“It’s No Compassion in These Courtrooms”:
Exploring the Linguistic Construction of Racial Identity in Narratives of Chicago Courtrooms

By Ruthie Dworin
under the advisement of Dr. Sharese King
submitted in pursuit of a Bachelor of Arts with Honors
for the Department of Linguistics
University of Chicago
May 14, 2021
Introduction

While significant research into African American Vernacular English (AAVE) since the 1960s has focused on documenting the variety (Labov 1968, Wolfram 1969), more recent research has focused on AAVE in legal contexts such as housing discrimination (Baugh) and speech in courtrooms (Fuller 1993). The research that we have seen so far has shown that AAVE is a wide dialect full of variety, and that Black speakers in regions across America use different elements of AAVE for different social meanings (Grieser 2019, King 2020). Further, Black speakers of AAVE use varying elements of both AAVE and non-AAVE varieties to construct their own personas in social situations, including sociolinguistic interviews and courtrooms. However, there is a dearth of research on the speech of Black Chicagoans and in Chicago courtrooms. Given that AAVE is a highly stigmatized dialect (Green 2002) and using elements of AAVE in high-stakes environments like a courtroom can have dire consequences for legal cases and defendants, examining regional variation of AAVE in concert with their narratives of courtroom experiences could further the understanding by linguists, court officials including jurors and judges, and the public, of the dialect as a legitimate variety and not a signal of ignorance or incredibility (Rickford and King 2016). Drawing on interviews with seven Black, Chicago-native speakers, I explore these areas of study via topic-based and sentiment-based analyses, raising questions about who the authentic AAVE speaker may be and how speakers’ style-shifting affects how they are viewed and interpreted by non-AAVE speakers.

Background

Section 1.1 On African American English

As Lisa Green explains in her 2002 book *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*, African American (Vernacular) English is a language variety of American English “that has set phonological...morphological...syntactic...semantic...and lexical patterns” (Green 2002: 1). Before we explore the data of this paper, we must have a grounded understanding of what African American Vernacular English is, who uses it, and what examples we will see in this paper.

Lisa Green’s book is one of the seminal works on AAVE, and it aims to educate the public on how AAVE is structured, and to help people understand that it is “not a degraded version of classroom English” (Green 1). Her history of the name of the variety is important to understand cultural attitudes toward it: she emphasizes that all the labels that have been used (including Negro English, black street speech, AAVE) to describe it link it explicitly with its speakers--i.e., African American working-class people.

Some earlier studies of the variety focused on the vernacular part of the name: scholars like William Labov and John Baugh started by studying inner-city youth. Labov called this variety “Black English Vernacular,” and applied it to Black youth ages 8-19 who participate in...
street culture (Labov 1973). Baugh called it “black street culture,” and he called the language they spoke “black street speech” (Baugh 1983). Green tells us that this black street speech is AAVE, and that it is spoken not only by youth who participate in black street culture, but also by people of multiple demographics in small towns and other parts of big cities. Green uses “African American English,” (AAE) excluding the word “Vernacular” because the variety is so broadly used and is not synonymous with “slang” or exclusively informal speech as “vernacular” can sometimes imply.

Green also cautions us not to assume that every Black person uses every element of AAE. Using the lexicon, for example, does not mean that one uses the sentence structure and sound systems. She divides the lexicon into three categories: general words and phrases across generational boundaries; verbal markers; slang items used by adolescents and young adults (Green 31). However, speakers of AAE must also have access to the general American English lexicon.

Many of the speakers whose speech is analyzed below have had significant problems finding and keeping employment, and Green’s description of attitudes toward AAE and employment can help us understand why. Green cites comments on the 1987 Oprah Winfrey show where Oprah and other commenters encourage Black people to “speak correctly” in order to get jobs. What Oprah and the others meant here is “Speak mainstream English rather than AAE,” but linguists like Wolfram and Schilling-Estes have pointed out that “it is impossible to speak English without speaking some dialect of English” (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998). Baugh (1983a) found that employers wanted “articulate” Blacks, which meant “those who were proficient in standard English” (Green 224). This idea of articulateness being related to language implies an association between AAE and illogical speech. Labov (1969) interviewed several AAE speakers and described how their speech was logical when using AAE and mainstream English, but this did very little to convince the general public. Jones (1982), who is Black, implored Black people to use less AAE in educational and employment contexts so that they could get jobs, and Teepen in the San Francisco Chronicle (May 8, 1991) wrote that non-Black people would misunderstand many elements of AAE and consider those who use it to be illiterate. Green’s research focused on attitudes from before 2000, but we will see below (section 4.2) that these attitudes have persisted into the 21st century in Chicago courtrooms.

Green’s comprehensive list of the various names that have been ascribed to the speech of Black Americans begs the question of what term we will use here. For the purpose of this paper, we will think of African American Vernacular English as referring to the speech of working-class Black Americans (representing the nebulous young, inner-city Black man mentioned below, the specific young, inner-city Black woman mentioned below, and the Chicago residents who have grown up in communities close to or below the poverty line). Terms like Green’s “African American English” and Lanehart’s (2015) “African American Language” refer to the larger category of all kinds of speech spoken by Black Americans, not just that speech that is most common with working-class Black Americans (King 2020). Similarly, we will follow Lippi-Green’s (2012) lead of styling it “Standard American English” as *SAE, much like a
syntactician would mark an ungrammatical sentence, because “Standard American English” is a nebulous term describing speakers that do not exist.

Section 1.2 On (Variationist) Sociolinguistics and Topic Analysis

Eckert (2012) divides the academic progress of variationist sociolinguistics into three waves. The first wave dominated the beginning of sociolinguistics, most clearly shown in Labov’s studies of language and class in New York, along with Walter Wolfram’s (1969) study of Black people in Detroit, which specifically looked at the amount of AAVE tokens present in speakers’ language across the spectrum of class. Crucial to Eckert’s definition of the first wave is the concept of the vernacular, which Labov established as “each speaker’s first acquired and most automatic, hence maximally systematic, linguistic production...unaffected by socially motivated correction...untouched by the reflexivity of human agency” (Eckert 2012: 88). Labov’s early idea of a vernacular is crucial to the study of AAVE because he specified that each person had their own vernacular, but a community vernacular does not depend on isolated individual speech--on the contrary, people correct their own speech to fit the vernacular. However, the individual’s vernacular was closer to the community vernacular than it was to the nebulous idea of standard speech, which distinguishes the vernacular from other vernaculars and other dialects.

Labov and other scholars connected vernaculars to communities categorized by macrosocial categories like class, age, gender, and ethnicity. Their analysis used preexisting social categories like class to determine what kind of linguistic forms people could access. Most of these scholars focused on class, solidifying the idea of linguistic variables primarily marking socioeconomic status. It was not until later that scholars focused more on other categories, and longer until they analyzed how these categories intersected.

Critiques of the first wave approach in AAE include that it imposes already existing categories on linguistic variables. Scholars like Labov and Wolfram looked at communities and imposed theoretical divides onto the groups based on class differences that they observed. They then used the results from these studies to generalize how members of that class might speak and view themselves. The error, Eckert says, is in the scholars themselves deciding what the difference between two groups is, rather than asking the community members to analyze their own social system. King (2020) notes that this kind of approach can also be dangerous when applied to a racialized dialect like AAVE as it only prioritizes comparisons between AAVE and a nebulous *SAE at the expense of studying in-group variation, but it also assumes “a direct relationship between one’s racial identity and the racialized variety” (King 2020: 291). This reduces the dialect, the racial category, and each individual speaker to restrictive stereotypes that do not represent the people they purport to describe.

The idea of characteristics being indexed by linguistic practices helped establish the third wave. In this analysis of language and society, we can observe how individuals navigate different social experiences and “place themselves in the social landscape through stylistic practice” (Eckert 2012: 94). Thus, this wave centers variation rather than sidelining it--it asks why people use different variables with different people, and what they are trying to signal by using a
particular variable. Becker’s (2014) analysis of a Black woman’s speech shows that any feature can be used to index various social meanings: a morphosyntactic feature can index place, and a phonological feature can index race (King 2020).

Sarah Benor (2010) exemplifies some of Eckert’s third-wave approach by proposing the idea of an “ethnolinguistic repertoire,” wherein we look at what kind of linguistic features speakers have access to, depending in part on their ethnic group. The ethnolect, the term she proposes replacing with the ethnolinguistic repertoire, describes the language patterns employed by an ethnic group. If we assume that every speaker in an ethnic group uses every element of the ethnolect, then we begin to rule out who is an authentic speaker or even member of the group (similar to Eckert’s “first wave”). However, if we understand the ethnolect as a set of linguistic resources that each member of the group has access to--that is, a repertoire of ethnolinguistic resources--we can look at how individuals use these resources in flexible and socially meaningful ways.

Eckert shows how many third-wave studies interact with enregisterment (Agha 2003; 2005), the process whereby a particular way of speaking becomes associated with a particular kind of person or group of people. For example, we have seen studies of the local northern Ohio manifestation of the Northern Cities Vowel Shift being enregistered (Campbell-Kibler 2011), along with the “valley girl” and “surfer dude” personae that use the California Vowel Shift (Pratt and D’onofrio 2017). These styles that we attach to a specific kind of person or region are central to third wave analysis, so the studies “often begin with styles, seeking out what makes them distinctive, in an attempt to fill out the resources and meanings that give language its social life” (Eckert 2012, pg 96). The question we must ask, then, is who determines which linguistic variables get enregistered.

The question of whose language is enregistered is central to the study of AAVE. Labov and Rickford both began their studies of AAVE by looking at “urban” youth--young Black men who live in the inner-city, lower-income areas of New York City and other major cities. The study of AAVE has moved beyond focusing on young Black men in inner-city areas, but it is hard for linguists not to impose the predetermined ideas of Blackness and Black language on other interview participants. Here we will follow Benor’s (2010) lead: we are not here to see speakers as being defined by the macrosocial categories imposed on them, but rather as agents who employ certain elements of their group’s distinctive, ethnolinguistic repertoire (AAVE) in constructing personas.

**Topic analysis**

Allan Bell (1984) focused on how and why speakers style-shift when addressing different people and discussing different topics: as he explains, the purpose of a sociolinguistic interview is to elicit casual, unselfconscious speech, which we assume speakers use with people they are close to. To hear this kind of speech, we ask questions that will provoke people to talk about things they usually discuss with family and friends (Bell 1984: 182). Bell suggests that “speakers associate classes of topics or settings with classes of persons” (Bell 1984: 181). Because we
discussed so many topics that are strongly associated with intimate relationships, or experiences that have defined these speakers, we can look at the speech patterns as being close to the way that they might speak with those people or in those environments. If speakers style-shift based on the topic and what behaviors and language patterns they have (likely unconsciously) associated with it, then the style shifting can be socially meaningful.

