African American English: Recalcitrant Myths and Syntax, Semantics, and Pragmatics

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Lexicon and computational component

The Lexicon
Information about lexical items

The Computational Component
Principles for using lexical items in appropriate syntactic environments

Output
## Sketch of the AAE lexicon

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Words and Phrases</th>
<th>Properties</th>
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</table>
| saditty, [sədidi], Adj __ (N). Conceited. | (1) cross generational boundaries  
(2) used in religious and secular environments  
(3) may reflect relationship between AAE and West African languages |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbal Markers</th>
<th>Properties</th>
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<tr>
<td>be [bi], Tense-AspM __(V-ing, V-ed, Adj, Prep, N, Adv, AspM). Indicates that an eventuality recurs.</td>
<td>indicate way an eventuality is carried out; tense-aspect syntactic and semantic properties</td>
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<td>BIN [bin], Tense-AspM __(V-ing, V-ed, Adj, Prep, N, Adv, AspM). Situates an eventuality or the initiation of an eventuality in the remote past.</td>
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<td>done [dɛn], Tense-AspM __V-ed. Indicates that an eventuality is in its resultant state.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Current Slang</th>
<th>Properties</th>
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<tr>
<td>gwop, [gwap], N__. Money. change ends</td>
<td>associated with age group, linked to popular culture; may be associated with a particular region</td>
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## Shifting continuum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AAE</th>
<th>Shifting within AAE</th>
<th>Shifting to GAE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>She reading.</td>
<td>She’s reading.</td>
<td>She reads fast.</td>
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<td>She read fast.</td>
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<tr>
<td>They be walking fast.</td>
<td>They usually walk fast.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The mailman came?</td>
<td>Did the mailman come?</td>
<td>Has the mailman come?</td>
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<tr>
<td>The mailman done come/came?</td>
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<tr>
<td>his sister book</td>
<td></td>
<td>his sister’s book</td>
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<tr>
<td>He went to his dad (house)</td>
<td></td>
<td>He went to his dad’s house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that’s his sister’s</td>
<td>No shift</td>
<td>No shift</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes:*
- AAE: American African English
- GAE: General American English
1a. Nobody didn’t tell me about no books.
   b. Nobody didn’t tell me nothing about no books nothing.

2a. Nobody didn’t want no tea.
   b. Didn’t nobody want no tea. (widened reading)

3. Nobody didn’t want no cheese.

4. I can’t ride my bike without no training wheels. (D007, 5;3, AAM)
Declarative Negative Auxiliary Inversion

• Declarative Negative Auxiliary Inversion (NAI) structures in African American English (AAE)

• NAI occurs in other varieties of American English (e.g., Alabama English, Appalachian English, West Texas English)

• Received a fair amount of attention (Feagin (1979); Foreman (2004); Green (2002, 2011a); Labov (1972); Labov, Cohen, Robins, and Lewis (1968); Martin (1992); Parrott (1999); Sells, Rickford, and Wasow (1996); Tortura and den Dikken (2010); White-Sustaíta (2010)); Wolfram and Christian (1976).
Declarative Negative Auxiliary Inversion

Initial negated auxiliary followed by a negative indefinite DP, which together receive a negative concord interpretation:

1. a) Can’t nobody tell you it wasn’t meant for you.
   ‘Not a single person can tell you it was not meant for you’

   b) Didn’t nobody want no tea.
   ‘Not a single person wanted tea’

   c) Wouldn’t nobody ride that bus.
   ‘Not a single person would ride that bus’

   d) Don’t nobody be working.
   ‘Usually, not a single person is working’
   ‘Not a single person is usually working’
Non-inverted negative concord constructions also occur in AAE

2. a) Nobody can’t tell you it wasn’t meant for you.
   ‘Nobody can tell you it wasn’t meant for you’

b) Nobody didn’t want tea’
   ‘Nobody wanted tea’

c) Nobody wouldn’t ride that bus.
   ‘Nobody would ride that bus’

d) Nobody don’t be working
   ‘Usually, nobody is working’/‘Nobody is usually working’
Focus is on what I have described as canonical NAI

Full inventory of negative inversion in AAE (and perhaps other varieties of American English) includes structures in which the subject is not always negative:

3. a) Didn’t one red cent make it back to the community. ‘Not any money made it back to the community
   b) Wouldn’t many people sign up.
      ‘Not many people would sign up
   c) Under no circumstances will I drive that car.
Focus is on what I have described as canonical NAI

Full inventory of negative inversion in AAE (and perhaps other varieties of American English) includes structures in which the subject is not always negative:

