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**The Aspects of “*Be*” in selected rap
and Hip Hop lyrics: A marker of
cultural identity?**

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Title: The Aspects of “*Be*” in selected rap and Hip Hop lyrics: A marker of cultural identity?

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to investigate the use of the African American English (AAVE) verb *be* in lyrics written and performed by four African American rappers, Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, Gucci Mane and *Future*. This paper also demonstrates how the verb *be* in AAVE is used by these rappers to construct cultural identity. The method used is a qualitative analysis and partly a quantitative study of the empirical data. Every instance of the verb *be* was written down and counted in order to examine the lyrics and to explore how often and in what context it occurs in the selected material. The result of the study shows that the copula absence has the highest rate in frequency and occurrence within the selected rap lyrics, after which comes the invariant/habitual *be* followed by the so-called equative copula.

Keywords: African American Vernacular English, grammar, Hip Hop Nation Language, cultural identity, sociolinguistics

Contents

- 1. Introduction** 4
- 2. Research aims and questions 5
- 3. Background**..... 5
 - 3.1 Previous research on the variations of the verb *be* in AAVE 6
 - 3.1.1 Syntactic structures of the verb *be* in AAVE 6
 - 3.1.2 Semantic structures of verb *be* in AAVE 8
 - 3.1.3 The AAVE verb *be* in Hip Hop music 10
 - 3.3 Hip Hop Culture 12
- 4. Material and Method** 14
 - 4.1 Material 14
 - 4.2 African American Hip Hop and Rap artists 16
 - 4.3 Method 18
- 5. Results and Analysis** 19
 - 5.1 Be_1 (Copula absence)** 20
 - 5.1.1 Be_1 (Copula absence) in Trap 20
 - 5.1.2 Be_1 (Copula absence) in Conscious rap 21
 - 5.2 Be_2 (Invariant/habitual *be*)** 22
 - 5.2.1 Be_2 (Invariant/habitual *be*) in Trap 22
 - 5.2.2 Be_2 (Invariant/habitual *be*) in Conscious rap 24
 - 5.3 Be_3 (The equative copula)** 25
 - 5.3.1 Be_3 (The equative copula) in Trap 26
 - 5.3.2 Be_3 (The equative copula) in Conscious rap 27
- 6. Discussion and Conclusion** 29
- References**.....

1. Introduction

African American Vernacular English (referred to by scholars as AAVE but also as AAE) in Hip Hop music, in recent years, has become a topic discussed among linguists. In particular, sociolinguists have been interested in finding the relationship between the language used in Hip Hop music and African American English. The question remains if AAVE is the same as “The language used in rap and Hip Hop songs [...] [which is known as] Hiphop Nation Language [HHNL]” (Alim 2004: 2). Some researchers believe that AAVE is the same as HHNL. For instance, Smitherman (1997) claims “The language of hip-hop is African American language [...]” (p. 7). On the other hand, other scholars, such as Cutler (2007), believe that not only is AAVE not necessarily the same as Hip Hop Nation Language, but also that African American rappers have been changing the grammar of AAVE (p. 61). In this context, the non-standard use of the verb *be* which is a prominent feature of AAVE, is not an exception.

In AAVE, the verb *be* can be used in a number of ways which differs from Standard English. For instance, in AAVE, there are two forms of the verb *be*, the copula absence/zero copula, the deletion of the words *is* and *are*, which usually connect the subject and the verb in a sentence in Standard English, and the invariant/habitual *be* which “is used most often to convey an aspectual meaning of habituality” (Alim 2004: 173). The copula construction¹ in AAVE is considered not only to be different from Standard English, but also to be a feature that distinguishes AAVE from Hip Hop Nation Language. For instance, in the speech of African Americans, the copula absence and invariant/habitual *be* occur more often, whereas in written language the equative copula, which is a new form of copula, is “[...] used widely by a variety of artists within the last decades or so” (Alim 2004: 185).