Rickford and McNair-Knox’s (1994) study of topic-influenced shift builds on Bell’s idea of audience design to examine how an 18-year-old Black teenage girl named Foxy used elements of AAVE to construct her identity in different topics across two interviews. The interviews were conducted in 1990 and 1991, the first with a 41-year-old Black lecturer at Stanford and her 16-year-old Black daughter who lived in a community close to Foxy’s, and the second with a 25-year-old white graduate student at Stanford. While Rickford and McNair-Knox’s study focuses explicitly on the differences in Foxy’s speech when interviewed by two different people and this paper uses only one interviewer, they do discuss the ways that topic can almost simulate the addressee such that topic-based variation can be understood similarly to addressee-based variation. Foxy uses more direct quotes, invariant habitual be, and copula absence when discussing her peers’ romantic and sexual lives than she does when discussing her college and career plans. Rickford and McNair-Knox point to the co-occurrence of increased use of direct quotes and the other elements of AAVE: she is using more copula absence and invariant habitual be when quoting her friends and acting out conversations because that is how she and her friends talk to each other. When she discusses her college and career plans, she is associating the topic with a more formalized language use, so she uses more formalized language and less AAVE.

Grieser (2019) builds on these two studies by applying a topic analysis to data collected in the late 1960s to understand how we might expect speakers of AAVE to style-shift. Labov (1963), mentioned above, pioneered a specific style of sociolinguistic interview, wherein the interviewer gives the speaker a few different environments in which to talk: reading a passage (often a parable), reading a word list, and engaging in a careful interview with an interviewer. Grieser focuses on this last context, which Labov calls “Context B.” In this portion of the interview, Labov suggests that linguists ask about several topics in order to elicit casual, unselfconscious speech. Of course, people are likely not to be unselfconscious for the entire interview, so linguists can analyze where and when their speech shifts, and what variables in their speech are changed. Many studies (including Labov’s) have shown that speakers will shift in and out of non-standard speech, such as AAVE. Indeed, “it has been commonly hypothesized that as the interview progresses, the interviewee will be more likely to use nonstandardized forms” (Grieser 2019: 63). This hypothesis is shown to be true in the data analyzed for this paper.

Grieser uses the data collected by Fasold and his colleagues for his study of tense marking in AAVE. Fasold’s interviews followed Labov’s model, asking about specific topics such as “games,” “pets,” and “friends.” She found that there was indeed topic-based variation within each speaker’s interview, and across the data. She found that the category of “games”
produced the most AAVE, and that women produced more features than men, that groups of higher socioeconomic status produced fewer features, and that 20-29-year-olds, who participate most in the linguistic marketplace (explained below), produce the fewest features (as expected). The main unexpected result was that women produced more AAVE than men in the topic of “games,” and she offers the possible explanation that because “communal experiences such as [games played in childhood] are integral to the identity and language formation of African American girls (Goodwin 2003),” women will use more AAVE in discussing them (Grieser 2019: 65).

People aged 20-29 are at the beginning of their careers, from trades to highly competitive fields like finances, so speakers of this age group are less likely to have the power in any given conversation with an employer, fellow employee, or prospective employer: they are more likely to adjust their speech to accommodate their interlocutors, to increase the chances of their being respected and possibly attaining a job (Bourdieu 1977). If the speakers with power in that environment speak *SAE, the speakers in their twenties are likely to style-shift into *SAE if they do not already use it.

We cannot fully understand the personas that speakers construct without discussing sentiment. Here we understand sentiment as the tone with which speakers discuss things, and how they seem to feel towards their subjects: Steve had a positive sentiment when discussing his childhood, while Jimmy had a sad and regretful sentiment when describing his path to the criminal courtroom. We determined these sentiments largely by listening to the speakers so that it was less in exactly what they said and more in how they said it: we listened to amplitude, pitch, and the emotion that speakers seemed to convey to the interviewer.

Alongside the topic analysis, there is an opportunity to continue exploring other kinds of style-shifting that we see within speakers' interviews because it can inform our discussions of racialized language use. Sentiment analysis has been for the most part left to computational linguistics and specifically natural language processing for the last 20+ years, and those studies use sentiment analysis for computer coding, to enable faster processing for other kinds of research: Pang and Lee (2004) looked at identifying the underlying sentiments in a text span like a movie review, using machine learning; Gatti, Guerini, et al (2014) used sentiment analysis to explore accurate wording in persuasive verbal communication; and Mandel, Culotta, et al (2012) used it to understand the reaction to Hurricane Irene on Twitter. These are interesting and fruitful pursuits, but sociolinguistics has neglected sentiment analysis in speakers’ variation.

Section 1.3: Chicago and The Cook County Criminal Court System

There is a growing body of research on speech in courtrooms relating concepts of intelligence and credibility to the style of speech used in courtroom interactions (Aronsson, Jönsson, and Linell 1987, Fuller 1993, and Rickford and King 2016, among others). Race and racialized speech can be explored via the concept of the “mope” in the Chicago legal system. A
mope is a stereotype of laziness and unintelligence linked to racialized language use that officials in the legal system use to degrade defendants, and even sometimes each other.

There is very little research on Black speech in Chicago, and even less on Black speech in Chicago courtrooms. While this paper does not examine speech spoken directly in courtrooms, it assesses the use of AAVE when recalling the experiences of Black Chicagoans in courtrooms. None of the speakers in this study was on the witness stand so their speech included only short utterances in the high-stress, highly formalized situation of the courtroom. However, I investigate how their backgrounds might influence how they speak about their experiences pre- and post- incarceration and how it relates to their usage of AAVE.

I chose to focus on Black people in the South Side of Chicago because Black Chicagoans are overrepresented in police violence and in Illinois prisons. The South Side is a largely Black area, and many of the top 10 zip codes that formerly incarcerated Chicagoans return to are on the South Side, as we will discuss below. Historically Chicago police have abused their power and disproportionately targeted Black Chicagoans in shootings, tasering, traffic stops, and arrest rates. From the FBI-CPD joint killing of Fred Hampton in 1969, to the Jon Burge torture ring in the CPD from 1972 to 1993, CPD has displayed an active lack of regard for Black lives. The Police Accountability Task Force in the Office of the Inspector General of Chicago released a 2016 report showing the following statistics: of the 404 shootings between 2008 and 2015, 74% of the citizens shot were Black; between 2012 and 2015, 76% of the civilians tasered were Black; in 2013, 46% of the people stopped for traffic violations were Black; and in the summer of 2014, 72% of the people stopped on the street were Black.

We have to consider demographic factors, especially those not directly related to prisons, because they impact the experiences of the interviewees and their peers in the process of criminal justice: from getting caught to being convicted to serving time to being released on parole to going right back in, the lack of access to things like education and financial stability has been crucial. Two of the interviewees (as discussed in the results section) described their experiences with financial need growing up, and how it drove them to petty crimes like stealing clothes and food. The lack of access to financial stability that ensures you are not forced to steal necessities is common across the city of Chicago, especially in Black neighborhoods.

According to U.I.C.’s “Tale of Three Cities” report in 2018, Chicagoans of color are subject to more police surveillance, suspicion, and intervention than white Chicagoans. Furthermore, African-Americans and Latinx-Americans have their vehicles searched at four times the rate of their white counterparts, while they are half as likely to be in possession of illegal contraband or a controlled substance. Black Illinois residents are eight times more likely than white residents to go to prison, according to data from the Prison Policy Initiative.

---


Dworin 8
Indeed, the South Side of Chicago is the area with the largest percentage of residents in Cook County Jail. According to the Sheriff’s Daily Report, for the Cook County Jail, there are currently around 9,000 inmates at CCJ, including approximately 3,500 people in the Electronic Monitoring Program. There is very little data available on Electronic Monitoring in Illinois and Cook County, though a recent bill has begun to change that. ProPublica tells us that Black people comprise 67% of those with ankle monitors. According to Loyola University’s report on the Population Dynamics and the Characteristics of Inmates in the Cook County Jail from 2011, 66.9% of residents are African-American and 33.5% of residents come from the South Side.

Data from the Illinois Department of Corrections parallels these findings. The 2018 annual report lists that of the parolee population, Black individuals comprise 58.2% of the whole, the overwhelming majority (90.8%) are male, and the average age of the parolee is 37.1 years old. Of the prison population, only 6.7% have acquired a post-secondary education.

According to the Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago’s article entitled “An End to Mass Incarceration,” more than half of the inmates from Illinois prisons return to seven zipcodes on the South and West Sides of Chicago. NBC Chicago supports this claim, reporting that in 2014 the top ten zip codes that inmates from the Illinois Department of Corrections returned to were in the South and West Sides. In these neighborhoods, Statistical Atlas shows that the majority of household incomes are $40,000. They also tell us that in these communities, as many as 50% of the neighborhood residents are on food stamps, compared with 19% of households in Chicago as a whole.

Each of the interviewees here has had to deal with this system in some way, and for many of them, it has derailed their lives and given them life-long trauma. Indeed, Cook County and Chicago in general have been understood as particularly rough places for Black people in the United States, and Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleve’s (henceforth NVC, as she abbreviates herself) breaking down of the system here helps us understand what the interviewees had to encounter.

From 1997 through the early 2010s, Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleve worked in the Cook County Criminal Court clerking for and observing prosecutors and defense attorneys. She started as an undergraduate and continued her ethnographic studies as a graduate student at Northwestern University. Over the course of this time, she interviewed 104 judges, prosecutors, public defenders, and private attorneys (NVC 55). She notes the following demographics from 2004, in the early days of her study: 84% of state’s attorneys, 69% of public defenders, and 74% of trial

---

4 Cook County Sheriff’s Office. “Sheriff’s Daily Report: 5/13/2021.”
court judges were white; on the other hand, 86.2% of felony defendants were male, 69% were Black, 17% were white, and 11.2% were Latino (NVC 17). I will compare these statistics with information from the 2000 census of Chicago:12 36.78% of Chicago residents were Black, 41.96% were white, and 26.02% were Hispanic or Latino.

I include these statistics from the census because I want to highlight the disparity in who is being tried in court: the differences in how many Black people were tried for a felony versus how many Black people live in Chicago, and the same for white people, are stark. We can compare these statistics with the above information of where most Black people live in Chicago, and look at the median incomes, to see how much poverty interacts with appearances in courtrooms. NVC points this out herself, that she saw many poor Black people in the courtrooms being treated much worse by the prosecutors and public defenders than even some middle class Black people (in the case of public defenders) and certainly white people of many socioeconomic statuses.

Returning to the term “mope,” NVC documents that prosecutors, judges, and public defenders (PDs) apply this most often to defendants. This is someone who violates the court’s ideals of work ethic, competency, and motivation--someone who is lazy, especially too lazy to get a “real” job, and who instead has to deal drugs and steal things (NVC 58). Other terms were used, of course, but this was the most common one that NVC heard, and it described the idea of defendants as somehow unworthy of rehabilitation or defense in a very concise way. However, some people used the term to describe other court officials, especially those who slowed down court proceedings by calling for motions or otherwise exercising due process. Prosecutors and public defenders alike had to be careful about not being seen as defending mopes, or loving mopes too much, because they would be looked down upon by their peers, and disrespected in that case or in future cases.

