



## Facultad de Filología

Trabajo de Fin  
de Grado

African American  
Vernacular English: a  
study of the  
representation of  
black speech in  
popular TV series

**Tutor:** Mario Cal Varela

**Autora:** Joana Costas Domínguez

**Julio 2016**

Curso académico 2015/2016

Trabajo de Fin de Grado presentado en la Facultad de Filología de la Universidad de Santiago de Compostela para la obtención del Grado en Lengua y Literatura Inglesas.



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## **Abstract**

African American Vernacular English or AAVE is a variety of American English often spoken by African Americans in urban or Southern regions.

The fact that a large number of people speak this variety has led African American Vernacular English to become almost a half-century an important topic of discussion among both; linguists and the public.

Linguists maintain that there is nothing “wrong” or “incorrect” about African American Vernacular English since, like other dialects, it only deviates from the standard and shows a consistent internal logic. However, it is known that this variety is highly stigmatized, and as a consequence, speakers of African American Vernacular English are often regarded as ignorant or uneducated people as well as members of a lower social class.

In this study I will give an overview of the main characteristics of African American Vernacular English through an analysis of relevant descriptive sources, and see how this language variety is represented in the media, especially in the popular TV series entitled “The Wire” which is settled in Baltimore.

The wide range of characters that this series presents will allow me to figure out if there is some sort of variability in the use of this variety depending on the social context or the recipient. Moreover, I will also try to conclude how this variety is established as symbol of black identity.

**Key words:** AAVE, media, variability and identity.

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## **1. Introduction**

The African-American culture has been always for me one of the most interesting and richest; its history, its music, its tradition, its literature and, what attracts me more, its language. For this reason, I have decided to focus my study on one of the most controversial varieties of English which is directly related to African-American people: African American Vernacular English. Moreover, this variety has been and continues to be, an important topic of discussion among society and linguists and, for this reason, I consider African American Vernacular English to be an important and interesting object of study.

The main purposes of this paper are, firstly, to study how, where and when this variety appears, this leads us to the study of its origins and historical context. Additionally we will try to analyse its social context, what means; how people and institutions react to African American Vernacular English and what kind of language attitudes are showed towards this variety. Moreover, it is also important to study what kind of people speaks it and in which manner or with which frequency and try to get to know, as a consequence, if this variety is a homogeneous one.

Another principal object of this paper is to analyze the features that define African American Vernacular English. In order to do this, we will focus on a bibliographically search and study the main relevant descriptive sources to portray the phonological, grammatical and lexicon features that characterize this variety. The main purposes of this analysis are firstly, to know the language variety that this paper studies and not only the context that surrounds it and, secondly, to demonstrate that, contrary to what many people think; African American Vernacular English is a systematic variety, and that it shows a perfectly organized internal logic as any other language variety.

Finally, we will try to analyse how African American Vernacular English is represented in the media. African American Vernacular English is a variety that is present in many films, songs, novels, series... For this reason, and in order to see how the features described by linguists in the descriptive sources are represented in the media, I have decided to analyse the use of African American Vernacular English in a very popular TV series entitled *The Wire*. In order to do it, I am going to select several scenes with the object of analyse the use of this variety by different types of characters.

Through the analysis of these selected scenes I will try to conclude if there is any kind of variation in the way the different characters use African American Vernacular English, and if there is variation, I will try to figure out if it responds to a change in the character's social context as the social class, sex or age. Moreover I will also expect to find out if there is any kind of variability in the use of this variety by the different characters depending on the recipient, what means that, this study of the series will try to show if there is any kind of accommodation (convergence or divergence) towards the speech of the recipient.

In order to accomplish the above mentioned objectives, the structure of this paper will consist on three different sections. The first one will be dedicated to give an overview of the historical and social context which surrounds African American Vernacular English, in the second section, I will analyse the phonological, grammatical and lexicon features of this variety and, the last section will be dedicated to the analysis of the use of African American Vernacular English in the TV series *The Wire*.

## **2. African American Vernacular English: historical and social context**

One of the first things that one must do in order to study a language variety is to know the origins of it; how, where and when it appears and how, when and towards which places it has been spread. It is also important study what people think about that variety and what type of linguistic attitudes people show towards it. Finally, the speakers of that variety must also be analysed in order to get to know what kind of people speak it and in which manner or with which frequency and try to get to know, as a consequence, if this variety is a homogeneous one.

For these reasons, in the following sections we will give a brief overview of the historical and social context which has surrounded African American Vernacular English since the very beginning.

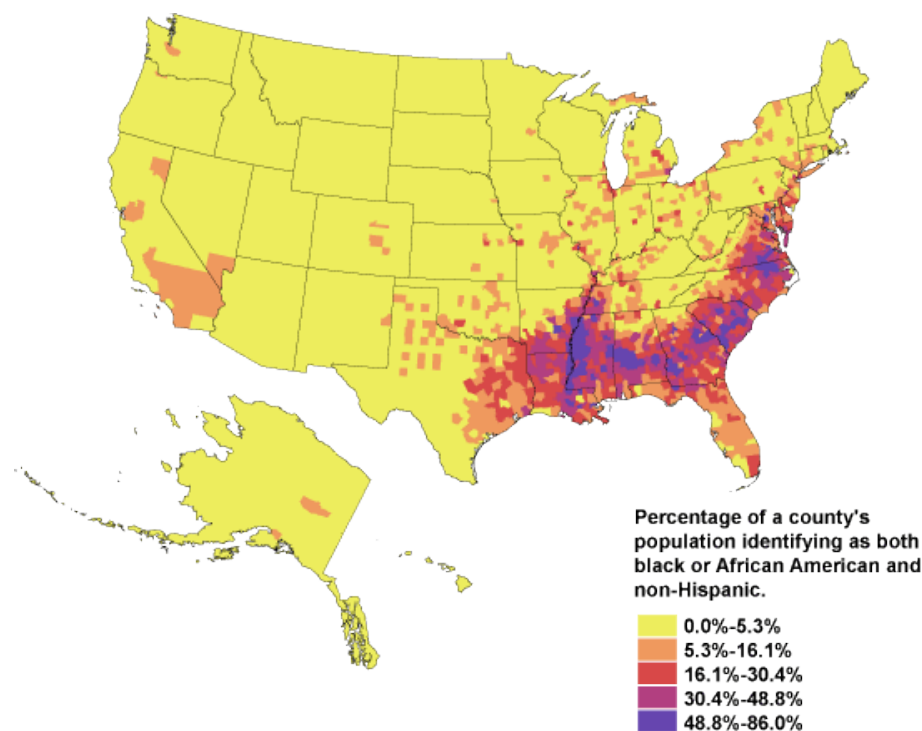
### **2.1 Origins**

African American Vernacular English is a variety of English spoken by those people in the United States who have African-American origins, that is, people who descend from the original African population that was transported there. The ancestors of most African Americans came to the United States as slaves, which mean that African American Vernacular English was born out of the history of slavery in this country.

This African population first arrived to the colony of Jamestown in North America, Virginia, in 1619, and from that moment onwards, a stable stream of slaves continued to arrive to the country for centuries. “Even though the slave trade became illegal in 1808, the domestic trade flourished and the slave population in the United States nearly tripled over the next 50 years, by 1860 it had reached nearly 4 million” (Staff, 2009).

In spite the fact that African Americans are currently distributed across the whole country, they were originally settled only in the south, in an area which goes from Texas in the West to North and South Carolina in the East where they worked as slaves for the white owners of the plantations. This explains why African American Vernacular English shares many features with Southern American English.

The following map (figure 1) provided by the Social Science Data Analysis (2000) shows how: “African Americans comprise the United States' largest racial minority, accounting for 12.1 percent of the total population in 2000. This population is concentrated largely in the southern states and urban areas”.



**Figure 1.** *The map shows the percentage of the spread of African American population through the United States in 2000. (SSDAN, 2000)*

As a consequence of the Industrial Revolution, especially in the first part of the nineteenth century, a migration from the south to the north began. This led to the fact that many African Americans started to live in industrial centres of the north and north east.

These slaves brought with them new languages totally different from English as Rickford (1999) affirms:

Like the forebears of many other Americans, these waves of African “immigrants” spoke languages other than English. Their languages were from the Niger-Congo language family, especially the West Atlantic, Mande, and Kwa sub-groups spoken from Senegal and Gambia to the Cameroons, and the Bantu sub-group spoken further south. (p.324)

But these slaves arrived in a country where English was dominant, so they had to learn English. Regarding this, there is a big controversy among linguists concerning how much these African slaves were influenced by their African languages when they learnt English.

The linguistic origins of African American Vernacular English are not very clear and continue to be a matter of debate. In fact, there are three different views about how African American Vernacular English arose, as Rickford (1999) portrays in his book, trying to clarify the possible sources of this variety.

#### *The Afrocentric view*

This view develops the idea that majority of the representative features of African American Vernacular English have influences from African languages. When West African slaves were brought to America and acquired English, they were influenced by their own African languages and “restructured it according to the patterns of Niger-Congo languages” (Rickford, 1999, p.325). As an example of the similarities that exist between them we can highlight the way in which both African American Vernacular English and Niger-Congo languages simplify consonant clusters at the end of words and do not use linking verbs like “is” and “are” as in, for instance, the prototypical example that Rickford (1999, p.325) portrays, “he happy”.

Despite this, there are important Niger-Congo languages which do not show these features and, moreover, some of them as the simplification of final consonant clusters can be found in certain vernaculars in England that had little or nothing to do with West African influence. As a consequence of this, a large number of linguists shows a sceptical attitude regarding this theory and demand more proof of the influence of African languages over African American Vernacular English.