This paper explores the use of the verb *be* in African American English in lyrics written and performed by current Hip hop and rap artists, such as *Kendrick Lamar*, *J. Cole*, *Gucci Mane*

¹ Note that the notion “copula” is often used to describe the verb *be*, used as a linking word for the subject and the predicate, in for example, an adjective or a prepositional phrase (Mufwene 1992: 145). In AAVE, the copula *be* is not only used as a linking word, but it is also used as an “auxiliary verb-*be* in the progressive (as in *John is singing*), in future constructions with [...] *gon(na)*, and in passive constructions” (Mufwene 1992: 145). In addition, the verb *be* in AAVE is also used with a habitual meaning as in the structure of invariant/habitual *be*. In this paper, due to the various functions of the verb *be* in AAVE, this feature will be further referred to as simply verb *be*, /or *Be₁*, *Be₂*, *Be₃* (see Alim 2004: 182, for more details). Also, in this study, passive sentences with the verb *be* (see Green 2002: 49, for discussion of this matter) is not discussed, since they are not found within the selected rap lyrics, but it could be a topic to suggest for further research in the field.

and *Future*, in order to look closely into the occurrences of the variations of the copula and to demonstrate in what way these constructions are used as an expression of cultural identity.

2. Research aims and questions

This study aims to analyze four randomly chosen songs from the artist Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, Gucci Mane and *Future* (see Section 4.2 for details), in order to look closely into the copula patterns and to see how often they are used, in what context and how these rappers may be using these patterns to identify themselves within the African American culture. In the current study, I compare the use of the copula structures within the two genres of Hip Hop music, so-called “Conscious rap” (Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole) and “Trap” (Gucci Mane and *Future*) (see Section 4.1 for the genre distinctions and definitions) in order to find out if the copula is a grammatical feature of AAVE prominent in rap and Hip Hop music today and whether these genre distinctions affect the way the construction is used.

The following research questions are used to examine the lyrics written by black rappers:

- How do these four rap artists incorporate the verb *be* in their music?
- How does the verb *be* in AAVE contribute to the understanding of cultural identity in Hip Hop music?
- Does the genre affect the use of the copula construction?

3. Background

In order to fully understand and contextualize the present study, it is necessary to give some background information about the variations of *be* in AAVE, the Hip hop culture, and the four artists involved in the study. To begin with, it is crucial to establish the syntactic and semantic structures of the verb *be* in AAVE in order to demonstrate and understand how these rappers apply the constructions within their lyrics to construct cultural identity. By doing so, the verb *be* in AAVE is compared with its use in Standard English. At the end of Section 3.1.2, there will be a table used to illustrate those Be_1 (copula absence), Be_2 (invariant/habitual *be*), Be_3 (the equative copula) usages in AAVE.

3.1 Previous research on the variations of the verb *be* in AAVE

3.1.1 Syntactic structures of the verb *be* in AAVE

The verb *be* (or the so-called copula) is the most studied grammatical feature of AAVE. According to Wolfram (2002) “[...] the copula is probably the most studied but least understood variable in sociolinguistics” (p. 77). This feature can also be considered a complex structure since it has different forms and distinct grammatical rules. The verb *be* in AAVE contains at least two patterns: the copula absence/zero copula and invariant/habitual *be*. The copula absence, or zero copula, often occurs in AAVE, when in Standard English the contracted forms of the lexical verbs (*is* and *are*) are used, whereas in the grammar of AAVE these features are often omitted (Yule 2014: 265). This means that speakers of AAVE have the possibility to vary their speech and create sentences such as: “*He is the leader* (full form) *He’s the leader* (contracted form) and *He Ø the leader* (absent form)” (Alim 2004: 141). What is interesting here, when looking at the syntactic structure of the verb *be* in AAVE, is that although the three sentences have different grammatical structures, they all have the same meaning. In relation to the copula absence, Lanehart (2001) gives an explanation of its structure:

The absence of present tense third person singular - s (as in “She Ø workin’ in the city”) [...] (as in “He Ø in the house watchin’ TV”), the absence of plural and second person singular copula (as in “They Ø gonna be here soon”) (p. 94).