NVC found that public defenders would often sacrifice mopes in favor of people who seemed not to be “native” to the system. Those who seem to cycle in and out of the system qualify as mopes, and thus are more likely to go into the prison system regardless of what the public defenders do, while those with no prior record may be considered less deserving of being in prison. Some public defenders that NVC interviewed described their clients if not exactly as “mopes” then as something very similar, in part to rationalize the lower quality of representation that the PD would be providing. One PD described fighting much less for “mope” defendants and letting them take plea bargains, because if he fought too much for them, that would drag out the case and aggravate the prosecutor and judge in a future trial “for that second person [who’s] never had a case” (NVC 161, quoting a PD).

This mope idea is deeply integrated in how public defenders treat their clients. NVC sat in on multiple meetings between public defenders and their defendants, and noted the differences in how some defendants were treated. Public defenders seemed to talk down to those they viewed as mopes, who were identified by being Black, poor, and uneducated. Even those who were educated, or who were trying to educate themselves in prison or on their own, were

12 http://censusviewer.com/city/IL/Chicago
regarded as less intelligent or as possibly trying to “hustle” the PD (NVC 167). The intersection of class is important here: NVC describes seeing PDs dismiss poor defendants’ requests for specific motions or their own stories, and seeing PDs yell at some poor clients who seemed to ask too many questions and seemed to try to hustle the PDs, while PDs were kind and displayed authentic care for clients who were middle class.

The descriptions that NVC gives of public defenders, prosecutors, and judges dismissing many defendants as mopes who deserve prison time and are beyond rehabilitation, and of separating themselves ideologically from police misconduct, serve as a strong indictment of the Cook County Criminal Court system. The way that prosecutors and PDs have to work with the police and even defer to them in many cases certainly upholds some of this paper’s interviewees’ view that everyone was working together against them. This kind of backdrop affected the ways that the interviewees were treated in courtrooms and alone with their lawyers.

Roadmap

This paper looks at seven Black speakers from the South Side of Chicago, Illinois who have been in a criminal court or family courtroom in Chicago since 1975. Over the course of interviews, each speaker discussed their experiences growing up in Chicago, how they found themselves in a courtroom, and what they have experienced since. We examine here their use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and how it varies according both to topic and to sentiment. We will also see how a topic-based analysis helps us understand the personas that each speaker constructs, and how these personas are seen in courtroom settings. A sentiment-based analysis contributes to this understanding of each speaker’s persona, because the speakers can use sentiment to complicate and further humanize their personas. If we are to use linguistic analysis to understand how speakers navigate their worlds with language, we must look at stylistic variation based not only on topic, but also on sentiment.

Methods

Section 2.1 Data Collection

Seven Black speakers were recruited from the South Side of Chicago, and have lived there most if not all of their lives. Four were born in Chicago, one moved from Alabama at age 6, one moved from the suburbs at age 10, and another moved from Chicago at age 2 and did not move back until age 14. Since this paper aims to explore the experiences of Black people in courtrooms, focusing on the South Side is important due to the high population of Black people who live there.

A total of 6.2 hours of interview speech was collected from the seven speakers, with an average interview time of 52 minutes. Recruitment was done through Teamwork Englewood, a nonprofit organization in Englewood, Chicago, where I have been a case manager for a year and a half at the time of writing this. It is important to note that I am a white woman working in an all-Black organization that serves a mostly-Black community in an over-policed and
under-developed neighborhood of Chicago. The power dynamics of a case manager interviewing clients about their experiences aside, my race and lack of familiarity to the clients likely affected their linguistic performance in the interview. Studies like Fasold (1972), Baugh (1979), and Rickford and McNair Knox (1994) have found that the race of the addressee and the “relative familiarity (or solidarity) of interviewer and interviewee” (Rickford and McNair Knox 1994: 250) affected the rates of usage of AAVE features. As the only interviewer, I had varying degrees of familiarity with the interviewees. Four of the seven interviewees were people with whom I have worked closely, but three of the interviewees were clients I had met once. It is difficult to tell how much of the data is affected by my own identity, but we must bear in mind that race and relative familiarity are likely to affect speakers’ use of AAVE features.

Six of the interviewees have criminal records, and thus were in a courtroom for their own trials, and one interviewee was in a courtroom for a family member. Each interview was conducted and recorded over Zoom with each interviewee’s consent. The interviews did not follow Labov’s (1963) interview model, but rather focused on Black Chicagoans’ experiences in courtrooms. I asked each interviewee the same basic set of questions (seen in the appendix), which were organized to elicit responses about their own experiences in the courtroom and in their individual cases. I asked each interviewee at least one unique question, since of course their experiences and interviews were not identical. Since each interviewee had grown up in Chicago, I asked what their childhood in Chicago was like, and then asked how each interviewee came to find themselves in a courtroom. I asked interviewees about their experiences with lawyers--both private attorneys and public defenders--and state’s attorneys and judges. Each interviewee had some degree of distrust of their lawyers, some a great deal. One interviewee had a good relationship with their lawyer and felt grateful to them to this day, even though they had lost the case. These questions were asked to ascertain the relationship between the usage of African American English and topic.

Section 2.2 Data Analyses

As discussed in the literature review, African American (Vernacular) English is defined as having particular lexical, morphosyntactic, and phonological patterns associated with Black Americans’ speech (Green 2002: 1). Scholars like Labov (1968), Wolfram (1969), Rickford (1999, 1994), and Green (2002) have found these patterns to be common across the spectrum of Black Americans, even across factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, and membership in Black communities. Labov (1968) documented the speech patterns of Black youth in the inner-city of New York City, a study which has informed the scholarship on Black speech since. Green (2002) emphasizes that elements of AAVE are found in equal measure in inner-city areas like Labov’s study and in small towns and rural areas.

The recordings were stored on a confidential server and then transcribed using the linguistics software Elan. NVivo was used to code each interview according to topic and sentiment, and then to create matrices that tracked the cooccurrences of AAVE features and topic, and AAVE features and sentiments. Grounded theory, used for qualitative data analysis,
informed the NVivo approach, allowing me to find meaning in the data by continuously sorting and distilling it, and then making comparisons to other segments of data, and then move back and forth from the data to the analysis to get a full picture (Charmaz 2006: 3). Table 1 lists all of the features, and following that is an explanation of how each feature was coded from the data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>feature</th>
<th>example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aspectual BIN</td>
<td>“Yeah I-0 been to college” vs “I’ve also been told, on the phone”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copula absence</td>
<td>“They 0 always lookin’ good” vs “This is the money”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existential it</td>
<td>“It was some males in the family that I was in fear of” vs “There’s still like reservations…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative concord</td>
<td>“It’s not really...no lesson being learned” vs “But they don’t have 0 programs”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preterite ain’t</td>
<td>“We ain’t had no clothes” vs “I didn’t have a structure”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s-deletion</td>
<td>“You know if he come-0 in” vs “That’s why it take-s best evident”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject-verb non-agreement</td>
<td>“I felt like they was playin wit my money” vs “They were real helpful”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invariant be</td>
<td>“I don’t have to worry about getting into trouble, because I be too busy”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: A list of the 9 features that were coded from the 7 interviews, and an example of what was coded as an example of the feature, and an example of what is not the feature.

The features were coded based on presence of the feature and absence of the feature. This looked different for each feature, so I will explain below the reasoning for each type of decision regarding each feature. Aspectual BIN was coded as present when the speaker made utterances like the following:

1) “I 0 been diabetic since I was what--16 or 15”

In *SAE we would expect the use of “have” in the present progressive. Examples like these were coded as *aspectual rather than *not aspectual BIN wherever there was not an antecedent “have.” On the other hand, examples like this one were coded as *not aspectual BIN:
2) “I’d’a probably went to go get some mollies or go get high or something and forget and just been like, ‘Wow, I--I dodged a bullet.’”

This second sentence contains the full *SAE present progressive because there is a “have” contained in “I’d’a.” The “have” is separated from “been” by a large amount of the sentence, but the antecedent “have” is still there, so it still forms the present progressive, thus not functioning as aspectual BIN.

Copula absence versus copula presence was determined solely by the presence or absence of inflected be forms like “is” or “are,” including in contractions. Examples like “that’s” or “it’s” and other pronouns ending in /t/ were not considered copula presence because these are not opportunities for copula absence (Labov 1995). Because of this, sentences like (3) were not coded according to any feature.

3) “…and I thought back then, that’s what would be conducive to my lifestyle”

There were many cases of “that’s” being used in reference to plural subjects, so those were coded as subject-verb non-agreement, and likewise there were many uses of “it’s” that were coded as existential it.

Cases of existential it were determined as such by simply replacing the word “it” or “it’s” with “there” or “there’s” and testing to see if it made grammatical sense. For example:

4) “I felt like it was more he could have done.”
5) “It’s no leniency, it’s all business.”
6) “It’s been a struggle because I growed up in a single-parent home.”

We see that replacing “it” in sentence (4) results in “I felt like there was more he could have done,” which makes grammatical and contextual sense. Sentences like these were coded as existential it. In (5), the uses of “it’s” could be existential or non-existential, and it depends quite a bit on context. The sentence that directly precedes this one is “It’s no...compassion in those courtrooms” (ellipsis used by the interviewee), which does look like existential it, and which introduces the setting of “courtroom.” We first replace both “it’s” with “there’s”:

7) “There’s no leniency, there’s all business”

Sentence (7) looks ungrammatical because of the second “there’s.” We can test this by inserting the phrase from the sentence preceding (5) in the data: “...in those courtrooms.” We see that “There’s no leniency in those courtrooms” makes grammatical sense, while “There’s all business in those courtrooms” does not. In this case, “It’s all business in those courtrooms” makes grammatical sense, and “it’s” in this case is referring to the sense of the environment, not to what is existing in the environment.
The last sentence, (6), can also be tested as an example of existential it by replacing “it’s” with “there’s”: “There’s been a struggle because I growed up in a single-parent home.” Using existential it here does not make sense given the context of the sentence--his life has been a struggle, so “it” has an actual antecedent rather than describing the existence or non-existence of something.

Negative concord was difficult to code, because there are many environments where negative concord may or may not occur.

8) “I don’t play no games”
9) “I can’t go back and give these people no more time”
10) “Ma’am, I haven’t did anything”
11) “But they don’t have 0 programs”
12) “But he didn’t have a way of proving that”

In these 5 examples we see 5 opportunities for negative concord. In the first two, those opportunities are used: “don’t” and “can’t” and “no” are negatives, and in *SAE, that would result in a positive meaning. In AAVE, however, negative concord is permissible, and the negative-ness of the sentence is not affected by the number of negatives used, or the distance between the negatives (Green 2002: 77-78). The latter 3 examples contain only one use of a negative, which follows the rules of *SAE. Examples like “I have done something” were not coded as an opportunity for negative concord, because there was no negative already used in the sentence: opportunities for negative concord must contain at least one negative. In sentence (10), we could replace “anything” with “nothing,” resulting in “I haven’t did nothing,” which would be an example of negative concord. In this case, the speaker only uses one negative. In (11) and (12), we could similarly insert a “no” to create negative concord, which would be grammatical in AAVE, but each speaker chooses not to do that. Therefore sentences (10)-(12) were coded as not negative concord.

The s-deletion here was used only for third singular present -s, possessive -s, and plural -s.