On the contrary, there are also several linguists and authors who support the Afrocentric view; among them, we can highlight Molefi Kete Asante, an African-American professor in the Department of African American Studies at Temple University and a well-known writer in the field of African-American Studies. Asante (1980) is considered one of his most famous books about the Afrocentricity.

#### *The Eurocentric view*

This second view considers that African slaves learned English as a consequence of being in contact with white settlers in the colonies, since they used to work together in households and fields. This hypothesis affirms that they acquired English successfully maintaining little of their native African languages. As a consequence, non-Standard features of African American Vernacular English as, for instance, the omission of final consonants and the use of invariant habitual “be”, would derive from dialects spoken by colonial English, Irish, or Scotch-Irish settlers.

In spite of this, there are also very relevant AAVE features as the absence of linking verbs like “is” and “are” that we can hardly find or do not find at all in the dialects of these early settlers. So, consequently, and as happens with the Afrocentric view, we still do not have enough historical information to confirm this hypothesis.

Moreover, this view seems to be the less popular among linguists and historians since, as Rickford (1999) states: “The assumption that slaves rapidly and successfully acquired the dialects of the Whites around them requires a rosier view of their relationship than the historical record and contemporary evidence suggest” (p.326).

### *The Creolist view*

This last hypothesis believes that African American Vernacular English emerged from a pidgin language which African slaves developed when they were acquiring English. This pidgin would be “a simplified fusion of English and African languages” (Rickford, 1999, p.326).

A pidgin is a language variety that emerges in a context of slavery with a very specific function which is to enable the communication between the slave master and the slave (vertical communication), or among slaves (horizontal communication). These varieties are very linguistically simple and are always learnt in adult life, so they lack native speakers.

Pidgins are the previous stage of a creole, a pidgin turns into a creole when it acquires native speakers and becomes the first language of a community. As a consequence, it develops a more complex phonology and grammar. This process from which a pidgin turns into a creole is called creolization.

Pidgins and creoles are very likely to be found on the islands of the Caribbean and the Pacific when as a consequence of the plantations huge groups of slaves are forced to work together. These slaves speak a totally different languages from the ones that European colonizers and settlers and as a result, in order to enable the communication between them, new simplified varieties appear.

These varieties emerge from the fusion of two different languages, one is called the superstrate and is the one from which the vocabulary is derived. The other is the substrate, the local language that provides the basic grammatical features. As this Creolist view affirms, AAVE may have derived from a pidgin which combines English as superstrate and African languages as substrate.

The Creolist view is supported by many linguists including Stewart (1968), who affirms that:

Of the Negro slaves who constituted the field labour force on North American plantations up to the mid-nineteenth century, even many who were born in the New World spoke a variety of English which was in fact a true creole language – differing markedly in grammatical structure from those English dialects which were brought from Great Britain, as well as from New World modifications of these in the mouths of descendants of the original white colonists.

Or Rickford (1999), who states:

My own view is that the creolist hypothesis incorporates the strengths of the other hypothesis and avoids their weaknesses. But we linguists may never be able to settle that particular issue one way or another. What we can settle on is the unique identity of Ebonics as an English dialect. (p.327)

But as Rickford (1999) maintains, the Creolist view is not confirmed either so the origin of African American Vernacular English is still today a matter of controversy among linguists.

## **2.2 Different terms used to make reference to this variety**

There are several labels used to make reference to this variety of English. For this paper, I have decided to choose African American Vernacular English or AAVE, which is its acronym. The reason why I have chosen it is because I have concluded that this term is the most common among linguists as well as the more neutral. But, additionally, we can find a large number of terms that make reference to this variety as African American Variety of English, African American English (AAE), Black English (BE), Black English Vernacular (BEV), African American Language, Black speech, or Ebonics.

The term Ebonics was originally coined in 1973 by an African American social psychologist called Robert Williams. The term derives from “ebony” and “phonics” meaning “black sounds” and was created to refer to the language of all people descended from enslaved Black Africans. In contrast with other terms, Ebonics especially emphasizes the African roots of those who speak it and the independence from English. The term Ebonics became widely-known in 1996 as a consequence of the Oakland School Board Proposal or Ebonics controversy (see section 2.4.2). These days, it is frequently avoided by the majority of linguists and it is often used by people who want to ridicule or parody this variety.

Finally, and in a clear pejorative way, it is easy to find certain terms as "ghetto talk", "slang", "bastardized English", "lazy English" or "bad English" among those people who consider this variety to be "wrong" or "incorrect" English.

### **2.3 Is AAVE a homogeneous variety?**

Even though African American Vernacular English is a variety of English spoken by African Americans, not all African Americans speak it, and if they speak it, they do not do it in the same manner or with the same frequency. Moreover, not all the people who speak it are African Americans. The biological connection between the way someone speaks and the colour of their skin does not always exist, what matters more is who someone grew up with or what groups they want to be identified with.

As a consequence, we have to take into account social factors such as the social class or age as well as the variability according to use such as the style, the context or the register. For instance, certain features of African American Vernacular English are more common among people from the lower and working classes than among people from middle or upper classes, among young people than among middle aged people. Moreover, they are also more common in informal contexts than in formal contexts.

In addition, we also have to take into account the way in which the different social networks influence the speakers of African American Vernacular English. Social networks have to do with the people you establish relationships with, and, regarding this, a doctor or someone who works or lives in contact with Standard English speakers would be influenced by them and would not use African American Vernacular English in the same way as someone who only establishes relationships with other African American people. Several linguists had found social networks as a key factor for the study of linguistic change, for instance, Milroy (1980) or Labov (1983) who concludes with his study of Philadelphia speech communities that social networks are the main way by which new variants are spread.

Finally, there is also another aspect that influences the way in which African Americans use this variety and it is the speech accommodation. Accommodation makes reference to the way in which the speaker converges or diverges in their speech. People converge when they adapt their speech to the one of the interlocutor in order to reduce the social differences whereas people diverge when, deliberately, change from the speech style or even language of the interlocutor, this occurs for instance, to mark distinctiveness of a particular ethnic group or as a mark of identity. Labov (1983) also took into account the concept of accommodation in order to study linguistic change in Philadelphia speech communities.

In the case of African American Vernacular English, young African American speakers or more specifically adolescents, often diverge from English and see AAVE features as a mark of identity. In other cases, as occurs for instance with middle-class speakers, the opposite happens, they tend to converge to English and escape from these AAVE features as a way of reducing the social distance with the interlocutor.

#### **2.4 Language attitudes**

Language attitudes have to do with the ideas, feelings, beliefs, opinions, and prejudices that speakers have with respect to their own language variety or to other's people language variety. "Attitudinal studies aid in identifying how people of one language group view the personal character and social status of speakers of another language and how they form associations about other languages" (Kenmogne, n.d.). Language attitudes are showed by the way we behave regarding a language variety, for instance, the attitude that one shows towards speakers of another variety. The fact that we converge or diverge (see section 2.3) suggests a positive or negative attitude respectively.

Very close to the concept of language attitude it is the concept of prestige. In sociolinguistics, prestige has to do with the level of respect that a language variety has in comparison with other language varieties. The prestige of a language variety is the result of the phenomenon of social stratification by which a language variety associated with the upper classes has positive prestige and on the contrary, a language variety associates with the lower classes has negative prestige.

The standard forms are normally aligned with the higher social classes, whereas the non-standard features will correlate with lower classes, as a result of this, non-standard varieties used to have negative prestige. These non-standard varieties are often said to have covert prestige ascribed to them by their speakers, which means that, the speakers of these varieties, knowing that their variety has negative prestige, continue speaking it as for them that language variety indicates identity, belonging to a particular group.

Also related to language attitudes, it is important to mention the concept of stigmatization. The process of stigmatization involves disapproval, to label the differences as inferior, worse or undesirable and can result in social exclusion, disempowerment, and discrimination. A language or variety is stigmatized when it is regarded as inferior and associated with marginalized and uneducated people.

In the following two sections (2.4.1 and 2.4.2), we will analyse the social status of African American Vernacular English and we will also see briefly, as a very clear example of linguistic prejudice, what the Oakland School Board Proposal was and how the society of that time reacted to it.

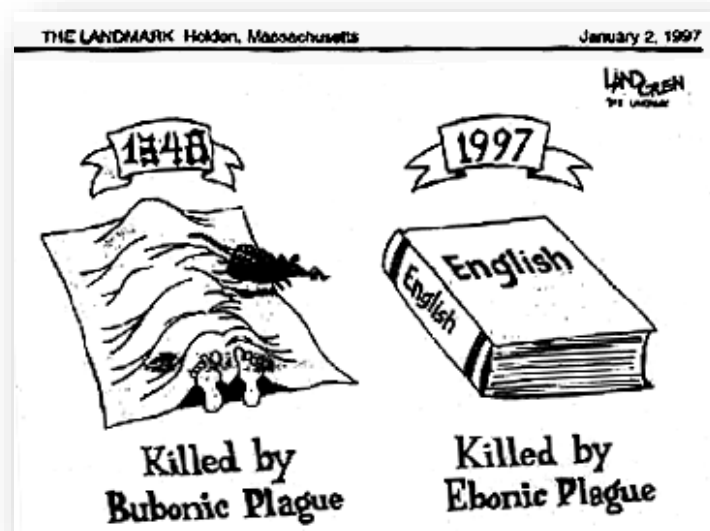
#### **2.4.1 Linguistic prejudice: stigmatization**

African American Vernacular English is a stigmatized variety as since the very beginning it has been regarded by many people as lazy English, slang, poor English, ghetto English or even bastardized English.