3. a) Didn’t one red cent make it back to the community.
   ‘Not any money made it back to the community
b) Wouldn’t many people sign up.
   ‘Not many people would sign up
 c) Under no circumstances will I drive that car.
AAE yes-no questions

4. a) The mailman dən passed?
   ‘Has the mailman passed (i.e. delivered the mail)?’

   b) When the mailman passed?
   ‘When did the mailman pass (i.e. deliver the mail)?’
NAI constructions have a “strongly affective character”. Labov, Cohen, Robbins, and Lewis (1968)

Didn’t nobody want no tea.
‘Not a single person wanted tea’

(cf. Nobody didn’t want no tea.)
Negative concord alone is not a strategy to emphasize negation

5. **Nobody don’t** want to ride the school bus.
Negative modifier strategy to emphasize negation

6. A: You like to ride the school bus.
   B: I don’t like to ride no school bus.
      ‘I don’t like to ride THAT SCHOOL BUS.
( cf. I don’t like to ride NO school bus.)
Nothing modification to emphasize negation

7. a) A: That girl ate all his beans.
   B: That girl didn’t eat all his beans nothing.
      ‘That girl DIDN’T EAT ALL HIS BEANS’

b) A: That girl ate all his beans.
   B: That girl didn’t eat nothing.
      ‘That girl didn’t eat ALL HIS BEANS’
Nothing as emphatic proform for nominals

8. a) A: I bought that Thunderbird parked in the driveway.
   B: You ain’t bought nothing./You ain’t buy nothing.
   Reading 1: ‘You didn’t buy THAT THUNDERBIRD’
   Reading 2: ‘You bought that Thunderbird, but it isn’t a good (worthwhile) car’
   (i.e. You didn’t buy much of a car.)
Nowhere as emphatic proform for prepositional phrases

8. b) A: She going to the mall.
   B: She ain’t/not going **nowhere**.
   ‘She’s not going TO THE MALL’
Questions still remain about NAI, especially about whether the negated auxiliary actually undergoes movement to some higher position.

Nobody didn’t want no tea.

didn’t nobody __ want no tea.
9. a) Ain’t nobody round here selling candy.
   a’) There isn’t anybody around here who’s selling candy.

   b) Don’t nobody say that students selling candy at school (no more/anymore).
   b’) There isn’t anybody that says students are selling candy at school anymore.
10. a) It ain’t nobody in that classroom.
   ‘There isn’t anybody in that classroom’
   b) _ ain’t nobody in that classroom.
A problem for expletive destressing

11. a) It don’t be nothing happening.
   ‘Usually, there is nothing happening’
   b) _ don’t be nothing happening.

12. a) Don’t nothing be happening.
   ‘Usually, not a single thing is happening’
   ‘Not a single thing is usually happening’
   b) *It don’t nothing be happening.
Position of the negative auxiliary in NAI is also linked directly to the ‘affective’ or ‘emphatic’ interpretation in which the indefinite DP is focused

13. a) DON’T$_i$ nobody$_i$ want no$_i$ tea. (where not, nobody, and no enter a negative concord relation)
   b) NOT$_i$ NOBODY$_i$ wants no$_i$ tea
   c) ‘Not a single person wants tea’
Negative inversion: Emphatic perspective

- Negation scopes over *nobody*: NOT nobody wants no tea
  ‘It is not the case that anybody wants tea’

- Absolute negation, strong domain

  14. Don’t nobody want no tea
      ‘Not even one person wants tea’
      ‘Absolutely nobody wants tea’
Widening effect: NAI constructions can be characterized as having a widening effect in the terms of the *any* analysis in Kadmon and Landman (1993): “In an NP of the form CN, *any* widens the interpretation of the common noun phrase along a contextual dimension” (p. 361). The generic sentences (a, b) below state a general rule about owls, but (b) conveys less tolerance for exceptions to the general rule.

a. An owl hunts mice.
b. Any owl hunts mice.
Conclusion:

“Emphatic” in reference to NAI refers to a type of widened interpretation (i.e. no exceptions)
The argument is that the auxiliary does not simply precede and scope over the DP; it must also be in a CP node that is labeled [NegFoc].

15. Don’t nobody want tea.

\[
\text{[CPNEGFOC}[C', [\text{NegFoc}] \text{DON'T}_j)] [\text{TPNOBODY}_i [T', \text{do+n't}_j]] \\
\text{NegP } [\text{Neg', do+n't}_j] [\text{VP nobody}_i [V', \text{want no tea}]]
\]
What we have so far:

“Emphatic” in reference to NAI refers to a type of widened interpretation (i.e. no exceptions).
1) structural positions of the moved elements correlate with the absolute negation/strong domain interpretation.