13) “I’mma show him what it take-s to be a man”
14) “They take someone’s freedom”
15) “I was charged with uh shootin up some people-0 house”
16) “She think-0 she’s a white woman”

The first two examples above contain examples of s-retention, and the second two contain examples of s-deletion. All four of these examples contain opportunities for s-deletion. We could remove the -s in the first two examples and see two sentences that are grammatically correct in AAVE, but the speakers choose to retain the -s there. In sentence (15), the speaker deletes the possessive -s in the word “people,” forming the possessive phrase “people house” without the possessive marker. In sentence (16) the speaker deletes the -s in the third singular present tense...
position. She retains the -s in “she’s,” but because this is copula presence, it was not coded as s-retention.

Cases of subject-verb non-agreement were found almost exclusively for plural subject + singular verb, and very often using the copula verb. There was quite a lot of overlap between third present singular -s deletion and subject-verb non-agreement, but cases where this happened were coded as both features.

17) “I got some people that’s with me”
18) “They wasn’t tryna hear no motions that I filed”
19) “I go to work, she go-0 to school”
20) “What the hell is you doin’?”
21) “They were like older than me”
22) “The culture change-s”

In (17), we would expect “people” to have a plural verb in *SAE, but using the singular verb form, even in contraction, is permissible in AAVE. The same is true for (18), because singular verb forms can be used for plural subjects in the present and past tenses. Sentence (19) is a case of s-deletion and subject-verb non-agreement, where the verb for the singular third person is the form used for other persons in *SAE. Sentence (20) uses the third person singular copula form for the second person singular, which is permissible in AAVE. Sentences like these first four were coded as subject-verb non-agreement. The latter two were both coded as subject-verb agreement, because we see a plural verb form used for a plural subject in (21) and a singular third person verb form used for a singular third person subject, retaining the -s, in (22).

The topics were qualitatively coded based on speakers’ responses to questions. Grounded theory, as Charmaz’s 2006 book describes, requires that we start by “naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data” (Charmaz 2006: 43). For this paper, I read through each speaker’s transcript and began with the topics that every speaker touched on: their childhood and their experiences in the courtroom. These were both broad topics, though speakers generally only spent about 5 minutes (on average, 6% of the interview) on their childhood. The topic of courtroom was interwoven with the topics of the legal system and the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC). For example, the speaker Steve13 uttered the following sentences:

23) “All them years I never did any time, right, so to me when the man gave me time, it was like a f*ckin’ shot”
24) “Only people went to [jail] were people with public defenders, didn’t have any money”

13 All names anonymized.
In the above sentences, Steve is telling the story of how he finally was convicted of drug crimes, after 20 years of paying off the judge, in the common practice of 1970s Cook County bribery that the FBI investigated under Operation Greylord. The first sentence was coded as the “courtroom” topic because he was describing an experience that happened specifically in the courtroom: the day he was convicted after being investigated by the FBI, after 20 years of going to the same judge every month and being charged only with probation. The second sentence was coded as “legal system” because although he was describing a courtroom experience, he was speaking more generally about the legal system as a whole—how the legal system was especially and explicitly corrupt in the 1970s, and how he was able to profit on it. These codes emanate directly from the data (Charmaz 2006: 45), though speakers did not necessarily themselves say “courtroom” or “legal system”—they rather talked about these things, and I found a category that many people’s experiences fit into.

Ashley’s interview was different from the others’ because she is the only speaker who has not been to prison, and has not been charged with a crime in court. She was in court to support her co-parent, and she has been heavily involved in his case. Her interview generated two codes that were more specific than the others: “being black in white environments” and “black people judging other black people”:

25) “I sit on the board with lawyers and doctors and educators, but I’m seen as, I’m seen as I’m okay, because well you—well, ‘Ashley’s working on her second master’s degree’”

26) “If I got on here and cut up, another Black person woulda saw it, and would b—in her mind or in his mind been like, ‘Ruthie why you got her on the camera’”

Sentence (25) was coded as “being black in white environments,” because Ashley was describing her experience as a board member of a local organization, and how she was accepted, but someone like her co-parent would not have been, because she has managed to attain a socioeconomic status that affords her some degree of safety in white environments. Sentence (26) was coded as “black people judging other black people,” because Ashley was explaining why she couldn’t talk the way she wanted to while being recorded for an interview with the University of Chicago: she felt the need to represent other Black people appropriately because she felt like she would be judged by another Black person who wanted a large, powerful institution like this school to present Black people in positive lights. These were specific codes, but they emanated directly from Ashley’s transcript. In Table 2 is the full list of codes and an example of a sentence that was coded to each topic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>topic</th>
<th>example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>About me</td>
<td>“How long you been a Jew?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

14 https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/operation-greylord
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Being Black in white environments</th>
<th>“You are around white people whose parents are senators and congressmen, um who some, this their first time being around black people”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black people judging other Black people</td>
<td>“And when I hear...you in court using Ebonics or not using proper English…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackness</td>
<td>“As far as being like a black man in Chicago, you gotta be careful where you going”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood</td>
<td>“I was kinda livin a facade, you know, as a child”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtroom</td>
<td>“…but before they call your name they send what they call the public defenders in the back where you at”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crimes</td>
<td>“Um, it’s this guy I robbed back in the day”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal record post-prison</td>
<td>“It was like you go in where you you go and pay your traffic tickets and I decided that I wanted to contest the ticket”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failed reentry resources (FRR)</td>
<td>“I don’t lose a job through the job. I lose it through IDOC”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting caught</td>
<td>“…it was some more people involved, uh me and another guy had got caught”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>health</td>
<td>“A sober mind ain’t the same as somebody who high”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Their past</td>
<td>“…and I emulated him, so I picked up bad traits from people”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interruption</td>
<td>“You got a charger? Can I borrow it? I'm doin a interview with Ruthie.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>language</td>
<td>“But I’ve also been told, on the phone, I sound like a white guy”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lawyer</td>
<td>“I--just wish I woulda found some+somebody found another lawyer”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal system</td>
<td>“They never know what I been through, they don’t know nothing that happened. All they know is I pled guilty.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
parole  | “If I had some money, I'd sic some lawyers on their ass, a dream team lawyers”  
---|---
people  | “That's a that's a uni- +united that's a United States thought process”  
Prison Industrial Complex (PIC)  | “He know that his--h- +he he gon' have 2 to 3 more years of job insurance because you punched him in his face”  
Post prison  | “I had no idea that I was gon' be doin this, this was the furthest thing from my mind, I didn't wanna be bothered with convicts”  
Prison or jail  | “I don't even know how to work the telephone yet, so that let you know that I been inside a lot”  
relationships  | “My girlfriend, she’s you know, she put a little weight back on me, you know {LG}”  
religion  | “I became Muslim when I went to prison, like most people do, most Blacks or African Americans do”  
school  | “You have them disciplines and they're inherited in you so going to school I just reached back to that”  

Table 2: A list of all the topics discussed in the interviews, and an example of a line of speech that was coded as each topic.

The sentiments were coded in a way very similar to the topics: I did not apply an existing list of sentiments that speakers might use, but rather read through and listened to each interview to find the common tones, and then coded each segment based on how each speaker seemed to feel about the particular topic they were discussing. The most common sentiments were critical, which was a tone between calm and angry (on average 21.17% of each interview) and calm which was a fairly neutral tone (on average 14.6% of each interview). The sentiments were determined based on pitch, volume, amplitude, and the emotion that speakers seemed to convey. Table 3 lists all the sentiments that were used, and an example of a sentence that was coded to each sentiment.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentiment</th>
<th>Speech</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ashamed</td>
<td>“You know...so I was...damaged and broken”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>calm</td>
<td>“But I try to advise these kids that's out here now”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>confused</td>
<td>“I--I--I don't know about, to be honest with you, I--I--I, to be honest with you, this my first time really thinking of it”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>critical</td>
<td>“And I think it was kinda more easier to get a conviction uh for somebody that was uh ready to go into the adult criminal justice uh”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dismissive</td>
<td>“Any motion that I had tried to get put in, it got denied”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>joking</td>
<td>“They gon' think this is so ghetto tell the people I am so sorry”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light and entertaining</td>
<td>“He would cover my ass, everybody was coverin’ my ass except for the prosecutor, he was so pissed”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive</td>
<td>“You don't have to lie or steal or be deceitful and take”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>proud</td>
<td>“And um...I went to jail and I rehabilitated myself”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>regretful</td>
<td>“You know he was negative and he influenced me told me what I should do that was negative gave me bad advice, so”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sad</td>
<td>“Because as black people in our mind you need to know how to be black in America and be adaptable in America”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: A list of all the sentiments coded in the interviews, and a line of speech from the interviews that was coded as each sentiment.

**Results**

Below we will discuss the overall rates of AAVE usage by the speakers as a whole, then discuss the speakers with low AAVE usage rates, and finally discuss the speakers with higher AAVE usage rates.
3.1 Overall AAVE Usage

Table 4 summarizes the most common uses of AAVE by the speakers. The AAVE features included all have multiple tokens for at least 6 of the 7 speakers. We see that the absence or presence of the copula was frequently occurring, followed by subject-verb non-agreement and negative concord. Negative concord had the highest average rate of usage, but copula absence and subject-verb non-agreement have higher numbers of tokens, so the rates of usage are more remarkable. We have the fewest tokens in aspectual BIN, but several high rates of usage, with the lowest being 50% (1/2 tokens), in Ashley’s data, and the highest being 100% (2/2) in Rob’s data. We also see more variety in the use of copula absence than in other features: Tom had the highest rate, at 82% (82/100), followed by Mike, at 78.57% (66/84); Ashley has a rate of 13% (16/105), and its rare presence may suggest that where she does use copula absence may be socially meaningful; Rob also has a low usage rate, with a smaller number of tokens than many other speakers (21.95%, 9/41). Similarly, Ashley used negative concord at a rate of 5% (1/18), and Rob had a rate of 14.3% (1/7), while Tom had a rate of 67.6% (23/34). We also see that Ashley and Rob had two of the lowest rates of usage of subject-verb non-agreement: Ashley had 25% (8/32) and Rob had 53.3% (8/15), while Tom had 85.3% (35/41). We will look at how speakers on each end of the spectrum used their AAVE features, and what social meanings these features may carry for each of the speakers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Tom</th>
<th>Steve</th>
<th>Mike</th>
<th>Rob</th>
<th>Ashley</th>
<th>Jimmy</th>
<th>Jack</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aspectual BIN</td>
<td>72.7% (8/11)</td>
<td>71.4% (5/7)</td>
<td>83.3% (10/12)</td>
<td>100% (2/2)</td>
<td>50% (1/2)</td>
<td>73.3% (11/15)</td>
<td>75% (¾)</td>
<td>75.47% (40/53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copula absence</td>
<td>82% (82/100)</td>
<td>49.4% (42/85)</td>
<td>78.57% (66/84)</td>
<td>21.95% (9/41)</td>
<td>16.67% (18/108)</td>
<td>46.3% (25/54)</td>
<td>76.5% (49/64)</td>
<td>59.70% (320/536)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existential it</td>
<td>80% (%)</td>
<td>36.36% (4/11)</td>
<td>61.5% (8/13)</td>
<td>18.8% (2/11)</td>
<td>86.67% (13/15)</td>
<td>84.6% (11/13)</td>
<td>87.5% (%)</td>
<td>64.47% (49/76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative concord</td>
<td>67.6% (23/34)</td>
<td>81.8% (9/11)</td>
<td>77.5% (31/40)</td>
<td>14.3% (1/7)</td>
<td>5% (1/18)</td>
<td>72% (18/25)</td>
<td>59.4% (19/32)</td>
<td>80.79% (122/151)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject-verb non-agreement</td>
<td>50% (17/34)</td>
<td>40.9% (9/22)</td>
<td>55.89% (19/34)</td>
<td>50% (½)</td>
<td>14.3% (7/49)</td>
<td>60% (6/10)</td>
<td>60.7% (17/28)</td>
<td>42.46% (76/179)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>85.3% (35/41)</td>
<td>57.1% (24/42)</td>
<td>73.3% (44/60)</td>
<td>53.3% (8/15)</td>
<td>25% (8/32)</td>
<td>47.2% (17/36)</td>
<td>82.3% (42/51)</td>
<td>64.26% (178/277)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.2 Speakers with low AAVE rates