This is derived from the idea that there is a correct way to speak English and that anything that departs from this way of speaking is incorrect and has no rules. This belief is called Standard Language Ideology, and it has very serious, transcendental, and important consequences. Because of this widespread ideology, varieties like African American Vernacular English become stigmatized and marginalized for reasons that have more to do with the erroneous standards of correctness that people have than with the structure or complexity of the variety itself. In fact, and as we are going to see later on in this paper (see section 3), African American Vernacular English departs from the standard as it is a different variety, but it shows a systematic internal logic with several features that can be perfectly described and identified.

Stigmatized varieties like African American Vernacular English do not have anything inherently “incorrect” or “wrong” about them and, on the contrary, standardized dialects do not have anything inherently “good” or “right” about them. The reason why a variety becomes standardized or stigmatized usually has to do with social and historical factors rather than with linguistic factors, so that the variety of those who have the power becomes the “standard” way of speaking.

In Baugh (2000), we can see several examples of how people think of African American Vernacular English as something “incorrect” or “wrong” or even as a threat to Standard English. One of the most striking examples of this is the following cartoon which Baugh (2000, p.90) used in his book in order to illustrate this spread idea



*Figure 2. Cartoon from The Landmark, Holden, Massachusetts. January, 2, 1997.*

In this cartoon we can see how even in the media, African American Vernacular English was regarded as an incorrect and improper variety of English, referring to it as a “plague”.

Linguistic prejudice continues to be something present and ignored these days. While most people are aware of racial prejudice and realize that you do not have to show prejudice towards someone because of their race or culture, a large number of the same people do not realize that you do not have to show prejudice for the way in which someone speaks. Linguistic prejudice is still prejudice, and it is part of the different forms of racism that exist. It is a real problem of our society and the fact that many people are not aware of its existence magnifies even more its serious consequences.

### **2.4.2 The Oakland School Board Proposal**

There have been a lot of controversies regarding African American Vernacular English but undoubtedly the most important one was the Oakland controversy of 1996-1997.

On December 18, 1996, the Oakland School Board of Oakland, California, passed a resolution in which Ebonics was recognized as the primary language of African American children in schools: “Board of Education officially recognizes the existence, and the cultural and historic bases of West and Niger-Congo African Language Systems, and each language as the predominantly primary language of African-American students” (Baugh, 2000, p.46).

Furthermore, this resolution also declared Ebonics to be separate language, not an English dialect: “These studies have also demonstrated that African Language Systems are genetically based and not a dialect of English” (Baugh, 2000, p.44).

A big controversy has surrounded the Oakland resolution since it has been passed and, as a consequence of this, the Oakland School Board reacted with a more conservative position, passing a new resolution on January 15, 1997. In this new version we can appreciate a new emphasis on the importance of learning Standard English and certain statements that we can find in the first version and previously mentioned such as “genetically based” turn now into “have origins in West and Niger Congo languages and are not merely dialects of English” (Baugh, 2000, p.44).

The intention of this modified resolution was not to teach Ebonics as a separate or main language, but to use it as an instrument to improve the use of Standard English among African American students who speak Ebonics:

Implement the best possible academic program for imparting instruction to African-American students in their primary language for the combined purposes of maintaining the legitimacy and richness of such language whether it is known as "Ebonics," "African Language Systems," "Pan-African Communication Behaviors" or other description, and to facilitate their acquisition and mastery of English language skills. (Baugh, 2000, p.46)

The resolution added: “Instructional assistants, who are certified in the methodology of African Language Systems principles, used to transition students from the language patterns they bring to school to English” (Baugh, 2000, p.45).

As we can read above, they considered important for Ebonics speakers to be aware of the differences that exist between their vernacular language and Standard English in order to learn the latter easily. As Rickford (1999) affirms, educators must take into account Ebonics in order to teach children Standard English: “There is experimental evidence both from the United States and Europe that mastering the standard language might be easier if the differences in the student vernacular and Standard English were made explicit rather than entirely ignored” (p.327).

Rickford (1999) provides some supporting evidence:

At Aurora University, outside Chicago, inner-city African American students were taught by an approach that contrasted Standard English and Ebonics features through explicit instruction and drills. After eleven weeks, this group showed a 59 percent reduction in their use of Ebonics features in their Standard English writing. But a control group taught by conventional methods showed an 8.5 percent increase in such features. (p.327)

As a reaction to these two resolutions proposed by the Oakland School Board of Oakland, Oklahoma passed a bill banning the instruction of Ebonics in schools and suggesting that African American Vernacular English could be a threat to the society:

Ebonics means an Africanized form of English reflecting Black Americans’ linguistic-cultural ties to their African heritage. Ebonics may also be known as Black English or Black dialect.... [As this action is] immediately necessary for the preservation of the public peace, health, and safety, an emergency is hereby declared to exist. [H.B] (1810)

The Oakland School Board answers that with this resolution they were only promoting the Standard English Proficiency program, or SEP. This program was actually founded by the federal government and it uses the methodology of teaching a foreign language in order to help students to change from non-Standard to Standard English.

This Ebonics controversy is a very representative example of how schools have been treating the language of African-American children for years, regarding it as “incorrect” and inferior to Standard English. The Oakland School Board resolution failed, and this happens because the teachers and administrators of the Oakland schools, as well as the parents, had a conservative point of view regarding language based on vague, idealized and erroneous standards of correctness that are, as a consequence, transmitted to the students.

### **3. The features of AAVE**

As a consequence of the Ebonics controversy that emerged in 1996, people started to demand a list of African American Vernacular English features or a description of them, in order to prove that it is a systematic variety instead of bad English as people regarded it to be.

In the last decades, a lot of descriptive studies have commented on the phonology, grammar, and lexicon of African American Vernacular English. Regarding lexicon, one must take into account two very influential works: Major C (1994) and Smitherman G (1994). For the description of phonology and grammar there are also very important works as the one by Baugh (1983) or the ones on which I will focus on for this paper, Rickford (1999), and Bailey G & Thomas E (1998). Even though, it is true that the majority of works which describe the phonology and grammar of African American Vernacular English are currently outdated both in terminology and coverage.

The above mentioned books already describe what we know at present about African American Vernacular English, so I would like to recommend them if you want to read more about the features of this variety. However, in this paper, I will try to give a brief description of the most important African American Vernacular English's structural features taking into account, as I have already mentioned, Rickford (1999) and Bailey G & Thomas E (1998).

#### **3.1 Phonological features**

Even though the more distinctive features of AAVE are grammatical, for instance, zero copula or habitual *be*, linguists have given a lot of importance also to the phonological features. In fact, they have concluded that the phonological differences between AAVE and white varieties of English are crucial and very distinctive of this variety. Moreover, Montgomery & Bailey (1986) suggest that phonology plays a crucial role in ethnic identification.

The following ones are some of the most relevant phonological features of AAVE, common to many studies of AAVE phonology as Rickford (1999) and Mufwene, Rickford, Guy, & Baugh (1998) and based on them.

1. Reduction of word-final consonant clusters: it is the reduction in a word of a group of two or more consonants that have not intervening vowel, especially those which end in /t/ or /d/. A prototypical example of this feature is the one mentioned both by Rickford (1999, p.4) and by Bailey G & Thomas E (1998, p.88): *han'* for Standard English "hand".

This feature occurs in the majority of varieties of English but in AAVE, as Bailey G & Thomas E (1998, p.86) portray in this book, is more frequent or occur in different contexts. For instance, in most varieties of English, the final consonant in the cluster is more likely to be lost when the cluster is followed by an obstruent with the same place of articulation as in "first time", producing: *firs' time*, or when the cluster is followed by an obstruent with a different place of articulation as in "first girl", producing: *firs' girl*. On the other hand, it is less likely to be lost when the cluster is followed by a vowel as in "first apple". Nevertheless, in AAVE, these constrains are reversed, and the /t/ in "first apple" is more likely to be lost than the /t/ in "first time".

2. Deletion of word-final single consonant after a vowel: this occurs especially in the case of the nasals. A very clear example that Rickford (1999, p.4) portrays is the case of *ma'* [mæ] for Standard English "man". Bailey G & Thomas E (1998, p.89) consider this feature as apparently unique to AAVE, even though Rickford (1999) considers it less frequent than number 1.
3. Devoicing of word-final voiced stops: when a word-final voiced stop goes after a vowel, it is devoiced as a consequence, [b] is realized as [p], [d] as [t], and [g] as [k]. The prototypical example that Rickford (1999, p.4) and Bailey G & Thomas E (1998, p.89) mention is the pronunciation of [bæt] for Standard English "bad".
4. Realization of final *ng* as *n* in gerunds: as in the example mentioned by Rickford (1999, p.4), *walkin'* for SE "walking".
5. Realization of voiceless *th* [θ] as *t* or *f*: as in *tin* for Standard English "thin" and *baf* for Standard English "bath" Rickford (1999, p.4).
6. Deletion or vocalization of post vocalic /l/: when /l/ comes after a vowel, it is normally deleted or vocalized (that is pronounced as a weak neutral vowel). An examples of this mentioned by Rickford (1999, p.5) is *he'p* for SE "help" and *toah* for Standard English "toll".

Rickford (1999, p.5) also mentions that this phenomenon can result in the deletion of the “ll” of contracted *will*, especially when the following word begins with a labial /b/, /m/, or /w/, as in “He be here tomorrow” for Standard English “He’ll be here tomorrow”.

In Bailey G & Thomas E (1998, p.88), this feature is considered to be present in many English varieties, not only in AAVE.

