. (Corner dealer 5.10)
b. No, girl. Got a bus pass. (Cutty, 3.3)
c. Got that reddie, son. (Corner dealer 3, 3.8)

This is not a unique feature of AAVE, and it appears in other dialects of English. Nevertheless, there is very little work on this phenomenon, but an observation of its use in Metropolitan New York English is made in Trotta (2003).

Similarly to many other non-standard and informal dialects, *got to* or *gotta* (14) often replaces the deontic modal expressions *have to* or *have got to*, indicating obligation, as in the following:

- 14) a. The game now is that we gotta sell more of this good shit than they do (Bodie, 2.10)
b. Fact is, I gotta tell 'em I'm not gonna be comin' round for a time. (Chris, 5.5)
c. - You gotta ask your wife? - Oh man, I ain't gotta ask her nothin'. (exchange between Security Director at John Hopkins (a white character) and Bunny Colvin (a black character), 3.4)

Gotta in this sense is used many times in the series, quite naturally and freely by black and white characters alike. Though it is regularly used in *The Wire* it is probably best considered to be informal English and only tangentially interesting in a discussion AAVE (for further discussion of *gotta* as a modal auxiliary in English, see Krug 2000).

5.8 Double Modals

According to Martin and Wolfram, 'AAVE is one of the English dialects that may use more than one modal auxiliary in a clause' (1998:32), similarly to the vernacular English spoken in the Southern United States, and they suggest that the second modal is the 'true' modal (1998:33). Consider the examples from *The Wire* in (15):

- 15) a. I got a little move we might could do. (Orlando, 1.7)
b. There is one boy who might could put this off. (PropJoe, 2.10)

- c. Might could be a problem. (PropJoe, 4.9)
- d. If you get a number, I might could find you a seat. (Bubbles, 5.7)
- e. Anyway, for a kid like that, my onliest plan might be fine, you know? Might could work for a boy like that. (Cutty, 5.5)
- f. Shouldn't oughta told nobody nothing. (Michael, 4.11)

According to Wofram and Schilling (2006: 52) the double modal combination *might could* means something slightly different and more nuanced than either of the modals on their own. In their view, a string like *I might could* would mean something like 'I may be able to, but I'm not sure'. This type of reading is compatible with all the *might could* examples in (15). Martin and Wolfram also comment that *might could* is the most common example of double modals and that some combinations, like for example *could might*, are extremely uncommon (for more discussion on double modals in AAVE see Labov et al 1968: 260-263 and Labov 1972: 57-59). Other than *might could* and the single *should(n't) oughta* combination in (15h), no other examples of double modals were found in the material.

5.9 Future indicators: *gonna*, *I'ma*, *finna* and *be*

The future tense in AAVE is very often expressed with the word *gonna*, a derivation of *going+to*, which almost always (cf. Sidnell, 2002: 7) lacks a preceding copula:

- 16) a. Just gonna put that same shit out in a different color gelcap is all. (Stringer, 1.3)
- b. He gonna get got no matter what you or me do. (D'Angelo, 1.9)

Gonna with a preceding auxiliary *be* is an unexceptional and prevalent feature of informal spoken English and therefore uninteresting for us; it is only with the copula deletion (see also section 5.2) that this becomes significant in the light of the present study. A further contraction of the construction, but this time with an explicit marker of the 1per. sg. *am* can be noted in the phrase *I'ma*, as seen in the examples below:

- 17) a. I'ma get dressed. We go see Bodie. (Namond, 4.6)
- b. Keep on with that shit an' I'ma leave your ass in Baltimore. (Bernard, 3.7)
- c. And the thing is, since the towers's gone, I'ma need to take my thing to some new places. Feel me? Y'know I'ma be home soon enough, right? (Avon, 3.1)

According to Green 2002: 196, this phenomenon is not well studied. However, one could speculate that since AAVE is resistant to deletion of *be* if it were to be expressed by the 1per. sg. *am*, this construction may be a way of compensating for a gap in the system when the speaker wants/needs to include the first person pronoun *I* in the utterance. Naturally, other options are available like *gonna leave in a few minutes* (a subjectless construction), *I'm gonna leave in a few minutes* or *I am going to leave in a few minutes*, but these are either variants of informal English or, as in the case of the last example, Standard English.

Finna is a future maker that is exclusive to AAVE though it is believed to be a contraction of *fixing+to*, which is a feature of Southern White Vernacular English (cf. Bernstein 2003: 114-118). *Finna* supposedly indicates that the event will take place in

the immediate future and, like a modal, ‘it precedes non-finite verbs which are not marked for tense and agreement’ (Green 2002: 70).

- 18) a. We finna get back old times. (Avon, 3.8)
b. You finna go hit a state senator. (Avon, 3.11)

It is interesting that throughout all the five seasons of the series, Avon Barksdale is the only character who uses the word *finna*.¹² Neither of the examples in (18) necessarily forces the immediate future reading, though it is certainly a normal way of interpreting their meaning.