The speakers used copula absence, negative concord, and subject-verb non-agreement the most, to express criticism and anger, and to discuss experiences in the courtroom, the prison system, and their racial identity, though the rates of usage varied considerably. Ashley, who has the lowest rates of AAVE features overall (the highest number of tokens in one category being 6), uses copula absence and subject-verb non-agreement in similar environments, but she seems to use subject-verb non-agreement even in environments when she does not use other elements of AAVE. Though Ashley has the fewest AAVE tokens, she uses AAVE in specific contexts, which can be socially meaningful. While there are few to no instances of negative concord, preterite ain’t, or aspectual BIN, Ashley uses copula absence and existential it the most. Specifically, copula absence is found in small percentages across her topics, but it occurs the most when she discusses language and being in white environments.

She uses the least AAVE when discussing her childhood. This is possibly due to the fact that it was the beginning of the interview, and people are expected to use more self-conscious speech at the beginning of the interview than at the end (Grieser 2019). In that topic, she uses only one token of existential it, and no other AAVE. On the other hand, she uses a higher rate of copula absence when discussing “black people judging other black people” (44%):

“When I hear you--somebody like my co-parent not wearing a suit, or see them not wearing a suit and tie to court, or you 0 in court using Ebonics or not using proper English, yeah I judge. Because to me it’s like you 0 puttin’ the race back 20, 30 years.”

In this example we see Ashley using two examples of copula absence here when discussing her tendency to judge other Black people. This was about two thirds of the way through the interview, so she was using more AAVE overall, and she also seemed to feel comfortable discussing and explaining her experiences to me. Her tone was critical, as she followed these sentiments with a reflection on why she judges Black people in these ways, and how that related to her own Blackness and to other people’s Blackness. Here, she mentions her Black co-parent in a courtroom--a typically white environment--and having to watch him be subjected to the judgment of white and possibly Black people around him. However, a few minutes later, when discussing her own experiences in white environments, she has a low usage of copula absence (10.6%, 5/47). When she explains her perspective on her own ability to code-switch versus that of others, she says,

“I judge, but then I judge myself because it’s like well what are you doing? You’re not being honest with yourself.”

We see two instances of copula presence where in other parts of the interview, she used copula absence. Throughout the interview she discussed her difficulty to fully identify with Blackness,
because she grew up on a naval base around mostly non-Black people, and did not learn AAVE until she moved back to Chicago at age 14. She has always been very used to speaking *SAE, and code-switching into it in college was easy for her. She expressed that she is always hyper-aware of how she is perceived in white environments, because she knows that the way people see her will reflect on other Black people, and the way that people see other Black people may reflect on her. It is possible that she uses *SAE to describe this kind of experience in white environments, because that is the kind of language she uses in those environments (Bell 1984: 181).

There is also the issue of Ashley’s class positionality. Ashley is the only speaker who identified herself as middle class, and as having grown up middle class. Her stepfather was in the navy and then became a police officer, so she grew up in a different environment than the other speakers, most of whom had to find ways to “hustle” as teenagers, some as young as 13. Ashley did not experience this. She discussed her experience of having to learn AAVE later on at great length, and she described her ability to code-switch as a privilege that she has because of her socioeconomic class. This is consistent with research that shows that “speakers of higher socioeconomic status are more acutely aware of situation-based linguistic expectations” (Grieser 2019: 66, referencing Hoover 1978, Anderson 2008, Britt and Weldon 2015, and Grieser 2015). Ashley discussed language and “being black in white environments” a lot throughout the interview, as she had gone to a predominantly white university for college and then for both of her master’s degrees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Copula absence</th>
<th>Being black in white environments</th>
<th>Black people judging other black people</th>
<th>blackness</th>
<th>childhood</th>
<th>courtroom</th>
<th>interruption</th>
<th>language</th>
<th>lawyer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10.6% (5/47)</td>
<td>44% (4/9)</td>
<td>4.76% (1/21)</td>
<td>0/0</td>
<td>6.2% (1/16)</td>
<td>50% (2/4)</td>
<td>10.6% (5/47)</td>
<td>25% (2/8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existent it</td>
<td>100% (4/4)</td>
<td>100% (2/2)</td>
<td>100% (3/3)</td>
<td>100% (1/1)</td>
<td>100% (2/2)</td>
<td>0/0</td>
<td>75% (6/8)</td>
<td>0/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S deletion</td>
<td>17.39% (4/23)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14.28% (1/7)</td>
<td>0/1</td>
<td>0/6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10.52% (2/19)</td>
<td>1/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject-verb non-agreement</td>
<td>66% (4/6)</td>
<td>0/1</td>
<td>16.6% (%)</td>
<td>0/5</td>
<td>0/2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21.4% (3/14)</td>
<td>20% (%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Ashley topics, with the most salient/most used AAVE features
However, she uses higher rates of *subject-verb non-agreement* in “being black in white environments” than she does in other topics: here it is 66%, whereas even in language, which has the second highest rate of this feature, it is 21.4%. It is interesting that she uses low rates of *copula absence* and high rates of *subject-verb non-agreement*, when both of these features are marked uses of AAVE. *Existential it* tends to be the least marked, and she does use that in this topic at a rate of 100%. Does she consider *subject-verb non-agreement* to be less marked? Nearly all of her tokens of AAVE in this topic occurred when she discussed her parents’ experiences in white environments, and how she felt about them. It is possible that she uses AAVE here specifically, and nowhere else when discussing this topic, because she talks about her parents with people she is close with, or she associates the topic of parents with the language she uses with her parents.

Ashley’s sentiment analysis shows that she has low rates of *subject-verb non-agreement* in general, and that the only tones that this feature was mapped to were “calm” and “critical.” She has a slightly higher rate of *subject-verb non-agreement* in “calm” than in “critical” (26.6% vs 23.5%). It is worth noting that Ashley’s tone oscillated between calm and critical for most of the interview (she spoke for 66% of the interview; her tone was calm for 20.8% total, and it was critical for 31.06%), and only switched into other tones like “angry” (2.27%) and “sad” (4.74%) and “joking” (0.94%) a few times--notably, these are tones that betray her emotions. “Angry” in particular is a tone that she is very aware of, as a Black woman who spends a lot of time in white spaces: she actively wants to avoid being seen as the stereotype of the angry Black woman, so she self-tone-polices quite a bit. Even when she was discussing difficult topics, like being bullied when she was younger, she was quite calm. Indeed, when she was discussing “being black in white environments,” she spent a lot of it describing the experiences of her friends, of whom she is very proud, and her parents, whom she loves and is annoyed by in equal measure.

Ashley’s language was described as joking only in the moments when the interview was interrupted, as Ashley did her interview while at work. We see more AAVE features when she is joking--i.e., when she is interrupting the interview:

“--hold on, Mia\(^{15}\) 0 right here, Ruthie”

“They 0 gon’ think this is so ghetto, tell the people I am so sorry”

We see two of Ashley’s 18 instances of *copula absence* here when she is joking, and when she is interrupting the interview to talk to someone else. Similarly, we see Ashley’s only use of *negative concord* when her tone is angry, and she is talking about non-Black people using AAVE and changing their language around Black people, and how the history of Black Americans being taken to the US by force enhances the effects of appropriating their language: “*We don’t have nowhere else to go.*”

Ashley uses AAVE the most when she is joking and interrupting the interview, and when she discusses her parents being Black in white environments, as well as when she is judging

\(^{15}\) Name changed for anonymity.
other Black people, and how she and others use language. She uses AAVE less when she discusses her experience in the courtroom and with her lawyer, and her thoughts on Blackness specifically. She uses *subject-verb non-agreement* more than *copula absence* when discussing her parents being Black in white environments, possibly because it is less marked for her as a feature of AAVE. Perhaps when she is increasingly focused on the topic, she uses more AAVE. She also uses more AAVE as the interview goes on, possibly because she becomes more comfortable and less self-conscious, even when discussing some of the same topics, like language and judging other Black people.

Rob’s current class status is closer to that of Ashley’s than it is to the others’ and his usage of AAVE looks closest to Ashley’s, with his AAVE features scattered across the interview. He used the most features overall when discussing “criminal record post prison,” indicating that he spent a lot of time on this topic. He used this topic to tell the story of his life after prison, and how he continued to be affected by the criminal justice system after he had been released. The highest use of AAVE features is found in the “prison or jail” category. He spoke very carefully and very critically about his experience in prison, as he had been politicized while inside, and when he came out, he became involved in revolutionary politics in Chicago and somewhat internationally. This topic had the highest rates of *copula absence* compared to other topics (42.85%). When discussing his experience in prisons with different levels of security, he said,

“*Like minimum, medium, you kinda get harassed in there more because that’s when you--you--you θ workin’ towards a out date when you θ at those places*”

Here we see him use two instances of *copula absence* when in most of the interview he would have used *copula presence*. This was nearly at the end of the interview, so he had presumably become less self-conscious in the language he used with me, and he was discussing being in a likely all-Black environment. As Tom put it later, “It’s only one area that you lockin’ people up from, and that’s in the Black neighborhood.” Rob and Tom were both in Illinois prisons, and Illinois prisons send inmates back to mostly Black zipcodes (see section 1.3), so we can infer that Rob and Tom were both in prisons with mostly Black inmates. As mentioned earlier, speakers will style-shift as topics shift based on the speech they associate with a given topic. If we apply that here, Rob’s use of AAVE to discuss his experience in prison may have connection to his speech in prison settings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>childhoo d</th>
<th>courtroo m</th>
<th>Criminal record post prison</th>
<th>language</th>
<th>lawyer</th>
<th>PIC</th>
<th>Prison or jail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Copula absence</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0/2</td>
<td>0/9</td>
<td>33% (⅓)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>28.57%</td>
<td>42.85%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Similarly, we see that Rob uses the most subject-verb non-agreement, and the second highest number of tokens of AAVE at all, when discussing his childhood. Like everyone else, Rob discussed his childhood experiences early on in the interview (within the first 15 minutes, 7.32% of total transcript). We see here that he uses two marked features of AAVE when recounting an early experience as a victim of crime and dealing with the police:

“*They kinda was* sarcasm-like *it was* nothing that they could do”

We see him use subject-verb non-agreement first, and then existential it. As Grieser (2019) mentioned, interviewees will often not use marked varieties of language early on the interview, because they will be more self-conscious about their speech. However, this was an emotional event that Rob was describing, and a major catalyst for his own experiences with the criminal justice system. It is also an experience with family, and since he uses AAVE with his family, it is possible that he associates childhood with the use of AAVE (Bell 1984), and that may have overridden his self-consciousness about his speech.