7. Deletion or vocalization of /r/ after a vowel: *sistuh* for Standard English “sister” or *fouh* for Standard English “four” are some of the examples that Rickford (1999) provides for this feature. In this same section he also affirms that:

This rule applies more often when the /r/ comes at the end of a word and is followed by a word beginning with a consonant (four posts) rather than a word beginning with a vowel (four apples), but it can also apply when a vowel follows within the same word, as in Ca’ol for SE “Carol” or sto’y for SE “story”. (p.5)

Moreover, the deletion of /r/ after a vowel can have the grammatical effect of the use of “they” for the Standard English possessive “their”.

Finally, Bailey G & Thomas E (1998, p.88), classify this feature as present also in other non-standard varieties, not only in AAVE, even though it is a feature that tends to be more common in the South.

8. Deletion of unstressed syllables: this occurs both with initial and medial syllables. Rickford (1999, p.5) and Bailey G & Thomas E (1998, p.88) provide typical examples of this feature as: ‘fraid for “afraid”, sec’t’ry for “secretary”, ‘bout for “about”, or gov’mnt for “government”.

Certain linguists find this feature to be strongly age-graded, as Rickford (1999) reflects:

According to Vaughn-Cooke (1987, p.22), the unstressed syllable deletion rate for speakers over 60 years old in her Mississippi sample was 85 percent, for speakers aged 40-59 it was 70 percent, and for speakers 8-20 years old, it was 52 percent. (p.5)

The deletion of unstressed syllables is present in the majority of English varieties, even though it is more frequent in AAVE (see Bailey G & Thomas E (1998, p.88)).

9. Metathesis of final /s/+stop: metathesis is a phenomenon that consists in the transposition of adjacent consonants, as in the example that Rickford (1999, p.5) provides: *aks* for Standard English “ask”. This example is one of the most representative of AAVE; “One of the biggest shibboleths of AAVE, often referred to by teachers, personnel officers, and other gatekeepers in the course of putting down the variety” (Rickford, 1999, p.5).

Other typical examples of metathesis are *waps* for “wasp” or *graps* for grasp.

10. Monophthongal pronunciations of *ay* and *oy*, as in *ah* for Standard English “I” and *boah* for Standard English “boy” (see Rickford (1999, p.5)).

11. Merger of /ɪ/ and /ɜ/ before nasals: Bailey G & Thomas E (1998, p.89) provide two clear examples of this phenomenon, which are, [pɪn] for Standard English “pen”, and [wɪnzdi] for Standard English Wednesday.

12. Stress on first rather than second syllable: this feature is very distinctive of AAVE, some typical examples of it are the ones mentioned by Rickford (1999, p.5) as, *pólíce* instead of Standard English *políce*, or *hótel* instead of Standard English *hotél*. According to many linguists, this feature only affects to a small group of words.

13. Loss of /j/ after consonants: this feature is commonly called yod-dropping and it is very likely to occur in American English especially after dental and alveolar consonants, as in “news” that is pronounced /nu:z/ in American English in contrast with /nju:z/ in British English. Despite this, in African American Vernacular English we can find different cases to the ones that we have already mentioned about American English and which, as a result, are apparently unique to AAVE. Bailey G & Thomas E (1998, p.89) provide some typical examples as [kæmpurə] for Standard English “computer”, or [hustn] for Standard English “Houston”.

### **3.2 Grammatical features**

14. Absence of copula *is* and *are* for present tense states and actions: an example of this feature could be “She Ø happy” for Standard English “She is happy”, or “We Ø swimming” for Standard English “We are swimming”.

15. Use of invariant be:

- a. To indicate habitual aspect or habitual actions, as the examples that Rickford (1999, p.6) provides which is the use of “He be walking” for Standard English “He is usually walking/usually walks”.

The auxiliary *do* is used in non-affirmative sentences: “Used with auxiliary *do* in questions, negatives, and tag questions, as in “*Do he be walking every day?*” or “*She don’t be sick, do she?*”” (Rickford, 1999, p.6).

- b. To indicate the future form “will be”, as in “*We be tired tomorrow*” for Standard English “*We will be tired tomorrow*”. This feature is a consequence of the phonological rule that consists on deleting the “ll” of the contracted form of “will” (see number 5 above).
16. Use of *steady*: it is used as an intensified pre-verbal marker, usually after invariant habitual *be* (see number 14.b above), and before a progressive verb. This used of *steady* gives the semantic meaning of an action that occurs repeatedly. Rickford (1999, p.6) provides a clear example of this: “*Ricky Bell be steady steppin in them number nines*”.
17. Use of unstressed *been* or *bin*: this feature consists in the use of *been* or *bin* for Standard English’s present perfect form (“has/have been”) as in, for instance, “*We been occupied this last summer*” for Standard English “*We have been occupied this last summer*”. As we can see in this example, unstressed *been* can co-occur with adverbs of time (“last week”).
18. Use of *done* to emphasize that an action is already completed: Rickford (1999, p.6) gives a prototypical example of this feature which is the use of *done* in “*He done did it*” for Standard English “*He’s already done it*”.  
Rickford (1999, p.6), also provides examples of the cases in which *done* co-occur with *been* (see number 16 above), for instance: “*By the time I got there, he been done gone*” for Standard English “*He has been gone*”, or, it is also possible to find it in the reverse order, “*They done been sitting there an hour*” for Standard English “*They have been sitting there an hour*”.
19. Use of double modals: this feature is very characteristic of AAVE as well as in the majority of Southern White vernaculars. The use of *may can*, *might can*, and *might could*, are some examples that Rickford (1999, p.6) provides, they are used for Standard English “might be able to”.  
Rickford (1999, p.6) also provides another example that, in this case, is unique to AAVE, that is the use of *must don’t* for Standard English “must not”.

20. Generalization of *is* and *was*: this feature consists on the generalize use of *is* and *was* with plural and second person subjects, that is, the use of *is* instead of “are” for the second person singular, and the use of *was* instead of “were” for the plural subjects. Some example of this could be: “You *was* here yesterday” for Standard English “You were here yesterday” or “They *was* there” for Standard English “They were there”.
  21. Absence of third person singular present tense –s: this feature is very characteristic of AAVE, an example of it could be the use of “She singØ” instead of Standard English “She sings”. Related to this rule is also the use of *don’t* instead of “doesn’t” or *have* instead of “has” since “does/doesn’t” and “has/hasn’t” include the third person singular –s. Some examples of this are: “He *don’t* know” instead of Standard English “He doesn’t know” or “She *have* one” instead of Standard English “She has one”.
  22. Absence of possessive –s: this happens when, for instance, “MaryØ car” is used instead of Standard English “Mary’s car”.
  23. Use of *and (th)em* or *nem*: they are usually used after a proper name or after a verb, and they are used to make reference to a plural person. In most cases it has an associative function, as in, “Mary *an’ em*” meaning “Mary and her friends or family or some people related to her. In other cases, it is used simply to make reference to other group of people as in “Kill ‘*em* all” instead of Standard English “Kill all of them” or “Kill them”.
- Rickford (1999, p.7) comments on this feature and states that this feature is very similar to English Creoles than to other varieties of English. He also mentions that other southern white varieties have this feature too.
24. Use of appositive pronouns: they are also called pleonastic pronouns and they are pronouns that support another word, phrase, or clause and describing or modifying it. Their use is very frequent in AAVE, an instance of it is the example that Rickford (1999, p.7) provides: “That teacher, *she* yell at the kids” for Standard English “That teacher Ø yells at the kids”.
  25. Use of *y’all* and *they* as possessives: in AAVE it is frequent to find *y’all* to mark second person plural possessive, and *they* to mark third person plural possessive. As a consequence, they are used instead of “your” and “their” respectively, as in “This is *y’all* car” for Standard English “This is your car”, or “It’s *they* dog” for Standard English “It’s their dog”.

26. Absence of relative pronouns: in many varieties of English it is possible the omission of object relative pronouns (e.g. “That’s the girl (who) I saw”), but this feature makes reference also to the omission of subject relative pronouns, which is rarer and very characteristic of AAVE. An example of this could be the following sentence: “That’s the man Ø come here” for Standard English “That’s the man who came here”.
27. Use of *ain’(t)* as negator: in AAVE it is common the use of *ain’(t)* instead of Standard English “am not”, “isn’t”, “aren’t”, “hasn’t”, “haven’t”, and “didn’t”, as in “She *ain’* my mother” instead of Standard English “She isn’t my mother”, or “I *ain’* got anything” instead of Standard English “I haven’t got anything”.
28. Multiple negation or negative concord: this feature consists on “negating the auxiliary verb and all indefinite pronouns in the sentence, as in “He *don’* do *nothing*” for Standard English “He doesn’t do anything” (Rickford, 1999, p.8).  
This feature is very representative of AAVE.
29. Negative inversion: this feature consists on the inversion of the auxiliary and the indefinite pronoun subject. This rule is related with the previous one (see number 27 above), since negative inversion usually involves the multiple negation of the auxiliary and of the indefinite pronoun. Rickford (1999, p.8) provides several prototypical examples of this feature: “*Can’t nobody* say nothing” (inverted from “Nobody can’t say nothing”) for Standard English “Nobody can say anything”, or “*Ain’t nobody* home” (from “Nobody ain’t home”) for Standard English “Nobody is home”.
30. Use of *ain’t but* and *don’t but* for “only”: this feature is very representative of AAVE. Some examples of it are, for instance, “She *ain’t but* a teenager” instead of Standard English “She is only a teenager” or “They *don’t want but* your money” instead of Standard English “They only want your money”.
31. Direct questions without the inversion of the subject and auxiliary verb: the formation of direct question without inversion of the subject and the auxiliary verb is very common in AAVE.  
Rickford (1999, p.8) provides clear examples of this: “Why *I can’t* play?” for Standard English “Why can’t I play?” and “*They didn’t* take it” for Standard English “Didn’t they take it?”