The final way to express the future that we explore in this section is the use of *be* as a future marker in a way that is superficially similar to the ever-present invariant *be*:

- 19) a. You see we a little short now, but tomorrow, I be right back here with the four. (Bubbles, 3.1)
b. Now, look, I be down later sometime. (Wallace, 1.8)
c. You ain’t even gonna be serving no more. Your ass be out on the bottom end of Vine street... sucking on a 40, yelling ‘5-0’. You hear me? (D’Angelo, 1.1)

In a small note on the matter, Rickford (1999: 5-6) mentions that this is probably due to the dropping of a contracted *’ll* (see also Fasold and Wolfram 1970: 51-53). This use of *be* is relevant for our study, but since it is probably more a matter of phonology rather than grammar, we defer any closer analysis to subsequent research on the matter.

5.10 notes on negation: *ain’t*, negative inversion and multiple negation

The use of *ain’t* is a perennial pickle in discussions of English usage. Despite its widespread and popular use, it is consistently condemned as substandard or improper by most grammars and usage guides. It occurs amazingly often in *The Wire*, a whopping 1500 occurrences, uttered with total impunity by black and white speakers alike:

- 20) a. Myself, I ain’t never really had a word with the man. (Marvin, 1.4)
b. This city ain’t that big. (Avon, 1.9)
c. They ain’t saying they think it. (Stringer, 2.2)
d. I leave messages, she ain’t call back. (Brianna, 2.2)
e. She ain’t had her ass down here regular neither. (Avon, 2.2)
f. They ain’t follow you? (Butch, 4.13)
g. You ain’t gotta worry about my child. (Brianna, 1.12)
h. -You ain’t know Omar? (Bubbles, 1.4)

As it is seen in the examples above, *ain’t* is a negation that can be used in nearly every situation that involves negation; it can correspond to any present tense form of *be + not* (20b-c) or any present tense *form* of *have + not*, as in (20a, d-e). Additionally, depending on how one chooses to paraphrase it into SE, it can also be used as a contraction of *do + not* as in (20f-h) (and in (20h) it is unmistakably used so). Our impressionistic interpretation of the material is that it is more popular among black characters in *The*

¹² It is also interesting to note that neither of these examples is recorded correctly in the closed-caption transcripts, possibly because the transcriber was not familiar with this construction.

Wire than it is among the white characters and that some uses (like those in (20h)) are more restricted to AAVE and do not occur in the speech of white characters. However, no percentages have been calculated for these variables in this study and thus any definitive results will necessarily be left to further research.

Ain't can also be used in combination with *but* to mean 'only', as in the following (cf. Wolfram et al 1993: 14 and Rickford 1999: 8):

- 21) a. Ain't but \$290 here. (Ziggy, 2.5)¹³
b. Come on, now, ain't but one working man, now, is there? (Omar, 1.5)

Finally, *ain't* is used as a part of the fixed expression (*it ain't no thing*, meaning something like 'it's ok' (22a), 'it's no big deal' (22b) or 'it's easy', 'it's no problem' (22c) depending on the context:

- 22) a. It ain't no thing. I'm just kinda getting' a little tired of it. (Dukie, 5.5)
b. - Because it ain't no thing, right? - Yeah, it ain't no thing. (exchange between Avon and D'Angelo, 2.3)
c. It ain't no thing to kill a nigga who's already 'bout the business of killing himself. (Horse yard 'araber', 4.12)

Many of the examples above also exhibit double or multiple negation, which is common in many forms of non-standard English besides AAVE, and is quite prevalent in the series. Consider also the examples in (23):

- 23) a. ...can't be playing checkers on no chess board. (D'Angelo, 1.3)
b. I can't make no money like that... (Anonymous Homeless person, 5.4)
c. My kids, they can't play outside no more. (Anonymous woman at Town Hall meeting, 3.4)
d. Them narco numbers I got for you don't work no more. (Bubbles, 4.9)
e. Ain't nobody go past that. (Street witness, 1.1)
f. Boy, don't nobody give a damn about you and your story. (Donette, 1.5)
g. Ain't nobody walking with me nowhere. (Little Kevin, 4.10)
h. Ain't nothin' wrong with me! I'm out here gettin' stuff done. (Kenard, 5.5)
i. But don't none of that amount to shit when you talking about protecting a neighborhood now, do it? (Bunny, 3.10)
j. I see ain't shit changed around this joint. (Poot, 4.9)

The sentences above illustrate some very common cases of double/multiple negation in AAVE. In (23a-c) the auxiliary verb (which in these examples happens to be the modal *can*) are negated, then followed by a further negative article (*no* as in (23a-d)) or other negative later in the utterance. Double negations have received a lot of attention in prescriptive grammars and usage guides (see *Webster Dictionary of English Usage*, pp. 365-366, for discussion), though there is really no inherent reason to stigmatize the construction. The standard versions of many languages make use of two negative items

¹³ Ziggy Sobotka is a working class white character who is torn between his identity as a dockworker and his aspirations to make it big through drug dealing. It is interesting to note that the character is played by James Ransone, a native of Baltimore (HBO online).

(most notably French) and in early forms of English it was possible without reproach (Cf. Shakespeare's *I am not sent to you by my lady, to bid you come speak with her; nor your name is not Master Cesario; nor this is not my nose neither*. Twelfth Night, Act 4, scene 1).