Rob uses the least AAVE overall when discussing language, which is possibly due to his being more self-conscious about his speech in that topic than when discussing other things. There are three opportunities for copula absence, and he only deletes one of them, and four opportunities for existential it, and he doesn’t produce any of them. He did not spend much time on language, but he also seemed a little confused by the question. I did not ask him directly about AAVE or any other term for Black language, which was true for everyone else. Indeed, the only person to name the dialect was Ashley, who called it “Ebonics,” as we saw earlier. He did not discuss any aspects of AAVE, and I did not prompt him to, but he rather described his speech thus:

“I—I wanna say that I’m the same with everybody, you know I’m like you know, I always like to keep it one hundred...I’ve always been the type of person that I feel like speaks from the heart, but of course there’s still like reservations when you can’t find the right words to express yourself.”
We see that he focused on the quality of his speech, and how eloquent or authentic it felt, rather than what dialect he spoke in. Some of this is due to the possibility that he had never been asked this question before, and therefore had never thought about the way he speaks in terms of a dialect or in terms of cultural differences. Another speaker, Jack, told me he had never been asked the question. Ashley was the only speaker who had gone to college on a traditional timeline (graduating in 4 years at a non-community college, right after high school), and she answered the first question about code-switching with a reference to W. E. B. DuBois, so it is very possible that knowledge of things like code-switching and the names for Black dialects are simply less accessible to the speakers who did not go to college on a traditional timeline, and especially to Rob, who got his education by reading in prison. He was in fact denied access to the library while he was in the lower-security prison because he refused to do manual labor, having not been sentenced to do it, and he was put in solitary confinement. Since being released from prison, he has found himself in many racially diverse environments, including mostly-white or all-white board rooms, so he probably code-switches unconsciously, and even if he does not, we see that he has low rates of marked AAVE usage.

We see that Rob uses AAVE when discussing topics he feels strongly about, like his experiences in prison and his childhood. He seems to have done a lot of self-reflection about how both of these categories of experience affected his life: his house being broken into as a child and then virtually ignored by the police helped set him on the path to engaging in criminal behavior himself; and his time in prison politicized him and informed the organizing work he does now. The closest Rob’s tone got to anger was in these two topics, so we may infer that he used AAVE to express anger, or strong criticism.

3.3 Speakers with higher levels of AAVE usage

So far we have discussed the use of AAVE features by people who use AAVE sparingly. For Ashley and Rob, it is possible that their sparing use of copula absence and subject-verb non-agreement was socially meaningful. We will now turn to speakers who used more AAVE, and explore how their higher rates of usage in particular topics and when speaking in particular tones may be socially meaningful as well.

Jimmy had at least one AAVE feature with 100% usage in every topic that he discussed, though many of these high rates had very few tokens. We see the most consistent AAVE usage when he discusses his crimes, which he committed in his youth before going to prison. He was mostly regretful and sad when discussing these, especially when discussing the actual people he affected, and his experiences with drugs. All of the features he used in this topic—copula absence, negative concord, s-deletion, and subject-verb non-agreement—had usage rates of 100%. When expressing his regret for his crimes, he said,

“It don’t even excite me. It’s sad now to me, it’s sickening, kids...they 0 killin’kids.”

Dworin 27
Here we see the use first of subject-verb non-agreement, and then of copula absence. This was very early in the interview, so we might expect him to use less marked speech, but he uses quite a bit. He was expressing very strong emotions and sentiments in this section of the interview, so similar to Rob, however he was feeling about the community he had grown up in and what he had done may have overridden his self-consciousness about his speech.

The sentiments of “regretful” and “sad” also had high AAVE rates: both had rates of 100% for subject-verb non-agreement and at least 80% for negative concord. It is possible that when discussing his crimes, and when seeming regretful and sad, as we saw above, he was overcome with emotion and that there may therefore be a link for him between AAVE usage and certain emotional states related to sadness. However, his usage rates when he is angry are not as high as would be expected based on this hypothesis: he has 33% subject-verb non-agreement and 54.5% copula absence, which are much lower rates than in “regretful” and “sad” and when discussing his crimes. We see an example of this when he discusses how he was treated and seen in the courtroom:

“The judge know-s this. Everybody that walk-s through this door is not the devil, everybody’s not evil, you know what I’m saying?”

Jimmy retains his -s and uses subject-verb agreement and copula presence at every opportunity here, but his tone was clearly angry based on his volume and pitch and the tension in his voice. It is also possible that because he is describing the courtroom, he uses the language that he spoke and heard in that environment.

Perhaps when he is angry he wants to make his point clearer to a non-Black listener, in order to explain the injustice of the system that he endured. When he discusses the prison-industrial complex (PIC) and the legal system, which he was certainly angry about, his copula absence rates were 50% and 40% respectively, and his subject-verb non-agreement rates were both 0, though only PIC offered grammatical situations for subject-verb agreement. This is more in line with the “angry” tone, so it makes sense that he may be trying to index something different when he is angry than when he is regretful or sad.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Jimmy</th>
<th>Tom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PIC or Failed reentry resources</td>
<td>50% (5/10)</td>
<td>75.6% (31/41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>courtroom</td>
<td>75% (9/12)</td>
<td>85.7% (18/21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>angry</td>
<td>54.5% (6/11)</td>
<td>77.2% (44/57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>critical</td>
<td>47.8% (11/23)</td>
<td>96.3% (26/27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regretful or sad</td>
<td>100% (13/13)</td>
<td>66% (2/3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dworin 28
Tom, who was mentioned earlier, used copula absence far more than the other features, with a total of 80 tokens. He discussed PIC the most, and had a very high rate of usage of copula absence (31/41, or 75.6%). All of the other features in that topic had rates of usage at or above 50%, except preterite ain’t, which had a rate of 0/1. The tones he used the most often were “critical” (13.86%) and “angry” (22.49%), which both had high usage rates of copula absence (96.3% and 77.2% respectively). He was certainly both very angry and very critical about the PIC, and discussed his issues with especially the penal institutions in Illinois. We see an interesting combination of copula presence and copula absence when he talks about the supermax prisons in Illinois:

“Okay now they 0 making all this money offa these prisoners--where’s the money going? Somebody 0 stealin’. Somebody is definitely stealin’. They 0 makin’ all this money off these prisoners: where. is. the money going...”

In this quote we see Tom switch back and forth between copula presence and copula absence as he tries to emphasize his point about the corruption in the prison system. In a syntactic environment where he uses copula absence quite frequently--pronoun + present participle--he drops the copula twice, then adds it back in when he repeats a sentence, but then drops it again when he repeats the first sentence. Interestingly, the first two uses of copula absence are in sentences that he utters with strong accusation: he was speaking loudly, he was clearly angry, and it was clear he had been thinking about this accusation for a long time. When he says “Somebody 0 stealin’,” it is loud and forceful, and when he repeats it in “Somebody is definitely stealin’,” there is focus marking on the adverb, to convey his strong belief, and his voice is quieter, as if he is supporting his accusation. Here it seems he is using copula absence--this clear marker of AAVE--to drive his point home and ensure that I understand the problems with the PIC.

Two speakers (Jack and Mike) used AAVE features across the board with less variety than the other speakers: both used copula absence and subject-verb non-agreement to discuss things in more positive tones. Mike had high rates of copula absence and subject-verb non-agreement when his tone was positive (92.3%, 100%) and joking (76.9%, 20%), and when discussing things like childhood (100%, 84.6%) and religion (83.3%, 50%). Similarly, Jack has a high rate of copula absence (80%) when his tone is positive, and when discussing language (78.9%) and Blackness (80%). Both of these speakers also used similar rates of copula absence and subject-verb non-agreement in negative tones and when discussing more difficult topics that they had stronger, negative feelings toward. For example, Jack had a rate of 89.3% (25 tokens) when discussing the courtroom and a 100% rate (6 tokens) when discussing the PIC, while Mike discusses his parole experiences, which he is currently dealing with and which have had a strong emotional effect on him, with a 66% rate of copula absence (8 tokens) and 77.7% rate of subject-verb non-agreement (7 tokens).
Because Jack and Mike use AAVE with so little variety, we can infer that their usages may be socially meaningful in a different way than Ashley, Rob, and Jimmy’s are. When discussing what his Blackness means to him, Jack mentions the clothing styles that non-Black cultures copy from Black culture:

“Black people wearing the skinny jeans and everything, we wasn’t doing that at first—we did, but (laughs), it just coming back around.”

Here we see Jack laugh as he talks about style and Blackness, which he feels proud of. He uses copula absence and subject-verb non-agreement casually. A minute or two later, he talks about how he style-shifts when around different kinds of people:

“‘Yes ma’am, how you doing today, no ma’am, thank you’—things like that, so it just depends on like the age and—cuz the race don’t really mean anything.”

Here Jack’s tone is relatively calm, and he seems to feel neutrally toward this kind of topic. He uses similar amounts of copula absence and subject-verb non-agreement. When he discusses the PIC, and his tone is a little angrier, he still uses similar rates of AAVE:

“You could be a detainee and they’d still look at you like ‘You guilty, I know you did it, you going to jail’”

Jack is still using a similar amount of copula absence when describing how he felt the legal system and the PIC treated him. We see his rates of AAVE stay very similar across different topics and different tones, suggesting that for Jack, AAVE functions differently than it does for those who use increased AAVE rates in particular moments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>blackness</th>
<th>childhood</th>
<th>courtroom</th>
<th>Getting caught</th>
<th>language</th>
<th>lawyer</th>
<th>PIC</th>
<th>Post prison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Copula absence</td>
<td>80% (8/10)</td>
<td>0/1</td>
<td>33% (%)</td>
<td>100% (1/1)</td>
<td>78.9% (15/19)</td>
<td>83.3% (%)</td>
<td>100% (6/6)</td>
<td>66% (4/6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existential it</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100% (2/2)</td>
<td>75% (%)</td>
<td>100% (2/2)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100% (2/2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S deletion</td>
<td>62.5% (%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>40% (%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>60% (6/10)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject-verb non-agr</td>
<td>66% (4/6)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>89.3% (25/28)</td>
<td>100% (1/1)</td>
<td>66% (6/9)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100% (2/2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8: Jack topics, with selected AAVE features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>childhood</th>
<th>parole</th>
<th>post-prison</th>
<th>Prison or jail</th>
<th>religion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Copula absence</td>
<td>100% (13/13)</td>
<td>66% (8/12)</td>
<td>76.19% (16/21)</td>
<td>100% (1/1)</td>
<td>83.3% (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existential it</td>
<td>100% (1/1)</td>
<td>100% (1/1)</td>
<td>100% (2/2)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20% (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S deletion</td>
<td>55.55% (5/9)</td>
<td>66% (4/6)</td>
<td>100% (7/7)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50% (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject-verb non-agreement</td>
<td>84.6% (11/13)</td>
<td>77.77% (7/9)</td>
<td>100% (11/11)</td>
<td>81.82% (9/11)</td>
<td>50% (%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9: Mike topics, with selected AAVE features

Discussion

We saw in the results section that speakers used AAVE to express frustration, anger, sadness, and a joking tone, and to discuss the courtroom, the prison system, their use of language, and their racial identity. Ashley used *copula absence* and *subject-verb non-agreement*, along with some *existential it*, to talk about her parents’ experiences in white environments, and how she lightly mocks them for it, how she has judged other Black people, and how she sees other Black people and sometimes non-Black people use AAVE. Rob used *copula absence* and *subject-verb non-agreement* to express his anger at how he was treated by the police and by the prison system. Jimmy used *copula absence* to express his regret and sadness at how he had acted in the past. Tom used *copula absence* to express his anger and to convince me to understand and believe his arguments about the PIC and the prison system in general. Jack used many elements of AAVE across his interview, in many different contexts, so it appears he does not use AAVE in a socially meaningful way.