### 3.3 Lexicon

African American Vernacular English's lexicon is full of unique words and expressions that turn it into a very colourful, dynamic and representative one. This lexicon is common to all African-American people, which means that, instead of finding variation among different social classes, different ages or different sexes as it happens for instance with African American Vernacular English's grammar or phonology, in the case of the lexicon we find variation among different sub-communities, as Mufwene et al. (1998) highlight in:

The lexicon of the Black speech community crosses boundaries – sex, age, religion, social class, region. That is, the Black lexicon is comprised of idioms, phrases, terms, and other linguistic contributions from various sub-communities within the larger African-American community. (p.205)

In order to understand the meaning of African American Vernacular English's lexicon, one must pay attention to African American's history and try to understand why and how the African-American community creates its own way of using the English language. Regarding this, one must take into account race as the main connection among African-Americans and as the main motivation they found to create their own variety.

The main feature of African American Vernacular English's lexicon is that it was developed by giving a different meaning to English words, what is called the "semantic inversion" that consists on turning the meaning of words into their opposites. Some examples of this are: the use of *bad* meaning "good", *stupid* meaning "excellent", or *dope* meaning "very good or superb" (Mufwene et al., 1998, p.216).

This practice of turning words into their opposites has its roots in slavery, when slaves tried to create their own system of communication that only they could understand. This is very similar to what the African-American community tried to do creating their own way of using the English language.

We can find an instance of the importance of the past in order to understand the lexicon of this variety in the name that the famous film-maker Spike Lee gave to his production company: *Forty Acres and a Mule*. This is a Black expression related to the nineteenth century and to the concept of "five states" that the Republic of New Africa created.

The Republic of New Africa was a Black Nationalist organization that claimed that, as reparations to Africans in America, it must be created an independent Black republic out of “five states” situated in the South of the United States, as the areas of the South constituted the *Black Belt*, where there have been the greatest concentrations of Black population.

This idea was an updating of the *forty acres* provision which the Congress of the United States attempted to pass in 1866. One part of the bill, and the one that gives the name to this expression, stipulated that: “Each ex-slave household should receive an allotment of “forty acres” of the land confiscated from the Confederacy, plus some start-up resources, captured in the Black lexical expression *forty acres, fifty dollars and a mule*” (Mufwene et al., 1998, p.207). President Andrew Johnson vetoed the bill, so the *forty acres* provision never was passed.

African-American people are a minority among a population who looks different physically and who promotes to be socially superior. This is the reason why the African-American community detaches from the rest of the population. One way to achieve it is to create their own way to use language. They want to highlight their differences, their race.

Regarding lexicon and race, it is important to take into account Hip Hop culture, as it plays a crucial role reintroducing the race-conscious into language. As a consequence of this, Hip Hop has contributed with a lot of terms and idioms to African American lexicon, some examples of this are the ones that Mufwene et al. (1998, p.204) portray in this book when they try to exemplify African American Vernacular English’s lexicon: the use of *def* and *dope* to refer to something that is superb or extremely good, or the use of *AKs* to refer to an “AK-47 assault rifle” and *Nines* to refer to a “nine-millimeter semi-automatic pistol”.

The lexicon of the African-American community is also influenced by the Traditional Black Church since it has been a crucial force in the survival of the African-American language and culture. As a consequence, several terms and expressions have been introduced into the African-American Vernacular English’s lexicon, some of them are the ones mentioned in Mufwene et al. (1998):

The use of the expression on time to acknowledge that something occurred at the appropriate psychological moment, the use of Brotha/Sista to refer in a generic way to any African American, or proverbs such as God don’t like ugly, used as chastisement of negative behaviour or talk, particularly when directed against another person. (p.209)

Additionally, we can also find terms and expressions in the lexicon of African American Vernacular English that are related to the sense of inferiority that the African-American community feels, for instance, the opposition between *good hair* used to make reference to the straight hair of the whites, and *bad hair* used to make reference to the curled hair of the Blacks (Mufwene et al., 1998, p.211).

#### **4. AAVE in popular TV series: *The Wire***

In section 3 we have described the most representative phonological, grammatical and lexical features of African American Vernacular English through an analysis of relevant descriptive sources. In this section, we are going to see how African American Vernacular English is represented in the media, concretely in the popular TV series entitled *The Wire*. Through an analysis of certain chapters, we are going to see in which manner the previous analysed features (see section 3) are represented in this TV series. Moreover, we will also try to conclude if there is some sort of variability in the use of this variety depending on the social context or the recipient. In order to achieve it, we are going to select certain characters that belong to different social classes, sexes and ages and analyse their way of using African American Vernacular English.

##### **4.1 Introduction to the TV series *The Wire***

For the analysis of the representation of African American Vernacular English in the media, I have decided to choose the popular TV series entitled *The Wire*. This TV series was broadcast by the cable network HBO in the United States from June 2, 2002, to March 9, 2008, comprising 60 episodes and five seasons.

There are several reasons why this TV series is an interesting object of analysis regarding African American Vernacular English. The first one is the setting, since *The Wire* is set in Baltimore, Maryland. As the data of Index Mundi (2013) shows, in the city of Baltimore, the percentage of population of African-American origin is quite considerable (63.3%). This leads to the consequence that in Baltimore, there is a large number of African-American speakers. This fact makes the city of Baltimore a perfect place to analyse the use of African American Vernacular English by its community.

| <b>County</b>          | <b>%</b> |
|------------------------|----------|
| <b>Allegany</b>        | 8.2      |
| <b>Anne Arundel</b>    | 16.4     |
| <b>Baltimore</b>       | 27.5     |
| <b>Baltimore city</b>  | 63.3     |
| <b>Calvert</b>         | 13.2     |
| <b>Caroline</b>        | 14.5     |
| <b>Carroll</b>         | 3.5      |
| <b>Cecil</b>           | 6.5      |
| <b>Charles</b>         | 43.1     |
| <b>Dorchester</b>      | 28.1     |
| <b>Frederick</b>       | 9.1      |
| <b>Garret</b>          | 1.1      |
| <b>Harford</b>         | 13.2     |
| <b>Howard</b>          | 18.4     |
| <b>Kent</b>            | 15.1     |
| <b>Montgomery</b>      | 18.6     |
| <b>Prince George's</b> | 65.1     |
| <b>Queen Anne's</b>    | 6.9      |
| <b>Somerset</b>        | 42.8     |
| <b>St. Mary's</b>      | 14.3     |
| <b>Talbot</b>          | 13.2     |
| <b>Washington</b>      | 10.7     |
| <b>Wicomico</b>        | 24.9     |
| <b>Worcester</b>       | 13.9     |

*Table 1. Representation of the percentage of African-American population in the different cities of Maryland, in the year 2013. From: Barrientos (2013)*

Despite the fact that it is very close to Washington, Baltimore is considered to be by many people the worse city of the United States, full of crime, murders, and where the drug trafficking dominates the streets. It is because of this that David Simon and Ed Burns decided to write this TV series, in order to pay a tribute to Baltimore, the city that they love. Simon was a journalist specialised in criminal activities whereas Ed was a policeman. They wrote this TV series in order to portray how they saw the city of Baltimore, the perception they had about it. They wanted to show to the whole world the most grotesque part of this city, in order to try to change it.

As a result, *The Wire* is not only a police series, it is set in the suburbs of the city and the protagonists are uneducated and marginalized African-Americans who belongs to the lower classes and who survive selling drugs to other neighbours of the ghetto. The main idea of the plot consists on the struggle of the police against this situation of drugs trafficking and crime.

*The Wire* tries to show the reality of a city where the drugs, the lower classes, the crime, the corruption and the exclusion dominates. In order to achieve it, the majority of the characters are real residents of Baltimore who play their own roles. This fact makes one more time this TV series to be very suitable for the analysis of the language these characters speak, in this case, African American Vernacular English. The fact that the characters of *The Wire* are not actors but real African-Americans who live in Baltimore turns the analysis of their language into a very accurate one as the way in which they speak is not exaggerated or imitated, it is the way in which they actually speak.

#### **4.2 Materials and method**

For the study of African American Vernacular English in the TV series *The Wire* we are going to focus on concrete scenes or fragments of certain episodes of the first season. The main reason why this first season is more interesting than the other four regarding the analysis of this variety is the fact that, in this season, we can recognize two main different kinds of characters. On the one hand, those who are on the side of the law, the group of policemen and lawyers who try to fight against the drug trafficking and the crime in the ghetto, and, on the other, the people who live in the ghetto and are involved in the drug-related crime. We can find African-American Vernacular English speakers among the members of both groups.

From that first season, I have decided to choose three different scenes or fragments and, in order to do this, I have taken into account mainly the social class of the characters, in order to try to find any kind of accommodation. As a result, we are going to analyse three different fragments or scenes in which policemen (middle class) and people from the ghetto (lower class) interact.

This two-group distinction and the analysis of the language used by both of them will help us to conclude if there is any kind of variation in terms of, for instance, social class, which means that we are going to try to conclude if people from the middle and upper classes as policemen or lawyers respectively, use African American Vernacular English in the same way and with the same frequency as people from the ghetto do. Moreover, and related to this, we will also try to conclude if there is any kind of accommodation (divergence or convergence; see section 2.4) among these two groups.