2) the feature [VERUM] in verum focus constructions in German has been analyzed as expressing the truth of a proposition, and the finite verb or complementizer in this context bears a pitch accent.

3) Interpretational differences between preposed and non-preposed negation in yes-no questions
NAI and non-inverted structures are not just variants used in the same pragmatic contexts.

Inversion

19. #Don’t nobody ride Bus #201—just the three people who live in the country. Most of the students in this class ride Bus #99.
NAI and non-inverted structures are not just variants used in the same pragmatic contexts

Non-inversion

20. Nobody don’t ride that bus.
   a) ‘Not very many people ride that bus’
   b) ‘No one at all rides that bus’

21. Nobody don’t ride Bus #201—just the three people who live in the country. Most of the students in this class ride Bus #99.
What we have so far:

1) NAI is real inversion
2) NAI constructions are declaratives not questions
3) NAI and non-inversion can occur in different pragmatic contexts
4) NAI is linked to kind of absolute negation, widened interpretation
Negation in context

Which ones should we use in the given contexts?

1. I can’t believe I got no money.
2. I can’t believe I got no envelope with no money.
3. I can’t believe I got this envelope without no money.
4. I didn’t get no envelope without no money in it.
5. I got an envelope without no money.
6. I didn’t get the envelope with no money in it.
7. I didn’t get the envelope with no lot of money nothing.
8. I didn’t get no envelope with her lil money in it.
9. I got the envelope without her lil money in it.
10. I didn’t get no envelope with no $100 dollars in it no. (regional)
11. I got the envelope without no money in it yeah. (regional)
A closer look at inversion: NAI and Question

NAI makes a statement, and yes-no question inversion asks a question, but how else can the two be compared?

Yes-no question: Could they open the door?
NAI: Couldn’t nobody open the door.

(cf. Couldn’t nobody open the door?)
Yes-no question can occur in embedded clauses.

29. a) I wonder [do it be like the water we drink].
   ‘I wonder if it’s usually like the water we drink’

   b) I wanted to know [could they do it for me].
   ‘I wanted to know if they could do it for me.’

   c) I’m asking your children [have they been to a concert lately].
   ‘I’m asking your children if they have been to a concert lately’

   d) Go over there and see [did they bring my car in].
   ‘Go over there and see if they brought my car in’
Yes- No Question Inversion in embedded contexts

Yes-no questions CANNOT occur with an embedded complementizer.

30. a) *I wonder [if do it be like the water we drink].
   (cf. (29a) and I wonder if it be like the water we drink.)
b) *I wanted to know [if could they do it for me].
   (cf. (29b) and I wanted to know if they could do it for me.)
c) *I’m asking your children [if have they been to a concert lately].
   (cf. (29c) and I’m asking your children if they been to a concert lately.)
d) *Go over there and see [if did they bring my car in].
   (cf. (29d) and Go over there and see if they brought my car in.)
The complementizer position must be filled.

31. a) *I wanted to know \([c_e][+Q] \_\_\_\_\_\_\text{they could do it for me}\].

   b) *I’m asking your children \([c_e][+Q] \_\_\_\_\_\text{they have been to a concert lately}\].

   c) *Go over there and see \([c_e][+Q] \_\_\_\_\_\text{they \[+PAST\] bring my car in}\].
NAI can occur in embedded clauses.

33. a) They told me [didn’t none of the children see anything, but you never know].

‘They told me that not a single child saw anything, but you never know’

b) She said [wouldn’t no member go with her].

‘She said that not a single member would go with her’

c) You can’t tell me [didn’t nobody volunteer to bring the music].

‘You can’t tell me that not a single person volunteered to bring the music’

d) ?I didn’t know [didn’t nobody wanna go].

‘I didn’t know that not a single person wanted to go’
NAI in embedded contexts

NAI can occur with an embedded complementizer.

34. a) They told me \([_{CP}{\text{that didn’t none of the children see anything, but you never know}}]\].
   ‘They told me that not a single child saw anything, but you never know’

b) She said \([_{CP}{\text{that wouldn’t no member go with her}}]\].
   ‘She said that not a single member would go with her’

c) You can’t tell me \([_{CP}{\text{that didn’t nobody volunteer to bring the music}}]\].
   ‘You can’t tell me that not a single person volunteered to bring the music’
NAI in embedded contexts

NAI can occur with an embedded complementizer.

35. d) I didn’t know \[ {_{CP} \text{that didn’t nobody wanna go}]}.  
   ‘I didn’t know that not a single person wanted to go’

e) I know for a fact that didn’t nobody leave this room.  
   (Weldon, 1994, p. 8)

f) This is the class that didn’t nobody sign up for.  
   (Weldon, 1994, p. 8)
What do the following show?