In (23e-j) we note the so-called negative inversion of AAVE, i.e. a negative operator such as *ain't* or *don't* is 'fronted' in an inversion pattern similar to *yes-no* interrogatives, then followed by a negative indefinite pronoun (typically *nobody* (23e-g), but other forms such as *no one*, *nothing* or *none* (23i) and even *shit*¹⁴ (23j) are also possible). Sidnell (2002) notes that this construction is also found in Southern white and Ozark dialects (p. 21).

5.11 Non-standard pronouns

The pronoun *y'all*, a contraction of *you-all*, is extremely recurrent in the show (407 attested examples in the corpus), for it is common in both AAVE and white Southern American English. It is used as a plural second-person pronoun to fill the gap which does not distinguish between the 2pers. sg. and 2pers pl. pronouns in SE:

- 24) a. Right now I need some assistance from y'all. (Omar, 1.10)
- b. Fuck both y'all. (Cheryl, 1.13)
- c. I know a club in Oxon Hill that would wreck y'all. (DC gangster, 2.6)
- d. Fuck you, and fuck all y'all bitches. (Albert, 4.11)

In (24a) the speaker addresses a large group of people, while in (24b) there are two addressees. In an interesting twist, the plural *y'all* is sometimes used to address a single speaker as in (24c), though this example can also be understood as having a generic reference, replaceable by *anyone* or generic *you* in SE. Note also that the *all* part of the *y'all* construction apparently has little of its original meaning since it can be combined naturally with another *all* in a sentence like (24d).

Black characters in *The Wire* who consistently use AAVE in their speech most often use the pronoun *them*, the objective case of the 3pers. pl. *they*, instead of the plural demonstrative pronouns *those* and *these*. According to Wolfram (1998), this phenomenon, among others, is "well represented in most vernacular dialects of English" (p. 342).

- 25) a. Them towers be home to me. (Bodie, 3.1)
- b. Been going to them co-op meetings with String. (Avon, 3.8)
- c. I heard them New York boys ran off most of Delroy's people, and those that stay gotta take they package. (Unknown member of the 'New Day Co-op', 4.3)
- d. They might just take it federal, run wild on they ass. (Unknown voice on wiretap, 3.1)
- e. He got hisself shot for trying to pull a kid off the corner. (Bunny, 4.13)

¹⁴ Technically speaking, of course, *shit* is not a negative element, it is included here since it is roughly equivalent to *nothing*.

In addition, as (25c-d) also attest, the genitive pronoun *their* is often expressed with *they*. According to Rickford 1999: 7, *y'all* can also have this genitive function, e.g. *It's y'all ball*, though we did not note any such examples in our material.

Consider also (25e), which shows the reflexive pronoun *hissself*, used in a straightforward way that corresponds with SE *himself*. No other NSE forms of a reflexive pronouns were found in the material (for fairly self-evident reasons this pattern of genitive + *self* would not produce forms that were easily discernable from standard forms), though we find it curious that no form of *they* + *self* could be found.

5.12 Redundant -s suffix

AAVE is believed by many scholars (e.g. Sidnell 2002) to have creole origins, and one aspect of creole speech apparent in the series is the addition of the plural -s suffix to phrases that do not require it, e.g. zero plurals, always plural nouns, etc.

- 26) a. How your peoples, dog? (PropJoe, 2.6)
- b. You good peoples (Bubbles, 3.5)
- c. The boys don't want to extend the good shit if it's gonna keep you and your peoples out on them corners bangin'. (PropJoe, 3.10)
- d. Everything right with my fishes? (Wee-Bay, 4.2)

The most common case for this phenomenon is with the always plural word *people* (commonly shortened to *peeps*, though this form does not occur in our material), as in examples (26a-c), however at least one other case could be observed, as in example (4c) with the zero-plural word *fish*.¹⁵

5.13 Ass-words and ass-contractions in AAVE

The word *ass* in AAVE, either as an independent word or as a kind of affix, is often used in creating intensified adjectives or alternatively, as Spears argues '*ass*, occurring in expressions in which it is preceded by a possessive pronoun, [is] usually used as the equivalent of the reflexive *self* ... also used as a substitute for other pronouns' (Spears, 1998:234; see also Collins et al. 2008).

- 27) a. Get your ass around the corner. (Bodie, 1.3)
- b. Lucky I signed off on your ass, or you'd be on your way out to boys' village. (Raylene, 5.4)
- c. I'm not out there asking about no random-ass-who-give-a-damn nigger. (Stringer, 2.5)
- d. we on this off-brand-ass strip right here (Bodie, 3.4)
- e. Man, shit. I seen a tiny-ass .22 round-nose drop a nigga plenty of days, man. (Snoop, 4.1)
- f. ...he ain't no governor, neither, just a weak-ass Mayor of a broke-ass city. (Norman Wilson, 5.1)

Example (27a) clearly represents the case where *ass* substitutes for the word *self* (or rather *your ass* means *yourself*), in (27b) the phrase *your ass* would most naturally be

¹⁵ Note that in (26d), *fishes* is not intended to mean different varieties of fish, in which case the usage would be SE and not NSE. Note also that many NSE dialects use the regular plural -s ending on zero plurals like *fish*, but the use of -s on the always plural *people* is specific to AAVE.

rendered simply as *you* in SE while in (27c-f) it is used creatively as an intensifying affix in an adjective phrase.