Because this paper focuses at least in part on how Black people who speak AAVE experience courtrooms in Chicago, we must ask which of these speakers are AAVE speakers. Are all of them AAVE speakers simply because they are all African American? Are they all AAVE speakers because they all use morphosyntactic elements of AAVE at least once? Is Jack more of an AAVE speaker than the others because he uses it with less variety? Are Ashley and Rob less authentically AAVE speakers because they use elements in particular, socially meaningful environments? We will discuss how to evaluate this idea, especially in the context of topic-based and sentiment-based variation. The frequency of AAVE usage did not increase across the board, but rather for a few elements for a few speakers. Rather we are talking about how the
usage of particular elements varied for particular speakers. We see Ashley vary a lot based on topic, but we see Rob and Jimmy vary their AAVE usage based on their tones. Much of variationist sociolinguistics has focused on topic-based variation over sentiment-based variation, since sentiment analysis is mostly reserved for computational linguistics and natural language processing. Looking more at sentiment analysis can be useful for analyzing AAVE speakers and how they navigate their identities through language.

4.1 Topic-based variation and the “authentic AAVE speaker”

The question of who is an AAVE speaker begins with the two approaches to sociolinguistics as outlined by Alim and Reyes (2011): the dialect orientation and the group orientation. We can also think of these as top-down and bottom-up. The dialect orientation, much like the first-wave variation discussed in the literature review (Eckert 2012), looks first at the preexisting idea of a group’s dialect—e.g., AAVE, or Southern American English, or Chicano English—and asks how much the group associated with that dialect uses the features, especially “with respect to some ethnoracial formation” (Alim and Reyes 2011: 380). The “dialect approach favors the ethnolect as a theoretical construct to understand the linguistic behavior of racialized individuals” (King 2020: 291). This can contribute to harmful stereotypes, and it can convince us that if a member of an ethnoracial group does not use all or most of the elements of the preexisting dialect, then they are less a member of the group, or they identify with it less. A group orientation asks us to look at a group and see what linguistic patterns emerge, especially in multiple linguistic contexts. We look at how speakers in the group use elements of various dialects in constructing their identities, and how that group as a whole absorbs and uses elements of various dialects around them.

Several of the speakers used the technique of “marking,” which occurs when a speaker “dramatically imitates the words and perhaps the actions of a person and makes some comment about him or her in the process” (Green 136). The verbal statements usually are accompanied by physical gestures to accentuate the character of whomever the speaker is marking. This is a specific kind of verbal strategy that is used when one has an audience, which is certainly important for speakers who are performing (to various extents) for an interviewer. This is a distinctive feature of AAVE, as Green explains, and the ability to use it deftly is strong evidence that one is an AAVE speaker.

With this idea of group orientation, wherein linguistic style is agentive, we will zoom in to look at how individuals within groups use elements of dialects within (here, AAVE) and outside of the groups. As Grieser suggests, we use a topic-based analysis to understand how the topics invite speakers “to style different parts of themselves” (Grieser 2019: 66). We saw that the speakers used more AAVE (especially copula absence and subject-verb non-agreement) to discuss their experiences in the courtroom, their feelings on the prison system, and their racial identity. This was not perfectly true for some (for example, Ashley used less AAVE and more SAE when discussing her experiences in the courtroom), but it was true for most speakers. We can connect the discussion of the prison system, including both the PIC broadly and the
experience of being in prison, to how these speakers may have spoken while being in prison and while discussing prison experiences with other ex-prisoners (Bell 1984).

What is more surprising is the level of AAVE usage when recalling experiences in a typically white environment--the courtroom in Chicago. While not all courtrooms have all white people, as many judges in Chicago are Black (see section 1.3), most of the speech is *SAE and almost none is AAVE. The courtroom is a highly formal environment, so the use of nonstandard speech is discouraged. The fact that speakers use AAVE while discussing this non-AAVE environment contradicts Bell’s idea of speakers unconsciously connecting topics to the environments of those topics. However, we may consider the experience of being a defendant in Chicago to be an experience with heavier usage of AAVE than it might be for white outsiders.

The courtroom experience is not exclusively being in a courtroom with a prosecutor, a public defender, and a judge. It also includes having been in “the back,” as Tom and Jimmy referred to it, and coming from local jails and possibly from Cook County Jail, with other defendants who are waiting to be charged. That experience involves mostly other Black people, as we saw earlier in Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleve’s book Crook County, wherein she recounts her years-long observation of justice in Chicago courtrooms, finding that 69% of defendants are Black. Tom recalled trying to set an example for the other defendants who were in lockdown, and Jimmy recalled speaking with women he called “grandmamas,” who helped emotionally settle him and prepare him for the courtroom. Given that these speakers were recalling their experiences with other Black people in and around the courtroom, we can account for their increased use of AAVE when discussing it with me. While many courtrooms across the country disproportionately charge Black defendants, we are looking specifically at a Chicago environment. Speakers in Chicago courtrooms and recalling Chicago courtrooms are going to discuss them differently than speakers in other places will discuss their own, simply because no two cities’ dialects are exactly the same: this necessarily affects the other topics that our speakers discussed, especially because our speakers are mostly native Chicagoans, people whose lives and thus language are affected very deeply by their being located in Chicagoland. Thus here we use topic-based analysis to understand not AAVE as a whole, or Black speakers of AAVE as a whole, but rather Black speakers of AAVE in Chicago specifically.

Under a group orientation, is deciding who exactly is an AAVE speaker a question of the frequency with which speakers use elements of AAVE, as determined by dictionaries and books like Green’s (2002), or is it a question of how speakers use these elements? Jack uses AAVE quite a bit throughout his interview, and with little variety across topics and sentiments. If he uses the same amount of copula absence to discuss his Blackness, of which he is proud, and to discuss his distaste for the PIC, then does that mean he does not know how to use AAVE? Or is AAVE simply the main dialect that he has access to? He spent very little time using *SAE when AAVE features were an option, so we know that while he has access to *SAE, he chooses AAVE more often.

On the other hand, Rob and Ashley used AAVE very sparingly. They both used AAVE in very particular instances and socially meaningful ways: Rob used it to express his anger, and
Ashley used it to talk about Blackness and language. If they only used it in these particular moments, are they less authentic or less adept speakers? This question of whether frequency or quality of usage makes one a more authentic speaker of AAVE is a difficult one to answer, and it in fact begs the question of whether we need to label who an AAVE speaker is at all. A better question may be how listeners decide who an AAVE speaker is, and how they treat that person based on their decision: If someone like Ashley uses little to no AAVE in white environments, as she described, then would the white people she is around consider her an AAVE speaker? Would they treat her differently if she were an AAVE speaker? People like Jack, Mike, Jimmy, and Tom, who use AAVE more frequently than *SAE, and code-switch less than Ashley and Rob do, may find themselves being treated differently than Ashley and Rob. Ashley spoke explicitly about her decision not to use AAVE around white people, and to take extreme care in how she presents herself, because she does not want to be judged as a negative stereotype of Black people. If Jack, Mike, Jimmy, and Tom are less able to code-switch, they may not have the choice of how they are judged on the basis of their speech.

4.2 AAVE in Chicago courtrooms

Six out of seven of the speakers had faced charges in a criminal courtroom in Chicago, and had served some amount of prison time for them. Rob used lower levels of AAVE, and expressed that he felt his manner of speaking had not changed much; Jack, Mike, Jimmy, and Tom all had higher levels of AAVE than Rob, and likely had even higher levels when they were charged at least the first time. Studies like Alim (2004) and Rickford and Price (2013) showed that Black teenagers, especially teenage boys, have higher levels of AAVE usage, and all four of the speakers just mentioned found themselves in a courtroom facing criminal charges when they were teenagers. While many defendants are not able to say much more than “Yes Your Honor, no Your Honor, yes I understand,” they speak quite a bit to their lawyers.

Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleve’s (NVC) research in Cook County Criminal Courts, and especially its lawyers on both sides of the aisle, illuminates the relationship between client and attorney. One of the major stereotypes that is used to describe defendants is a “mope,” someone who violates the court ideals of work ethic, competency, and motivation, and who therefore is less worthy of clemency or rehabilitation. Specifically, NVC saw that many people involved in the system saw “mope”-ness as a choice: if someone committed a crime, they had to have made the choice to be unmotivated, lazy, and incompetent (NVC 58). The legal system professionals extended this “choice” to commit a mope-y crime to define the defendant’s entire being and lifestyle.

NVC notes that these professionals equated what she calls Ebonics with the defendants themselves. A probation officer she overheard used his bastardized version of AAVE to mock a defendant: “See this guy...he’s like ‘oh man dat ain’t right...dis shit ain’t right’” (NVC 59). Later, a sheriff referred to other adult defendants as “kids,” and a clerk corrected him with “Chitlans,” referring either to an AAVE word for “children” or to “fried pig intestines” (NVC 60). Either way, we see the probation officer and clerk explicitly use AAVE, the dialect that most of the
Black defendants they see will speak, to mock and put down defendants, and excuse their own maltreatment of the defendants. The idea is that a Black defendant who speaks in AAVE is automatically associated with the crimes and societal violations that mopes commit, so all Black defendants, especially those who speak AAVE, are likely to be considered mopes.