In the case of this paper, when analyzing the use of *be* in AAVE in Hip Hop and rap lyrics, it is necessary to look at the grammatical categories in which the verb *be* can occur. By examining the syntactic structure of the verb *be*, it becomes easier to understand how this feature is used within the selected rap lyrics. As can be seen in Lanehart’s examples, the copula absence appears in present tense in the grammatical environments: before progressive, prepositional or locative verb phrases. Additionally, in the last sentence the absent form of the verb *be* follows the future marker *gon* (*gonna*). According to Alim (2004) the verb *be* “[...] can be absent before prepositional phrases and locatives (*on the rise*), progressive verbs (*he runnin scared*), adjectives (*we wide awake*), negatives and *gon* (*we not just gon lay down*) [...]” (p. 141). However, there are grammatical environments in which the copula absence is not appropriate: “it cannot be absent when it is in sentence-final position (*as they are*) [...] The copula can’t be absent in the first-person singular form. A sentence such as *I the boss* is ungrammatical [...] (Alim 2004: 141-142). This shows that there are existing rules that govern the way in which the verb *be* appear in AAVE.

When it comes to the invariant/habitual *be*, Campbell (2005) explains that this feature of AAVE “[...] means that the *to be* verb isn’t conjugated, doesn’t vary in tense or number [...]” (p.13). This means it does not correspond with the conjugated forms of Standard English, such as *am is* and *are*. In other words, in comparison to copula absence which is “[...] the form of the copula that varies [...] [invariant *be*] [...] don’t vary [...] it always occurs as one form, just “be” (Alim 2004: 173). The invariant/habitual *be*, which is also called the distributive *be*, is used in five different grammatical environments:

[...] (1) as the auxiliary progressive construction *be+ Verb+-ing* (“Cause sometimes I be sleeping and I don’t feel like doing the work”); (2) before adjectives (“Christmas? Everybody be happy”); (3) predicative nominals (“When you first come there, there be a lot of teachers”); (4) locatives and some nonlocative prepositional phrases (“Sometimes I be with Rudy”) and (5) past participles (“Well, they be mixed up all kinds of way”) (Fasold 1972: 151 cited in Alim 2004: 180)

When looking at the examples of the grammatical categories of the invariant *be*, in comparison with the categories of the copula absence, there are some differences that can be noticed. For instance, according to the rules of the copula absence, the verb *be* cannot be absent with first person singular, as previously stated by Alim (2004: 141-141), but most importantly, it is not used in past tense. In spite of their differences, there are, just like the copula absence, grammatical constraints for the invariant/habitual *be*:

[...] *be* does not have durative function like the conjugated forms *is*, *am* and *are* (so *He is working now* is grammatical, but **He be working right now* is not) [...] [the invariant/habitual *be*] “[...] cannot be used with a purely past time meaning and [...] [with] constructions of *will* and *would*” [...] “He be in in a few minutes” is interpreted as “He’ll be in in a few minutes”) (Fasold 1972: 151 cited in Alim 2004: 180).

Regarding the use of the verb *be* for future tense, there is a deletion with the modal verb *will* and “[t]his is essentially a result of the phonological rule deleting the contracted ‘ll of *will*” (Rickford 1999: 6). In the example “He be in in a few minutes” (Fasold 1972 cited in Alim 2004: 180), the verb *be* is not used to express reoccurring events. Therefore, the sentence is not only deemed ungrammatical in AAVE, but also not considered being a form of the invariant *be*. Furthermore, neither the invariant/habitual *be* nor the copula absence can be used to talk about events in the future. Due to the length of the current paper and due to the lack of ungrammatical sentences of the copula absence and invariant/habitual *be* in the selected rap lyrics, such instances are not discussed in this study. However, this could be an interesting area in future research, since AAVE is considered to be a non-standard form of

English and is “stigmatized as being “illogical” or “sloppy”” (Yule 2014: 264). Thus, it is important understanding that AAVE is not English with grammatical mistakes. AAVE, like Standard English, has grammatical rules applied to its structure.