6. Vocabulary

It is no secret that slang, jargon, in-group vocabulary and extreme uses of certain registers can be used as a way of signaling personal, group and/or subcultural identity. In his introduction to *Juba Jive: A dictionary of African American Slang*, Clarence Major discusses how African-American slang has developed throughout the years: ‘Since the days of slavery, this secrecy has served as a form of cultural self-defense against exploitation and oppression, constructed out of a combination of language, gesture, body style, and facial expression. In its embryonic stages during slavery, the secrecy was a powerful medium for making sense out of a cruel and strange world. African-American slang is a kind of “home talk” in the sense that it was not originally meant for listeners beyond the nest’ (Major 1994: xxix).

Additionally, it is also well-known that a common function of popular euphemisms, slang and colloquialisms is to refer to items/topics that are typically not considered appropriate for polite conversation, e.g. when talking about violence, sex, death, drugs, etc. In light of this, African-American slang has a strong resemblance to many other kinds of slang in general, it can: 1) show solidarity to the in-group, 2) show distance or resistance to the out-group 3) be used as a code to obscure meaning and 4) be used to cover unsavory topics. Most of these four points conflate in the slang used in *The Wire*, partly because many of the characters are criminals, but also because these words are a part of the world of the people who experience street reality on a daily basis; those who live in the blighted areas, know people involved in criminal activities, or otherwise cannot avoid contact with it.

Throughout the observation phase of this study, numerous terms were noted, many of them unclear regarding whether the words/expressions are used more frequently or exclusively by AAVE speakers or whether they are simply ordinary American slang and jargon. Thus, a certain method has been applied here: each of these words was checked against a recognized AAVE dictionary (such as Major 1994), or in other reliable sources. Words that were not regarded clearly as AAVE (regardless of whether they are used by other groups or not) were not included in this study.

It is important to mention that the meanings of the words and terms listed in section 6.1 are not always as they appear in the dictionaries and reference sources. Some terms are used in *The Wire* with a different nuance; the sense presented here is based on our interpretation of the meaning as we see it in the particular context of the speech situation examined. As stated by Anthony Hemingway, one of the directors of *The Wire*, ‘Baltimore has its own dialect. A lot of actors go out and do their research’ (HBO Online). With this statement in mind, the following sections attempt to reflect the actual use of language as it is understood in the context of *The Wire*, as well as the manner in which it is being used.

6.1 Words, slang and colloquialisms in *The Wire*

The characters of *The Wire* have a rich and interesting vocabulary. Since the series puts a heavy focus on the African-American drug dealers of Baltimore and their affiliates, the viewer is exposed to plenty of jargon and slang, some of it typical of AAVE, some unique to Baltimore, some associated primarily with the criminal underworld. It is no easy task to group this myriad of terms and expressions into coherent semantic fields, but in the hope of producing some orderliness, we have grouped them into the following (very subjective and admittedly ad hoc) categories: ‘street life and crime-related jargon’; ‘people’; ‘tags & discourse markers’; ‘other phenomena’ and finally ‘a note on verbs from nouns’.

Street life and crime-related jargon

The police are usually referred to as *PO-lice* (emphasis on the first syllable) or with the commonplace term *cops*; sometimes terms more specific to the show and/or AAVE are used such as *po-po*, *5-0* (pronounced ‘five-oh’, presumably originally a reference to the American TV series *Hawaii 5-0*), *narcos*, or *knockos*, while the term for a drug addict is *fiend*, often referred to as *dope fiend*. *Prison* is usually simply called *jail* in *The Wire*, however it is sometimes called *the cut*, *the pokey*, *the joint* or by the particular name of the prison, as for example *Jessup*, a correctional institution in the state of Maryland mentioned time and again in the series. Much of the communication between the criminals on the show takes place on cell phones that are used for only a short period and thrown away, referred to as *burners*.

A key term appearing frequently during the series is *the game*. *The game* is the life of any person who becomes involved in the drug trade directly or indirectly, it is a certain set of unwritten rules which encourages a form of social Darwinism – survival of the fittest in a modern urban environment, in which ‘minor transgressions may be punishable by death’ (Lakhani & Johnson 2009). Thus when Omar is robbing a drug dealer in New York, he explains himself simply with ‘it’s all in the game’ (1.13). A person participating in *The Game* is often called a *player*. Geneva Smitherman (2006) explains the use of the words *play* and *game*:

Taken together, ‘play’ and ‘game’ constitute a powerful linguistic icon. Every game in the social universe has its clearly defined rules of play. Conceptualizing reality and life as a game is a framework that fixes things, puts structure and system in place, gives one the comfort of order in a random, disorderly world... (p. 68)

The actual process of selling or distributing drugs is called *slinging* or sometimes *grinding* and occasionally *bangin’* (see below). A *corner* is a simply a street corner used for the distribution of drugs. A *stash* is a hidden stock of drugs, and a *stash house* is a police term for a property in which drugs are stored, cut and packed into vials making them street-ready, which the drug dealers in the series call *main stash*. A *G-Pack* is a package of 1,000 dollars worth of drugs, *re-up*, *package* and *product* are all synonyms for drugs, *re-up* specifically meaning a delivery of drugs to street dealers, *package* being a large amount, a shipment or a supply of drugs from a particular dealer.