Public defenders (PDs), who represented Mike and Jimmy, and Jack and Rob at least in the beginning, are susceptible to these harmful racialized ideologies as well. As mentioned in the literature review, PDs in Chicago have some of the largest case loads across the country, so they have to pick and choose which defendants get proper representation, and which get possibly less than the bare minimum. One of the ways they distinguish between defendants is the idea of “mope”-ness: police officers are less likely to be compliant and offer helpful testimony for a mope than for someone who is seen in a better light by the court, and prosecutors are more likely to offer a harsher sentence, partly because they need the police on their sides for other cases so that the prosecutors can get promotions. If innocence and worthiness are connected to mopeness and use of AAVE, then speakers who use a lot of AAVE with their public defenders may be less likely to get proper representation. Mike described public defenders as “public pretenders”:

“That’s what I call ‘em, public pretenders; now it’s a small percentage of lawyers that are public defenders that really do they job. It’s a difficult job, now, I’m not naive, I’m not foolish...I know you bombarded, physically, physically...they just try and get you a quick cop out, that’s it... ‘Well you got it on your background, you did this, you did that’--well hold on for a minute, you the state’s attorney or the public defender? What, you, you represent me or the state? ”

Mike articulates here the distrust that a lot of defendants have for public defenders, whose entire job is to advocate for their clients. If the last person who stands between the client and jail does not believe the client deserves the defense, based solely on the racialized ideologies they have that pervade the court regarding clients’ skin color and dialect, then the clients must feel desperate. It is not surprising that Tom became especially angry and frustrated when recalling when his PD would not let him speak in court:

“[My public defender] tell me ‘Shh, shh, be quiet, you can’t talk’...I looked at her...I say, ‘Well now you takin’my freedom of speech from me?’ The judge-- ‘Take him back in the back, take him back in the back’”

It is generally not recommended that any client represent themselves, but after the kind of treatment from a PD that NVC noticed and that PDs admitted to, Tom’s reaction seems a little more justified.

Generally Tom has higher AAVE usage than Mike, and it is true here too, where Tom has a 78% (32/41) rate of AAVE usage in this topic while Mike has a 50% (5/10) rate. However, Tom’s utterance here was coded as part of the courtroom topic, because he was narrating his
experience in the courtroom, while Mike’s utterance was coded as part of the legal system and lawyer topic, because he was talking about his relationship with his lawyers rather than the courtroom specifically. Tom spent quite a bit of time discussing his courtroom experiences, while Mike did not spend much: TJ’s discussion of the courtroom took up 7.79% of his transcript, while Mike’s discussion of his lawyer/the legal system took up only 2.53%. Because of this, the role of topic is interesting, but perhaps not statistically significant.

If the way that PDs treat their clients depends on how they view the clients’ skin color, dialect, and perceived character, then treatment in the actual courtroom, from people like the judge who are less invested in the case for a client going well, may be worse. We can refer to the treatment of Rachel Jeantel, as analyzed by Rickford and King (2016), when she was a witness in the trial of George Zimmerman, who killed teenager Trayvon Martin in 2012. Jeantel was Martin’s close friend, and was on the phone with him while he was running from Zimmerman. She was as close as the prosecution or the defense would get to an eyewitness, so her testimony was key in the trial. However, because she spoke with elements of AAVE, her testimony was disregarded by the jury. Jeantel uttered sentences like the following:

“He said he 0 from--he--I asked him where he 0 at”\(^{16}\)

We see her use two examples of copula absence in just one short utterance, much like many of the speakers in this paper did. Rickford and King quote an interview with one of the jurors who heard Jeantel’s testimony live, who reflected on it with Anderson Cooper on CNN:

\begin{quote}
AC: Did you find it hard, at times, to understand what she was saying?
Juror: A lot of the times.
...
AC: So you didn’t find her credible as a witness?
Juror: No. \(^{17}\)
\end{quote}

We do not have the court transcripts or the transcripts of meetings with our speakers’ public defenders. We do know that these speakers were using the same kind of language that Jeantel was using, and that the speakers were working with public defenders who are employed by a system that degrades the use of AAVE and devalues the defense of clients who are judged not to “deserve” it. Our speakers here are operating in the same kind of world that Jeantel was: a world that does not understand how they speak and penalizes them because of it.

4.3 On sentiment analysis and further research for variationist linguistics

Jimmy (along with a few other speakers) varied his speech patterns mostly based on his sentiment. When he was regretful and sad, he used more copula absence and subject-verb

\(^{16}\) Rickford and King 2016: 956, quoting the Courtroom Testimony of Rachel Jeantel, day 1
\(^{17}\) Rickford and King 2016: 971, quoting the interview with Juror B37 on Anderson Cooper’s AC 360 on CNN, which aired on July 16, 2013

Dworin 36
non-agreement. We may think that this is because he is losing control in some way, but when he used another tone that suggests lack of control, he had lower AAVE usage rates. This variation overlapped with the topics, but was not exact, which is why we will focus on the sentiment. When he is regretful, we see the following:

“So you 0 askin’ me, after I got out this [Juvenile Advisory Council (JAC)] did my life progress or did it c-continue to decline? Oh my life was shit...you know I started robbin people left and right...you know breakin’ in people- 0 houses...I did all that. It don’t even excite me. It’s sad now to me.”

And when he is angry, he says the following about the courtroom:

“And the judge know-s this: everybody that walk-s in this door is not the devil. Everybody-s not evil, you know what I’m saying? So you can’t possibly paint everybody that walk-s through this door as that.”

In the first example, we see Jimmy use copula absence, s-deletion, and subject-verb non-agreement within a few sentences. A little bit later in the interview, when he is angry, he retains all of his /s/ and uses copula presence and subject-verb agreement. When he was speaking about his life declining in his late teens after working with the JAC, a community mentorship program, he used higher AAVE rates even though it was early in the interview, when we might expect him to use less marked speech. We saw him use less AAVE when he is angry, but he is also talking about the courtroom, a traditionally white environment, so he may be switching into *SAE because that is what he associates with the topic. However, we see that he uses copula absence at a rate of 75% when discussing the courtroom, with 9/12 tokens, and while his rate of copula absence when discussing his crimes (which is when he was mostly regretful) was 100%, there were only 3 tokens, so it is not perfectly comparable. We also see that the regretful and sad tones had a combined total of 100% with 13 total tokens, and angry had a rate of 54.5% with 17 total tokens. The rates of the tones are much more comparable, and we see a starker difference in usage. We will look further at how he uses copula absence when discussing the courtroom in other moments:

“But these women are sittin here and they 0 so compassionate, they 0 like grandmamas--grandmamas, you know, grandmothers--and they 0 talkin like ’Do you have kids? What religion are you?’”

In this example we see him use one token of copula presence, and then three tokens of copula absence in a row. He is discussing the same topic as above, when his tone was angry, but here his tone is critical. It is difficult to say exactly why his AAVE usage changes between tones.
here—it seems less sensical to say one associates a tone like “anger” with a specific environment than it does to say one associates a topic with an environment. As we discussed a bit in the results section, it is possible that he is trying to ensure that I, a non-Black listener, understand what he is trying to convey, and what he is angry about. He felt that his treatment in the courtroom was unjust and unwarranted, and he wanted me to understand it, as someone who had not been in his position. We see from this example that Jimmy uses AAVE to convey something different in this sentiment (anger) and this topic (the courtroom) than in other sentiments and other topics. Noting that he uses AAVE differently here than in other topics helps us understand the persona that Jimmy is trying to construct.

I discuss this idea of sentiment-based variation because it has been understudied recently in linguistics. I argue here that we would not understand the persona that Jimmy builds in his interview if it were not for his variation based on sentiment. We would not know that he uses lower levels of AAVE to get his point across when he is angry--at least about a systemic issue--and that he uses more AAVE when he is regretful and sad. We would not know that Tom uses higher levels of AAVE, on the other hand, to drive his own points home when he is angry, even when he is speaking with a non-AAVE speaker. If we are using variationist sociolinguistics to understand how individuals use language to construct and reconstruct their identity, we must look at their sentiment-based variation as well as their topic-based variation.

**Summary and Conclusion**

As variationist sociolinguistics grows to focus less on the one-to-one relationship between macrosocial categories and dialect varieties, so does the research on AAVE. Bell (1984) gives us a clear framework to consider this topic-based shifting as socially meaningful: we associate topics with the way we speak when in the environment of that topic. In the interviews for this paper, speakers discussed difficult experiences like being in a courtroom, dealing with the criminal justice system, and falling in and out of criminogenic behavior before and after prison. These are the kinds of topics one does not usually discuss with a stranger, but rather with someone one is close to, or at least feels comfortable opening up to--indeed, one speaker (Jimmy) described the interview as a “therapy session” after we finished talking.

We have seen very little research into how Black speakers talk about their own experiences in courtrooms, and very little research into either Black speakers in Chicago or Black speakers in Chicago courtrooms. Here we used a topic-based and sentiment-based analysis to examine how seven Black Chicagoans used AAVE to talk about their experiences growing up in Chicago, and facing Chicago courtrooms. We set up this study by looking at the demographics of Chicago and at the environment of the legal system in Chicago: Black Chicagoans are faced with systemic racism that has landed them in poverty, are given subpar treatment by defense attorneys and prosecutors, and are disproportionally charged and convicted of crimes, and then disproportionally jailed. Many Black Chicagoans understand the disparity in how they are treated, and the speakers for this paper were eager to discuss their feelings on this injustice.
One speaker had only encountered family court, but the other six had had much of their lives defined by the Cook County Criminal Court. We saw that the speakers overwhelmingly used *copula absence* and *subject-verb non-agreement* to discuss their experiences in the courtroom, the prison system and the prison industrial complex (PIC), their use of language, and their racial identity. We also saw that they used AAVE in varying amounts to express criticism, anger, sadness, and a joking tone. Speakers like Rob and Ashley varied their AAVE usage considerably largely according to topic, but to some degree according to sentiment as well. Jack, Mike, Jimmy, and Tom used AAVE at higher, more consistent rates, but Jimmt had the most variety in his sentiment. We saw that Tom used AAVE, especially *copula absence*, to emphasize his explanations, and possibly to ensure that I properly understood him. We saw Jimmy use lower rates of AAVE to express his anger at the court system and at how he was treated in court, and use higher rates of AAVE to express his regret and sadness for the crimes he had committed.

Ashley, the only speaker who had grown up middle class and had attended a traditional four-year university, used *copula absence* and *subject-verb non-agreement* to discuss her experiences of judging other Black people and of being in white environments, as they related directly to her racial identity. When discussing her ability to code-switch and use language in multiple racial environments, she used less AAVE and more *SAE*. When discussing non-Black people using AAVE in appropriative ways, she used more AAVE, perhaps as a defense, and perhaps because she unconsciously associates that kind of discussion with the use of AAVE.

All seven of the speakers had similar experiences in the courtroom, but did not necessarily speak about them in the same ways, using varying rates of AAVE and *SAE* according to particular topics and sentiments, to negotiate their own identities on the basis of language, race, and relationship to the criminal justice system.

Here we used a topic-based and sentiment-based analysis to begin to study how Black people in Chicago use language when discussing their courtroom experiences, and their regular life experiences. More research needs to be done to see how other Black Chicagoans use AAVE and *SAE*, both in the courtroom and when discussing the courtroom, but these analyses suggest that speakers draw on a range of linguistic strategies for negotiating these experiences and talking about these experiences. Linguists, scholars of Black Chicago, and advocates for social justice will benefit from more research into how Black Chicagoans use language.

Furthermore, we must make more space for sentiment analysis in sociolinguistics as we saw it could provide more insight into how speakers construct their personas for speakers like Jimmy. If we do not account for this kind of variation, we cannot understand how people use language to navigate and construct their own identities in a range of social situations, including the courtroom.
References

Cook County Sheriff’s Office. “Sheriff’s Daily Report: 5/13/2021.”
FBI. 2016, May 18. Operation Greylord. FBI.

Dworin 40