My analysis of these four fragments is based on the scripts of the episodes that one can find in [springfieldspringfield.co.uk](http://springfieldspringfield.co.uk) web page, which might not be entirely reliable so I have also listened carefully several times the audios of the fragments in order to detect if there is any kind of error in the scripts regarding phonology or grammar. The appendix of this paper contains the dialogues of the fragments analysed.

In the following section, after the description and analysis of each feature, I am going to mark between brackets the number of times that each feature is repeated in the selected dialogue, in contrast with the total number of cases in which we could find that feature in the fragment.

The four fragments selected for the analysis are the following ones:

**Fragment 1:** season one, episode one (1x01, min. 37-39). In this fragment we can find a dialogue between different friends of African-American origin that takes place in the suburbs of Baltimore. This fragment is very important since is the first time that the young African American people from the suburbs appear in the series, which means that this is the way they are presented to the audience.

In the scene, they are talking in a relaxed manner and in a friendly atmosphere, so it is expected to find in the dialogue several distinctive features of African American Vernacular English. Even though there are several men talking in the scene, we are going to focus our analysis on those parts where a character called D'Angelo speaks, since we are going to analyse this character later on in other scenes and it is important to focus our analysis on him in order to be able to establish a comparison at the end of the analysis among the different scenes in which he appears. Character: D'Angelo Barksdale.

**Fragment 2:** season one, episode three (1x03, min. 4-6). In this scene, a police lieutenant is talking with a commissioner, what means that these two characters belong to a higher social class than the ones that have been already analysed in the previous scene (1x02, min. 37-39) who were young people from the suburbs. Both the police lieutenant and the commissioner are also African-Americans, so the analysis of their speech will help us to conclude if the social class determines or affects the use of African American Vernacular English or not. Characters: Colonel Cedric Daniels and Police Commissioner Ervin H. Burrell.

**Fragment 3:** season one, episode two (1x02, min. 26-28). In this fragment two policemen are talking to a young African-American man from the ghetto that is accused of drug trafficking and murders. Only one of the two policemen that appear in this dialogue is African-American, so we are going to analyse only those parts of the dialogue where the African-American policemen and the young African-American talk.

This type of dialogue in which two African-American people that belong to different social classes (middle class and lower class) interact, will enable us to conclude if there is any kind of accommodation among them. In order to facilitate the analysis, we are going to separate the policeman's dialect from the young's dialect. Characters: D'Angelo Barksdale (young man from the ghetto), and Detective William Bunk (policeman).

**Fragment 4:** season one, episode four (1x04, min. 12-15). In this fragment we can find the same policeman that was already present in fragment 3 (Detective William Bunk). In contrast with that previous scene, in this fragment the policeman is talking with a white policeman instead with a black young from the ghetto as it was the case in fragment 3.

This change in the situation and the fact that we are analysing the same character will make possible to conclude if there is any kind of accommodation in this scene, if the African American Vernacular English's features that we have found in fragment 3 when he talks with a young man from the ghetto remain in this scene in which he talks with a white policeman. Character: Detective William Bunk.

### **4.3 Analysis of the fragments**

#### **4.3.1 Fragment 1:** season one, episode one (1x01, min. 37-39).

In this dialogue, one can find several distinctive features of African American Vernacular English. The following ones are some examples of the phonological features:

1. Realization of voiceless *th* [θ] as *t* or *f* (see section 3.1, number 5): we can find one examples of this feature in the selected dialogue, which is, the pronunciation of the word “thing” in the sentence “Somebody snapping pictures, they got the whole damn *thing*”, where the *th* [θ] is pronounced as [t]. (1/1)
2. Realization of final *ng* as *n* in gerunds (see section 3.1, number 4): we can find this feature in several examples throughout this dialogue, for instance: “Somebody *snapping* pictures” in which the *ng* of the verb “snapping” is pronounced as [n], or “See what I’m *saying*” in which the *ng* of the verb “saying” is pronounced as [n], or “I’m *trying* to give you a little game” in which the *ng* o the verb “trying” is pronounced as [n] also. (5/7)
3. Deletion or vocalization of post vocalic /l/ (see section 3.1, number 6): we can find this feature in the question “All right?” If we pay attention to the pronunciation of these two words one might realize that the final “ll” of “all” is deleted. (1/1)
4. Deletion or vocalization of /r/ after a vowel (see section 3.1, number 7): this feature can be also identified in the previous example, the question “All right?” As a consequence of the deletion of “ll” (see number 2 of this section), the /r/ of the word “right” comes after a vowel and because of this it is also deleted. Moreover, as it has been previously explained (see section 3.1, number 7), the deletion of /r/ after a vowel my carry the grammatical effect of the use of *they* for the Standard English possessive “their” as it happens in the following example of this dialogue: “You can't serve your customers straight up after taking *they* money”. (3/5)

5. Monophthongal pronunciations of *ay* and *oy* (see section 3.1, number 10): we can find several examples of this feature in the dialogue, for instance, in the pronunciation of *ah* for Standard English “I” as in “*I* mean, *I* don't know how you do shit up in the towers” or in the pronunciation of *boah* for Standard English “boy” as in “You gonna fall out slamming that shit like that one of these days, *boy*”. (3/4)

In this dialogue, one can also easily identify several grammatical features very characteristic of African American Vernacular English; the following ones are all the examples that we can find in this dialogue:

6. Absence of copula *is* and *are* for present tense states and actions (see section 3.2, number 14): in this fragment we can find clear examples of this feature as in the sentence “You  $\emptyset$  off the money” in which the copula *are* is deleted, or the question “That  $\emptyset$  it?” in which the copula *is* is also deleted. (3/4)
7. Use of invariant be:
  - a. To indicate habitual aspect or habitual actions (see section 3.2, number 15a): we can find an example of this in the sentence “Money *be* green”. The use of habitual “be” in this series is something predictable since this feature “is more common in urban than in rural areas” (see Rickford 1999: 325). (2/2)
  - b. To indicate the future form “will be” (see section 3.2, number 15b): as in the sentence “Your ass *be* out on the bottom end of Vine street”. (1/1)
8. Use of unstressed *been* or *bin* for Standard English’s present perfect form (see section 3.2, number 17): we can find one example of this feature in this dialogue, which is, “Y'all niggers *been* burnt”. (1/1)
9. Absence of third person singular present tense –s (see section 3.2, number 21): we can find a very clear example of this feature in the selected dialogue since this feature is one of the most representative of African American Vernacular English: “This shit happen $\emptyset$  again”. (4/4)
10. Generalization of *is* and *was* with plural and second person subjects (see section 2.2, number 20): as in the example that we can find in this fragment “Nigger, *is* you crazy?” (1/1)

11. Use of *y'all* and *they* as possessives (see section 3.2, number 25): in the dialogue that we are analysing we can find several examples of this feature, as “You can't serve your customers straight up after taking *they* money” in which *they* is used instead of “their”. (2/3)
12. Use of *ain'(t)* as negator instead of Standard English “am not”, “isn't”, “aren't”, “hasn't”, “haven't”, and “didn't” (see section 3.2, number 27): this feature is very common in African American Vernacular English, and, as a consequence, we have several examples of it in this dialogue as, “That shit *ain't* money” where *ain't* is used instead of Standard English “isn't”, or “He *ain't* no president” where the same happens. (5/7)
13. Multiple negation or negative concord (see section 3.2, number 28): this is another representative feature of African American Vernacular English. In the dialogue that we are analysing we can find several examples of this as, “He *ain't no* president”, or “*Ain't no* ugly-ass white man get his face on *no* legal motherfucking tender except he president”. (4/5)
14. In this dialogue that we are analysing, there are also non-standard grammatical features that have not been previously explained in section 3.2, as there are not present in the main descriptive sources analysed for this paper. One example of this type of feature is the formation of questions without any kind of auxiliary, as in “Ø You hear me?” where the auxiliary “do” is elided, or in “What Ø you mean?” where the same happens. These features are common to several varieties and very frequent in colloquial spoken language. (8/8)

#### **4.3.2 Fragment 2:** season one, episode three (1x03, min. 4-7).

Throughout the analysis of this fragment, I have found that most of the relevant features of African American Vernacular English are not present.

Regarding phonology, the only feature that can be clearly appreciated is the reduction of word-final consonant clusters (see section 3.1, number 1). But this feature, as has been already explained in that section, occurs in the majority of varieties of English, so, even though it is more frequent in African American Vernacular English than in other varieties, it is not a distinctive feature of it.

An example of reduction of word-final consonant clusters in this fragment could be the sentence: “Three witnesses' statements all of them saying the officer's assault on the youth was unprovoked” in which a reduction of the word-final consonant clusters of the word “assault” and of the verb “unprovoked” is produced. (5/18)

In the case of the grammar, it is important to comment on the following sentence: “Sir, I would request that pending the grand jury review Officer Pryzbylewski *be* placed on administrative leave”, in which the use of *be* may look like habitual *be* (see section 3.2, number 15a), but it is in fact, an instance of so-called “mandatory subjunctive”, a typical feature of Standard American English.