There are many different verbs used for violent acts like killing or murdering, some apparent ones are *drop*, *get got*, *play*, especially in the context *play or get played* (Omar, 1.8), i.e. ‘kill or get killed’. For the act of killing someone with a gun, or shooting in general the verbs *ace*, *pop*, *blaze*, *smoke* and *pop a cap (in someone’s ass)* are used. The terms for a gun also vary – *whistle*, *heat*, *that thing*, *chrome* and *nine(s)* are common criminal jargon terms used in the series. *Muscle* refers to armed people who serve as bodyguards or hitmen, while a person outside the drug trade is referred to as a *civilian* and earning money in a dishonest or illegal manner is called *hustling*.

The act of robbing is usually referenced simply as *robbing* or *ripping*, while robbing drug dealers is sometimes referred to as to *rip and run*. People who engage in the act of robbing drug dealers are called *stickup* boys/girls/crews/artists. As mentioned above, a *joint* could refer to a prison (particularly Jessup), but may also mean a building or a place of (illegal) business, even if it is a street corner (...*but this right here, this a Barksdale joint, man*, Unknown Street Thug 3.2), depending on the context.

People

The wide variety of words/expressions for referring to other people is immediately obvious in the material. Several words are used almost only positively (or neutrally), like *bro* (a shortened version of *brother*¹⁶), *dawg* (dog), *homes* (probably from *homeboy*, i.e. a person one knows from the neighborhood, though the meaning has been extended to ‘friend’¹⁷) and *cat*, a neutral synonym of the word *person*. *Boy*, meaning ‘friend’ or ‘associate’ and *fool* (often in the traditional, negative sense, but sometimes with a more neutral tone used for non-specific reference as in *And it don't matter that some fool (‘somebody’) say he different...* (D’Angelo 2.6)) are frequent terms of address in *The Wire*. The word *ho*, shortened from *whore*, is a much-discussed word in AAVE commonly applied to women in general, but it is not used very often in the show (3 occurrences). On the other hand, *bitch* occurs fairly repeatedly (~ 200 examples, used on its own or as a part of larger expressions like *sons of bitches*). It is used by both white and black characters to denote not only women, but often it is used to refer to men in demeaning way, implying that they are effeminate, inferior or weak in some way, e.g. *He ain’t nothing but a skanky-ass bitch to begin with* (Namond 4.5). *Shorty* is a word with two very different meanings, one being a child (or a person younger than the speaker), the other being a woman (usually, but not necessarily, one’s girlfriend).

A more complicated term is *motherfucker* (typically pronounced like *muthafuckah*). This word occurs extremely often during the show (588 attested instances), and is used by both blacks and non-blacks. In AAVE, however, the word has more uses than of merely referring to a person. Smitherman (1998) explains: ‘Depending on the context, *muthafucka* may have a neutral, negative or positive reference to a person, place or thing’ (p. 223).

¹⁶ The complementary female term, *sister*, though it is a documented AAVE term for black woman, could only be found once in the material: *Yo, Mike. Hook a sister up...* (Omar, 1.4)

¹⁷ Interestingly enough, *homes* is used roughly 10 times in the series, mostly by AAVE speakers, but *homeboy* occurs only once, *Have you ever heard of federal guidelines? Pre-indicted corners, homeboy,* (4.8) by a white police officer with the purpose of being mocking and ironic.

- 28) a. Look the part, be the part, motherfucker. (PropJoe, 1.9)
b. Listen, motherfucker, I know what happened to him. (Corner dealer, 5.10)
c. And these crickets, louder than a motherfucker. (Wallace, 1.11)
d. ...they even got grenades in that motherfucker. (Stringer, 3.11)

In example (28a) the speaker uses the word *motherfucker* to neutrally address a fellow drug-dealer during a basketball match. The term is used negatively in (28b) to express frustration and disrespect to a police officer during an interrogation. In example (28c) the word functions as an abstract entity that can carry any required quality – in this case loudness, i.e. louder than x, where x equals something really loud, while in example (28d) *motherfucker* clearly refers to a location, i.e. a vehicle, house, apartment, basement, etc.

We turn now to the troublesome and thorny term *nigger* and its variant *nigga(h)*. According to Spears (1998: 234), ‘Most Americans know that *nigga* ... is used among African Americans ... but African Americans (and blacks in general) take grave offence at whites calling them N’.¹⁸ Accordingly, depending on contextual and situational factors, this term can be (and often is) a highly emotionally-charged slur used to refer to an African American or dark-skinned person. However, as noted above, many AAVE speakers have ‘flipped the script’ (cf. Alim 2004), i.e. the word has been reclaimed by some (certainly not all) African Americans and can be often used, most typically by one black person to another, in an affectionate, joking or ironic way. In some contexts, it is even used as an expression of solidarity or respect. For speakers using AAVE slang in *The Wire*, its usage is so natural and routine that it can be used as a type of indefinite pronoun or non-specific deictic expression, something along the lines of *guy(s)* in informal SE (e.g. *Look at those guys over there*, or *Hi guys, what’s up?*). In the series it is occurs often (394 instances), sometimes even in cases where white people are referring to other white people.