36. a) Let me know \([_{_{CP}} \text{if } \text{don’t} \text{ nobody wanna ride the bus}]\).
   ‘Let me know if not a single person wants to ride the bus’
   * Let me know \([_{_{CP}} \text{don’t nobody wanna ride the bus}]\).

   b) I don’t care \([_{_{CP}} \text{if can’t nobody hear me}]\).
   ‘I don’t care if not a single person can hear me’
   * I don’t care \([_{_{CP}} \text{can’t nobody hear me}]\).
What do the following show?

37. a) I’m asking your children [if they have been to a concert lately].

    b) I’m asking your children [have they been to a concert lately].

    c) *I’m asking your children [if have they have been to a concert lately].
NAI in embedded contexts

What do the following show?

38. a) The teachers don’t know [[Force]if [NegFoc]can’t nobody leave].
   ‘The teachers don’t know if not a single person can leave’

b) *The teachers don’t know [[Force]can’t_i [NegFoc]can’t_i nobody can’t_i leave].
   ‘The teachers don’t know if not a single person can leave’
What do the following show?

39. a) The teachers don’t know [[Force]0 [NegFoc]can’t_i nobody can’t_i leave]

   b) The teachers don’t know [[Force]that [NegFoc]can’t_i nobody can’t_i leave]

   ‘The teachers don’t know that not a single person can leave’
Questions

```
Embedded inversion

ForceP

Force    TP

[Interrogative]
  if, have

T   VP
```
Embedded inversion

NAI

ForceP

Force
  [Interrogative]
  if
  [Declarative]
  \{0, that\}

TopicP

FocusP
  [NegFoc]
  can't

Focus

TP
Let’s think more carefully about subjects in NAI constructions

From the perspective of the unique negative focus reading (i.e. ‘absolutely zero’) that is associated with NAI constructions, the CP movement analysis has merit in that the structure—more specifically the position of the negated auxiliary—is correlated with the “focus” meaning. This conclusion is a response to the question about auxiliary inversion in NAI in AAE. However, one question that is always in the background in discussions of NAI still needs to be addressed. What prevents referential and non-negative subjects from occurring in NAI constructions? The sketch of an answer to this question will rely on quantifier scales as modeled in Horn (1989, p. 237):
### Horn’s quantifier scales

<table>
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<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>every/all</th>
<th>-1</th>
<th>no/none</th>
<th>hardly/almost no (one)</th>
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<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>many</td>
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<td>not all</td>
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<td></td>
<td>quite a few</td>
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<td>some</td>
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The strongest values are ±1, and the weakest values are just above 0. The strongest values are the duals every/all and no/none.
Let’s think more carefully about subjects in NAI constructions

Given the absolute negation reading of the canonical NAI construction, the subject DP should be near the strongest end of the scale on the negative side.

25. a. Didn’t but a few people show up.
   b. #Didn’t not all the people show up.
Let’s think more carefully about subjects in NAI constructions

This appeal to quantifier scales makes it possible to provide an explanation for the fact that non-negative subjects can also occur in NAI constructions. Quantifiers that are at the strongest end on the positive side of the scale can occur in NAI constructions:

26. Didn’t all (the students) show up.

On the other hand, the weakest quantifiers on the positive side of the scale do not occur in NAI constructions felicitously:

27. #Didn’t some (of the students) show up.
The appeal to quantificational scales also helps to put into perspective the claim that referential DPs are restricted from occurring in NAI constructions. The fact is that referential DPs can occur in NAI constructions if they are in a phrase with a quantificational determiner that is at the strongest end of the negative side of the scales.

28. A. Many old fraternity guys showed up for homecoming. I think even Vince Jackson was there.
   B. No, didn’t no Vince Jackson show up!

   Reading 1: No one by the name of Vince Jackson showed up.
   Reading 2: The one and only Vince Jackson did not show up.
How strict is the restriction on quantifier subjects?

28. A. Many old fraternity guys showed up for homecoming.  
   I think even Vince Jackson was there.  
B. No, didn’t no Vince Jackson show up!

Reading 1: No one by the name of Vince Jackson showed up.  
(non-referential reading)
Reading 2: The one and only Vince Jackson did not show up.  
(referential reading)
What can we say about variation among varieties of (American) English?

Perhaps there is [NegFoc] node in AAE that is not available in mainstream American English and that might also work differently in other varieties of English.

We will see a similar case in the days to come with Aspect.
Quick overview

Myths!

Ways to emphasize negation

Closer look at NAI

Questions
1) variation
2) acquisition