### **4.3.3 Fragment 3:** season one, episode two (1x02, min. 26-28).

4.3.3.1 **Policeman's dialogue:** in this part of the fragment we can find several phonological African American Vernacular English's features:

1. Reduction of word-final consonant clusters (see section 3.1, number 1): we can find examples of this feature in the pronunciation of verbs like “killed” or “worked”. (3/4)
2. Realization of final *ng* as [n] in gerunds (see section 3.1, number 4): examples of this feature in this part of the dialogue are gerunds like “driving”, “going”, “crying”, and “lighting”. (4/4)
3. Deletion of unstressed initial and medial syllables (see section 3.1, number 8): we can see an example of this when the policeman pronounces ‘*cause* instead of Standard English “because”. This feature is very frequent in spoken language and, as a result, it is important to highlight that it is considered to be present in many English varieties, not only in AAVE. (1/1)
4. Monophthongal pronunciations of *ay* and *oy* (see section 3.1, number 10): the sentence “*I* know he don't believe it”, in which “*I*” is pronounced as [ah] is an example of this feature. (1/1)

In those parts of the dialogue where the policeman speaks one can also easily identify the following grammatical African American Vernacular English's features:

5. Absence of copula *is* and *are* for present tense states and actions (see section 3.2, number 14): we can see an example of this feature in the questions “You Ø sorry? You Ø sorry for him?” in which the copula “are” is elided. (2/2)

6. Absence of third person singular present tense –s (see section 3.2, number 21): in those parts of this dialogue spoken by the policemen we can find a clear example of this feature: “I know he *don't* believe it”, where *don't* is used instead of Standard English “doesn’t”. (1/2)
7. Use of *ain'(t)* as negator (see section 3.2, number 27): the sentence “if you weren't so busy lighting folks up in high-rise lobby he *ain't* coming out of the elevator and see it happen” that the policemen pronounce and in which *ain't* is used instead of Standard English “hasn’t”, is clear example of this feature. (1/2)

4.3.3.2 **Young man’s dialogue:** in this part of the dialogue we can only find the following phonological feature as the young African-American man does not speak so much in this dialogue:

8. Monophthongal pronunciations of *ay* and *oy* (see section 3.1, number 10): we can find several examples of this feature in the fragments where the young man speaks, as in the sentence “*I* got nothing to say” or in “*I* mean, *I*’m sorry for the man, but *I* ain't got nothing to say” in which “I” is pronounced as [ah]. (4/4)

Moreover, we can find the following grammatical features:

9. Absence of copula *is* and *are* for present tense states and actions (see section 3.2, number 14): the question “Where Ø my lawyer at?” in which the copula “is” is elided, is clear example this feature. (1/1)
10. Use of *ain'(t)* as negator (see section 3.2, number 27): as in the sentence “*I* *ain't* got nothing to say” in which *ain't* is used for Standard English “haven’t”. (1/2)
11. Multiple negation or negative concord (see section 3.2, number 28): an example of this feature in the dialogue that we are analysing could be the sentence ““*I* *ain't* got *nothing* to say”, in which both the auxiliary verb and the indefinite pronoun are present in their negative forms. (2/2)

**4.3.4 Fragment 4:** season one, episode four (1x04, min. 12-15).

Throughout the analysis of this fragment, I have found that most of the African American Vernacular English features are not present.

Regarding phonological features, one can only perceive the realization of final *ng* as [n] in gerunds (see section 3.1, number 4), as it is the case of the sentence “He’s supposed to be down here *helping* us, anyway” in which the final *ng* of the verb “helping” is pronounced as [n].

Concerning grammar, there is no presence of any grammatical feature characteristic of African American Vernacular English.

**4.4 Discussion of the fragments**

In part 4.3 we have analysed four different fragments or scenes which belong to the first season of the popular TV series entitled *The Wire*. The main purpose of this analysis is to compare the use of African American Vernacular English mainly in people who belong to different social classes and to conclude if, as a result of this, there is any kind of accommodation among them. The following tables will help us to organize the main results of this analysis:

| Character |    | Voiceless <i>th</i> [θ] as <i>t</i> or <i>f</i> | Final <i>ng</i> as <i>n</i> in gerunds | Deletion or vocalization of post vocalic /l/ | Deletion or vocalization of /r/ after a vowel | Monophthongal pronunciations of <i>ay</i> and <i>oy</i> | Reduction of word-final consonant clusters | Deletion of unstressed initial and medial syllables |
|-----------|----|---|--|--|---|---|--|---|
| D’Angelo  | F1 | 1/1   | 5/7                                    | 1/1  | 3/5   | 3/4   | ∅  | ∅   |
|           | F3 | ∅   | ∅                                      | ∅  | ∅   | 4/4   | ∅  | ∅   |
| Bunk      | F3 | ∅   | 4/4                                    | ∅  | ∅   | 1/1   | 3/4  | 1/1   |
|           | F4 | ∅   | 1/1                                    | ∅  | ∅   | ∅   | ∅  | ∅   |
| Daniels   | F2 | ∅   | ∅                                      | ∅  | ∅   | ∅   | 2/4  | ∅   |
| Burrell   | F2 | ∅   | ∅                                      | ∅  | ∅   | ∅   | 3/14                                       | ∅   |

**Table 2.** Enumeration of the different phonological features found in the dialogues, classified by the number of times that each feature is repeated in the dialogue, in contrast with the total number of cases in which we could find that feature in the fragment and also, by the name of the different characters whose dialects contain those features.

| Character |    | Absence of copula <i>is</i> and <i>are</i> | Use of invariant <i>be</i> | Use of unstressed <i>been</i> or <i>bin</i> | Absence of third person singular present tense <i>-s</i> | Generalization of <i>is</i> and <i>was</i> | Use of <i>y'all</i> and <i>they</i> as possessives | Use of <i>ain'(t)</i> as negator | Multiple negation |
|-----------|----|--|----------------------------|---|--|--|--|----------------------------------|-------------------|
| D'Angelo  | F1 | 3/4  | 3/3                        | 1/1   | 4/4  | 1/1  | 2/3  | 5/7                              | 4/5               |
|           | F3 | 1/1  | ∅                          | ∅   | ∅  | ∅  | ∅  | 1/2                              | 2/2               |
| Bunk      | F3 | 2/2  | ∅                          | ∅   | 1/2  | ∅  | ∅  | 1/2                              | ∅                 |
|           | F4 | 0/2  | ∅                          | 0/1   | 0/2  | ∅  | ∅  | ∅                                | ∅                 |
| Daniels   | F2 | ∅  | 1/1                        | ∅   | ∅  | ∅  | ∅  | ∅                                | ∅                 |
| Burrell   | F2 | ∅  | ∅                          | ∅   | ∅  | ∅  | ∅  | ∅                                | ∅                 |

**Table 3.** Enumeration of the different grammatical features found in the dialogues, classified by the number of times that each feature is repeated in the dialogue, in contrast with the total number of cases in which we could find that feature in the fragment and also, by the name of the different characters whose dialects contain those features

\***Note 1:** the “F” of the abbreviations F1, F3 and F4 means “fragment” and the number makes reference to the number of the fragment analysed in order to identify it, so, for instance, F1 stances for “fragment one”.

\***Note 2:** the symbol “∅”, indicates that in the dialogue spoken by that character, there is no possible context in which that feature could be realized.

The observation of the results classified in tables 2 and 3 enables us to conclude the following statements about the way in which these characters speak:

1. The first character who appears in the tables is D'Angelo Barksdale who, as it is already explained in part 4.2, is a young African-American man from the ghetto. He is present in two different dialogues (fragment 1 and fragment 3), as a consequence of this and looking to the results obtained, we are going to conclude if there is any kind of accommodation or change from one fragment to the other in the way he speaks.

In fragment 1, he is in the ghetto taking to other friends who also live there; moreover, they are all African American so it is expected to find, as the two tables (2 and 3) show, a lot of instances of African American Vernacular English's features, both phonological and grammatical.

In the second fragment in which D'Angelo appears (fragment 3), the situation changes a lot. He is now speaking with another African-American man but who in this case, is a policeman. The policeman is someone who belongs to a higher social class than him and, moreover, is a representative of the law, so maybe we would expect that, in this case, D'Angelo would try to moderate his use of African American Vernacular English since, as we have already explained in this paper, it is a stigmatized variety (see section 2.4.1). Despite of this, if we look tables 2 and 3, we realise that, we find African American Vernacular English's features in all contexts in which an African American Vernacular English's feature is possible to be produce. This leads us to the conclusion that, instead of trying to accommodate to the way in which a policeman is supposed to speak, the character of D'Angelo decides not to moderate his use of African American Vernacular English at all.

2. The second character that appears in tables 2 and 3 is the African-American policeman called Bunk. This character also appears in two of the four analysed fragments (fragment 3 and fragment 4), so it will be also possible in this case to conclude if there is any kind of accommodation or change in the way he speaks from one fragment to the other. In fragment 3, he is talking to D'Angelo, interrogating him in order to obtain information. For this reason, and as a representative of the law, we may think that this African-American policeman would moderate the way in which he speaks African American Vernacular English in order to diverge from the way in which D'Angelo speaks and to show, as a result, his superiority and his authority.

Moreover, we would also expect to find, in normal circumstances, less features of African American Vernacular English in someone who belongs to a higher social class (as is the case of Bunk) than in someone who belongs to a lower social class (as is the case of D'Angelo). Despite of this, if we pay attention to tables 2 and 3, we realise that, we find African American Vernacular English's features in all contexts in which an African American Vernacular English's feature is possible to be produce.

Taking this information into account, we can conclude that this policeman tried to converge towards the way in which D'Angelo speaks, maybe in order to eliminate the social distance and to show proximity.

In the second fragment in which Bunk appears (fragment 4), he is talking to a white policeman. Through the results obtained we can see how most of the features that he shows when he speaks with D'Angelo in fragment 3, now have disappeared (Absence of copula *is* and *are*, absence of third person singular present tense *-s*, etc). This reinforces the above explained idea that, in fragment 3, he converges towards the speech of D'Angelo, showing as a result, more instances of African American vernacular English features.