- 29) a. That nigger don’t play. (Bubbles, 1.4)
b. Naw, man, I’m just a nigger with a plan, that all. (Omar, 1.5)
c. ...we gonna have two dozen niggers saying that we on our way. (Stringer, 1.9)
d. And you got a good heart in there too, not like the rest of these niggers. (D’Angelo, 1.9)
e. Sergey, my nigger. (PropJoe, 2.6)
f. Baltimore niggers off the hook, I swear. (DC gangster, 2.7)
g. you wanna be my nigger, you got to be with me for real. (Frog, 2.5)

In (29a) a black speaker neutrally refers to another black person. In (29b) it is used by Omar to refer to himself, with the possibility that he uses the word to emphasize his identity as being African-American. In (29c-d) *nigga* refers to unspecified people, with the probability that those people are African-Americans, though in (29d) it has a clearly negative flavor. In (29f), the speaker refers to the African-Americans in Baltimore

¹⁸ The *nigger-nigga(h)* distinction, the problematic nature of this epithet and the distinctions between in-group and out-group uses are well-documented in the literature on AAVE (for a book length discussion, see, for example, Kennedy 2003, see also *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, 1997).

associated with the drug trade. Example (29e) is uttered by a black person to a white person, with a strong positive sense, showing solidarity, while in (29g) it is a white speaker addressing another white person, meaning something like ‘buddy/friend’ or ‘someone I can trust’.

According to the HBO website for *The Wire*, some specifically Baltimorean slang terms in this category are *hopper*, *yo*’ and *gump*. A *hopper* (Bubbles, 3.5) is a condescending term that refers to the young drug dealers who are at the bottom of the criminal hierarchy. The word *yo*, has two main uses, one as a frequently occurring interjection (used often like a discourse marker to get the addressee(s) attention), the other a type of vocative to refer to someone in second person, as in *-Yo, you all up on me for? - I’m not your yo.* (exchange between Namond and Prezbo 4.5). Finally, *gump*, is an insult used by young teenagers, *Man, I said you ’s a gump* (Namond 4.12).

Tags and discourse markers

AAVE is rich with questions seeking confirmation, in particular *you know what I’m saying*, *you feel me* (Avon, 1.5), *you know what I mean* (Omar, 1.5). All of them basically meaning ‘do you understand me?’, though sometimes they are used to seek confirmation for understanding of a more subtle message, especially *you feel me?*, which is used time and again in *The Wire* by Omar as an equivalent of ‘do you understand my position’. *You know what I’m saying?* (Marlo, 4.8) often has the quality of a rhetorical question or discourse marker. Respectively, there are also a few common methods of showing confirmation or approval, for example *I feel you* (Poot, 1.11), *true that* (Omar, 3.3), *word* (Poot, 1.2), *for real* (Avon, 1.9), meaning ‘seriously’ and *mos def* (D’Angelo, 1.1), a contraction of ‘most definitely’.

Other phenomena

There are plenty of AAVE synonyms for *good*, most of which originally have a different meaning, for example *phat*, *right*, *tight*, or *the bomb*, especially when referring to drugs. *Off the hook* generally means ‘to a great extreme’, and can be used with both positive and negative attitude, e.g. in *Man, whoever invented these, he off the hook* (Wallace 1.2) it means that this person (who invented chicken nuggets in this particular case) is ‘great’ ‘fantastic’ or ‘magnificent’.

The word *carry* is a Baltimore equivalent of the slang word *play*, in the meaning of ‘manipulate’ ‘control’ or ‘deceive’ (as in *don’t try to play me like that*). The word is never used in exactly that way in the show, but it is used in a related sense of manipulating or dealing with a situation as in *So, I’m asking how you want to carry this. You want to get out?* (Daniels, 1.7). The expression *to scheme somebody* (e.g. *He wasn’t trying to scheme me*, Namond 4.12) means ‘to trick’ or ‘con’ someone. *Bang* is used in *The Wire* to mean ‘rough up, beat up’ both in a literal, physical sense, but also figuratively (*You gonna go public and bang the Mayor with it? You gonna bang Burrell and the state’s attorney then?* (Anthony Gray 3.5). *Bangin’* is sometimes used to mean ‘gang bangin’, in the sense of perpetrating criminal activities, like for example, dealing drugs (*They’re still running product. Still got kids banging out there*, Kima, 3.3). The term *grill* is occasionally used to mean ‘face’ as in *...next time you come to Jessup, it*

won't be my grill talkin' at you (Avon, 5.2) or *Fucking gimpy-assed, big-grill motherfucker* (Namond, 4.5).

Some expressions seem to be remnants of the Southern White Vernacular such as *Triflin'* meaning 'toy around' or 'be irresponsible'. *Holler* could be used as a synonym of *yell*, or alternatively *call out*, particularly someone's name. *Mite* means 'a little bit' – e.g. *slow down a mite* (Marvin, 1.4) and *no how* means 'anyway' as in *In fact, I ain't really one for meets no how* (Marlo, 5.6). Another possible observation of this type is the use of outdated or archaic sounding words, such as *yonder* and *onliest* (e.g. *Onliest people knew 'bout the deed is us right here* (Marlo, 5.9).

A note on verbs from nouns

Certain nouns from SE have been verbalized in AAVE, and thus transitive verbs as *punk*, to trick someone, or to behave disrespectfully towards someone, or *pimp*, in the context of bribing or buying one's silence or agreement, as in *Motherfucker thinking he can pimp me over a candy bar* (Arrested adolescent, 1.7). Even the slang word *crib*, meaning 'place where someone lives or stays', which is usually a noun, is sometimes converted to a verb *Me and bug got our own spot so you could come crib with us if you want* (Michael, 4.12).

7. All the pieces matter: an analysis of an extended extract

As a way of showing the natural flow of AAVE in an ordinary conversation, we present the extract below (given with numbered lines for quick reference), from season 2, episode 6 of *The Wire*. The speakers involved are Proposition Joe¹⁹ (a prominent Baltimore Eastside drug kingpin who generally prefers peaceful solutions to various problems), Nicky (a white dock worker) and Sergey (a white Russian gangster who is involved in criminal activities at the docks with Nicky's family as well as being connected with the drug business via Joe). In this scene Nicky comes to discuss with Joe the issue of his cousin Ziggy's car being torched by one of Joe's sergeants (Cheese) because Ziggy owed Cheese drug money. Nicky, using Sergey to mediate the discussion, is asking Joe to erase Ziggy's debt on account of the burned car and, additionally, to repay the remainder of the car's value:

1. PropJoe: Sergey, my nigger.
2. Sergey: You're losing weight. Shit. You are down to nothing. In this country, supermarkets are cathedrals. I worry for you, buddy.
3. PropJoe: How your peoples, dog?
4. Sergey: Same, good.
5. PropJoe: You talk to the man about that other thing, right? Because I can get behind that business in a big way.
6. Sergey: We will talk later. Now, another business.
7. PropJoe: Right. This the man with the raggedy-ass Camaro?
8. Nicky: Wasn't mine, it was my cousin's. It wasn't all that raggedy.
9. Sergey: Sorry. Nicky is with us. His cousin... But family cannot be helped.

¹⁹ According to Stephen Daly (2007), the role of Proposition Joe is played by a real resident of Baltimore, and not a professional actor, which makes his speech even more interesting in the context of this study.

10. PropJoe: Who you telling? I got motherfucking nephews and in-laws fucking all my shit up all the time. And it ain't like I can pop a cap in their ass and not hear about it Thanksgiving time. For real, I'm living life with some burdensome niggers.
11. Nicky: So what the fuck?
12. PropJoe: You ain't pay my boy Cheese, and Cheese ain't paying me, right? I ain't talking about all the money in the world. But it ain't like Cheese be in a position out on that corner... to let your cuz exemplify shit, you feel? The man cut you some slack, and soon every fucking-up white boy be on his titty.
13. Nicky: We wanna pay what we owe. The \$2,700 anyway. We're gonna have it soon enough. Your man doubled it, though. He also burned the car. Now the blue book on that Camaro was \$5,100.
14. PropJoe: Now, let me understand. You gonna come up in here, having fucked up a package... asking me to tell Cheese, who you fucked it up on... to pay you out \$2,400.
15. Nicky: He gets to keep the Camaro.
16. PropJoe (to Sergey): Just how good a friend is this motherfucker to y'all? The Cheese ain't gonna be happy having to pay me back... so I would advise y'all to give him some distance.
17. Nicky: Just so he don't come back on my cousin. Anyway, thanks for being straight on this.
18. PropJoe: Fool, if it wasn't for Serge here, you and your cuz both would be cadaverous motherfuckers.

The passage contains plenty of typical AAVE grammar: The negation word *ain't* is used six times in the passage (lines 10, 12 & 16). Aspectual *be* appears twice in line 12. Copula deletion occurs four times, mostly in question forms, in lines 3, 7, 10, 14. The word *y'all* is used twice in line 16. In line 3, Joe uses the always plural word *people* with an additional *-s*. The *-ass* morpheme is used twice, once in line 10 meaning 'them', (i.e. *their ass* = 'them'), once as in line 7 as a part of an adjective. The future indicator *gonna* is used twice, once with a deleted *be* (line 14 and once with *ain't* in line 16). *Got* is used in line 10 where one would have expected *have* or *have got* in SE. Irregular concord also occurs here, in line 12, which in SE would read something like '(if) the man cuts you some slack'.

In terms of vocabulary, Joe uses the word *dog* (dawg) as a synonym of 'friend' (line 3); the idiom *pop a cap*, another way of saying 'shoot a bullet' (line 10); *for real*, as a disjunct meaning 'seriously' (line 10); and the confirmation tag question *you feel?* (line 12), meaning 'do you understand?'. The word *nigger* is used twice, once in a positive sense towards a white person (line 1), and once in a negative sense (line 10). He also uses the word *motherfucker*, once as an adjective in line 10, once as a substitute for 'person' line 16 and once in the creative phrase '*cadaverous motherfuckers*' (line 18) meaning 'you would be dead'; in all cases the word is intended in a negative sense. The word *boy*, meaning associate, can be found in line 12 as well as *fool* in line 18.