3. Finally, we are going to analyse the results of the last two characters (Daniels and Burrell) together, since they are both African-American policemen who appear in the same fragment talking to each other (see section 4.2). In both cases, we find very few instances of African American Vernacular English's features, for example, in the case of the reduction of word-final consonant clusters, we only find 2 of the 4 possible cases in Daniels, and 3 of the 14 possible cases in Burrell. This is somehow expected since, when you see the series, you realise that these two policemen, in contrast with Bunk, are not in contact at all with people from the ghetto, and instead, they are more in contact with white commissioners and lawyers who belong to upper classes. This is because, instead of being mere policemen as is the case of Bunk, Daniels is a lieutenant and Burrell is a commissioner.

Taking into account the information we get from the analysis of the different fragments of the TV series *The Wire* that have been commented below, we can reach the conclusion that there are more instances of African American Vernacular English's features among people from the lower classes than among people from the middle and upper classes.

This may have to do with the fact that, for people of the lower classes who, in this case, live in the ghetto, African American Vernacular English functions as a mark of identity, as a symbol of who they are, and as a consequence, they do not moderate at all their use of it and, in most cases they deliberately diverge from the way other people speak in order to mark even more that Black identity they deeply feel.

Regarding African-American characters that belong to middle classes, as is the case of the policemen, we can see how, as a consequence of being constantly in contact with people from the ghetto, they find it very easy to converge towards the speech of them, even though in their daily life or talking to other policemen they show few instances of African American Vernacular English's features.

Finally, there are those policemen and lawyers who belong to upper classes and who, despite the fact of being African-Americans too, do not show African American Vernacular English's features. This could be explained for the fact that they are not in contact at all with the lower classes which is the social group that shows more features of this variety, and, in addition, they are daily in contact with white people from the middle and upper classes, which emphasize even more this situation.

## **5. Conclusion**

Through the analysis of the different bibliographical and descriptive sources and after the reflexions and the analysis showed in this paper, I can clearly conclude that African American Vernacular English shows a very organized internal logic and that, as a consequence of this, it is a systematic variety with its own rules and norms as any other language variety. As Rickford (1999) says: "In short, the manner in which Ebonics differs from Standard English is highly ordered; it is not more lazy English than Italian is lazy Latin" (p. 323).

Moreover, the study and analysis of the way in which different African-American characters of the TV series *The Wire* speak, has enabled us to observe the use of this variety within a determined social context. The results obtained lead us to the conclusion that, even though all the selected characters of the series speak African American Vernacular English, they do not do it in the same manner or with the same frequency. Variation is something present in this variety and it responds to several causes.

We have seen how, in the case of the representation of African American Vernacular English in this popular TV series, young people from the lower classes are the ones who show more features of this variety and are also the ones who use them with more frequency. Additionally, this group of characters is the only one who does not show any kind of accommodation or variation in the way they use African American Vernacular English, not even when they are speaking with a person who belongs to a higher social class and who, additionally, is an authoritarian figure. This has a very simple explanation, African-American people, and especially those who belong to the lower social classes as are who suffer the most the discrimination and stigmatization, see African American Vernacular English as a mark of their identity, as a symbol of who they are and as an essential part of their culture which they refuse to moderate or eliminate.

On the contrary, and as we have seen in several cases through the analysis of the TV series, in most cases, African-American people from the lower classes deliberately diverge from the way other people speak accentuating even more their African American Vernacular English's features in order to mark their ethnicity.

Additionally, we have also seen how, African-American characters who belong to the middle classes are the ones who show more variation in the way they speak since they are in contact with both; African-American members of the lower classes and white people from the middle and upper classes. As a result of this, we have found among these characters different examples of accommodation resulting in the use of an African American Vernacular English's version which shows several features of it when they are speaking with African-American people from the lower classes and, a more moderate one when they are speaking with a member of the middle or upper classes.

Finally, we must conclude that the selected African-American characters analysed who belong to the upper classes and who are not in contact with members of the lower classes, scarcely show instances of African American vernacular English's features.

Even though the number of materials analysed in this paper are not enough to produce an accurate quantitative study, the results obtained and the knowledge and linguistic information that I have obtained after observing the African-American character's way of speaking throughout the 60 episodes and five seasons that constitute this TV series, allow me to conclude that, at least in this TV series, the social class is a determining factor regarding the use of African American Vernacular English.

For future studies of this variety, I would try to accomplish objectives and answer questions that I have not been able to conclude in this paper, as if the variation in terms of sex and age are also as relevant as the variation in terms of social class showed in this study. Moreover, I would also like to do an accurate quantitative study of this variety which I could not do in this paper since it would mean a study and analysis of an amount of materials too big for a project of this kind.

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## Appendix

- **Fragment 1:** season one, episode one (1x01, min. 37-39).

**D'Angelo:** Yo, Wallace.

**D'Angelo:** This the way Ronnie Mo set it up?

**D'Angelo:** Man, this is fucked up.

**D'Angelo:** Look, you can't serve your customers straight up after taking they money.

Somebody snapping pictures, they got the whole damn thing. See what I'm saying? You get paid you send they ass off around the building, yo. Then you serve.

All right? We gotta start tightening up, man. No more shortcuts.

**Bodie:** What's your count?

**Wallace:** I'm up \$270.

**Bodie:** You want to count it. I mean, I don't know how you do shit up in the towers. But down here, you want to count it.

**Wallace:** Shit.

**D'Angelo:** That's what you got to say? This look like money, motherfucker? Money be green. Money feel like money. That shit look green to you?

**Bodie:** It got a dead fucking president on it.

**Wallace:** I don't give a fuck about the president. That shit ain't money.

**Wallace:** He ain't no president.

**D'Angelo:** What you mean?

**Wallace:** Hamilton. He ain't no president.

**D'Angelo:** Nigger, is you crazy? Ain't no ugly-ass white man get his face on no legal motherfucking tender except he president. This shit happen again, you off the money. You hear me? You ain't even gonna be serving no more. Your ass be out on the bottom end of Vine street sucking on a 40, yelling "5-0". You hear me? Get the fuck out of here.

- **Fragment 2:** season one, episode three (1x03, min. 4-7).

**Daniels:** What are we facing from the riot?

**Burrel:** Three witnesses' statements all of them saying the officer's assault on the youth was unprovoked.

**Daniels:** What does the state's attorney say?

**Burrel:** He says it goes to a grand jury.

**Daniels:** And if they do indict?

**Burrel:** They won't. Criminal histories on our three witnesses one longer than the next. Drugs, weapons, assault more drugs. Just the same, Lieutenant I want you to rethink whatever tactic led you to send three plainclothes officers to do field interviews at the high-rises at 2:00 in the morning.

**Daniels:** Yes, sir.

**Burrel:** I take it your people have union counsel?

**Daniels:** Yes, sir. Sir, I would request that pending the grand jury review Officer Pryzbylewski be placed on administrative leave. I can use him in-office, but we shouldn't have him on the street until the grand jury signs off.

**Daniels:** A 14-year-old is half-blind.

**Burrel:** Bobby, what do you think?

**Burrel:** Okay, then, we'll wait on the grand jury.

**Burrel:** Lieutenant. A moment, please. What happened out there? Did you know they were in the high-rises without backup? If I tell you yes I screwed up.

**Daniels:** If I tell you no I'm putting my men in the jackpot. Do you still want me to answer? I screwed up, sir.

➤ **Fragment 3:** season one, episode two (1x02, min. 26-28).

**Bunk:** But you know the man who got killed this time? You know who that poor son of a bitch was?

**McNulty:** A citizen.

**Bunk:** Worked every goddamn day of his life. You know that? He would get up every day, go out and do maintenance work. Then on the weekends, he was driving a cab out to the airport.

**McNulty:** Two jobs. And he volunteers what little time he has left at his church.

**Bunk:** Church-going man.

**McNulty:** A bethel man, a deacon.

**Bunk:** Two jobs and three kids. Did you know that? Three kids. Young, too. Five, eight, eleven. Crying their little orphaned asses to sleep 'cause they lost their mama some years ago and now they out there on their own.

**McNulty:** He doesn't believe us.

**Bunk:** I know he don't believe it.

**McNulty:** We've been here two hours, telling you what's true in the world and you sit like nothing happened.

**D'Angelo:** Where my lawyer at?

**Bunk:** We called him. When he comes, we'll let you know.

**D'Angelo:** I got nothing to say. I mean, I'm sorry for the man, but I ain't got nothing to say.

**Bunk:** You sorry? You sorry for him? You fucking killed the man.

**D'Angelo:** No.

**Bunk:** Yes, you did. We don't think that you shot him, but if you weren't so busy fighting folks up in high-rise lobby he ain't coming out of the elevator and see it happen.

**McNulty:** He don't see anything, he doesn't testify. He doesn't testify, those kids still got a daddy to lean on.

**D'Angelo:** Why'd he testify?

**McNulty:** How would we know?

**D'Angelo:** He didn't have to testify.

**Bunk:** No, he didn't, but he did.

- **Fragment 4:** season one, episode four (1x04, min. 12-15).

**Bunk:** Right? So, from all them hand-to-hands, nobody flipped?

**Bunk:** How does this match with the rest of the Westside mopes?

**Bunk:** He's got you, Jimmy.

**Bunk:** Why don't you just dump this loser on Santangelo? He's supposed to be down here helping us, anyway.

**Bunk:** What does Daniels have to say about that? Man, Keeley really dogged this one.

**Bunk:** There's a callback number, though.

**Bunk:** All right, motherfucker, he got me, too. So, I'm gonna call Verizon, see if they got a fresh listing.