Note that in the extract, Joe addresses two white characters, and while doing that in a short space of time he uses at least 12 different typical properties of AAVE as described in sections 5 and 6 along with other AAVE features that are not explicitly discussed in the present study such as, for example, *come* to express indignation in line 14 (cf. Spears 1982:252). Throughout the entire series Joe chooses to be highly articulate with AAVE alone, despite the fact that in episode 4.9 there is a short scene in which he calls the police and shows that he is perfectly capable of speaking Standard English with a white-sounding pronunciation – there is a lot that can be learned from that. If we consider Baugh's (1980) comments in defining AAVE as something spoken

typically “between speakers of the same vernacular”, and Trotta’s (2003) discussion that non-standard language speakers are often expressing a rejection of the norms and values of mainstream society, then Proposition Joe’s comfortably expressing his AAVE linguistic identity with Nicholas and Sergey is an indication that in Joe’s eyes, there is a type of solidarity among them by virtue of their rejection of, and by, the mainstream. Even though all of the characters present are criminals, they have more things in common than just that: Joe, as mentioned before, is an African-American. Sergey is an immigrant. Nicholas is a second-generation stevedore working in a dying harbor. All of them are struggling, disenfranchised, lower-class outsiders.

Finally, the exchange given above can be used not only as evidence that Proposition Joe’s is a good representation of genuine AAVE but also that the level of depth and sophistication that can be expressed through this dialect is completely dependent on the speaker.

8. Discussion and Concluding remarks

In sections 5 to 7 above, we provide a great deal of evidence that the series, as was hinted in the introduction, indeed presents a high-fidelity, albeit densely packaged, reflection of African-American Vernacular English, with strong regard to both grammar and vocabulary.²⁰ Nevertheless, no scripted representation of speech will ever reproduce all the characteristics of naturally occurring spoken language exactly or in exactly the same proportions; scripted language is created with the intention of entertaining an audience and thus (as Quaglio 2009 shows) some features will be exaggerated or heightened for effect, while others, such as repetitions, false starts, conversational overlaps, etc. are played down or ‘disaccentuated’, partly because of the time constraints and practicalities of television and partly because they would make the viewing experience tedious. It is also crucial to keep in mind that ethnicity is not the only relevant variable for the way AAVE speech is represented in *The Wire*; the specific subject matter of the show, its Baltimore location, and the social class membership of many of its characters surely affect the language and vocabulary and thus also have a great significance for the types of features found and their relative frequencies.

The Wire is an extremely powerful television series which manages to present the bleak reality many citizens of Baltimore face daily.²¹ The poverty, violence, isolation, neglect and despondence are apparent not only in the actions, but also through the speech and dialogues of many characters. Ethridge (2008) explains that, according to the show’s creator David Simon, *The Wire* received its title not only because of the

²⁰ The Wire is indeed bursting with AAVE and though we have presented a fairly extensive list of grammatical features, it is hardly comprehensive and there is more to say and do with this material. Also, a great many other types of questions remain, for example: how does our material compare to other Popular Culture representations of AAVE? Are there noteworthy gender or age differences in AAVE usage? How about individual speakers – are they consistent in their AAVE? And what about the relevance of contextual and situational factors? It is the authors’ intention to produce more work on these topics in the future.

²¹ Some scholars though, for example Johnson-Lewis 2009, feel the show is all too bleak and cynical.

show's focus on high-end police investigations and wire taps, but also because it illustrates a 'wire of separation':

The title really refers to almost an imaginary but inviolate boundary between the two Americas, between the functional, post-industrial economy that is minting new millionaires every day and creating a viable environment for a portion of the country, and the other America that is being consigned to a permanent underclass, and this show is really about the vagaries and excesses of unencumbered capitalism and what that has wrought at the millennium and where the country is and where it is going and it is suggestive that we are going to a much more divided and brutish place, and I think we are, and that really reflects the politics of the people making the show. It really is a show about the other America in a lot of ways, and so *The Wire* really does refer to almost a boundary or a fence or the idea of people walking on a high wire and falling to either side... (p. 154)

In the five-year long stretch of 60 episodes, we see how in a city abandoned by the general American public, the dialect is becoming the norm, while the 'norm' is becoming the margin: we see it with politicians and community leaders, we see it with the young white working class and with the black police officers – there is no clear 'wire' that neatly divides them up into AAVE and non-AAVE speakers.

Because of the nature of our study, we have focused much attention to individual, artificially isolated elements of AAVE, but the language of *The Wire* is clearly more than just grammar and vocabulary, it is a place where socio-political and cultural meaning are produced and understood; it is, to paraphrase Alim (2004: 394), a dialect that is central to the lifeworlds of the characters in the show and it is suitable and functional for all of their communicative needs. It is only when we let the characters in and really to listen to them that we can understand AAVE in *The Wire* as being more than the sum of its parts, it is rather an entire way of thinking, expressing and embodying oneself in language.

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