It is noteworthy to mention here, in Standard English the verb *be* belong to two different categories, as opposed to its AAVE counterpart. According to Payne (2010), in Standard English, there is a difference between the lexical or copular *be* (the English vocabulary word), and the auxiliary *be* (the grammatical entity) (p. 1-2). However, in AAVE the copula *be* and auxiliary *be*, are considered as the same grammatical category (Green 2002: 38). In fact, in AAVE the copula *be* and auxiliary *be* “[...] have the same [syntactic] form [...]” (Green 2002: 37-38). For instance, the copula *be* and the auxiliary *be* can be deleted: “Absence of copula/auxiliary *is* and *are* for present tense states actions, as in “He Ø tall” for SE “He’s tall” or “They Ø running scared” for SE “They are running scared [...]” (Rickford 1999: 6). In addition, both the absent form of the verb *be* in the copula absence construction and the present *be* in the structure of the invariant/habitual *be*, can be used as either a progressive auxiliary or a copula. In this study the lexical or copular *be* and the auxiliary *be* are combined, which means that they are treated as the same grammatical category.

3.1.2 Semantic structures of verb *be* in AAVE

AAVE is different from Standard English not only in terms of the syntactic structures of the verb *be*, but also in terms of the semantic properties that are ascribed to it (see Table 1). Unlike Standard English, the AAVE verb *be* has many ways of indicating tense and aspect, whether the event or action is continuing, repeated, incomplete or complete in the past and present time. For instance, as for the verb in invariant/habitual *be*, speakers of AAVE “[...] can use *be* (not *is*), as in *She be working downtown*, as a way of expressing habitual action” (Yule 2014: 265). In this case, this is where the verb *be* in AAVE is used to indicate that the subject is always or usually working. In fact, the invariant/habitual *be* is used “[...] to indicate [...] actions or attributes that are continuous, intermittent, or ongoing [...]” (Smitherman 1997: 9)

The other way in which the verb *be* can be used in AAVE, is when talking about what is currently happening, namely the copula absence/zero copula, as seen in the sentence “*he busy*” (Yule 2014: 265). The absence of the verb *be* implies that he is busy right now. However, Standard English requires, when expressing habitual aspect, the adverbs such as

usually or always. Additionally, in Standard English, when talking about events that are happening in the very present moment, it is obligatory to include one form of verb *be* in combination with time expressions such as “*currently= (now)*” (Yule 2014: 265). In Standard English, the absence of the verb *be* and the use of *be* with an aspectual meaning is not possible.

It is worth mentioning here that the copula absence is different from invariant/habitual *be* in a number of ways (Alim 2004: 173). While copula absence is used in present tense with first person plural, second and third person (both singular and plural), the invariant/habitual *be* is distributive in time: “[...] (“Distributive [or tenseless] *be* is only used in iterative contexts to refer to states or events which are periodically discontinued and resumed again”) [...]” (Fasold 1972: 151 cited in Alim 2004: 180). In fact, the invariant/habitual *be* is an aspect marker, whereas copula absence only denotes present tense. In addition, Yule (2014) confirms the importance of separating the two structures from each other, as he proposes that “the presence or absence of *be* distinguishes between what is a recurring activity or state and what is currently happening” (p. 265). This means that, in AAVE, the verb *be* in copula absence is omitted optionally when talking about events that happen in present time, whereas the verb *be* in the invariant/habitual *be* has to be present in order to express situations that happen more than once.

Table 1 below illustrates the differences between the AAVE and the Standard English use of the verb *be*. The table is also used to show the syntactic and semantic structures of *Be₁*, *Be₂*, and *Be₃* in AAVE. Hence, this can be helpful when distinguishing the various types of *be* in AAVE.

The categories of AAVE “ <i>Be</i> ”	AAVE structures	Standard English	Grammatical environments
(i) <i>Be₁</i> (Copula absence)	He \emptyset happy	He is happy right now (currently)	The absence of the verb <i>be</i> is placed before the adjective

Table 1

(ii) <i>Be</i> ₂ (Invariant/habitual be)	He <i>be</i> happy	He is usually or always happy (habitual)	The verb <i>be</i> is placed before the adjective
(iii) <i>Be</i> ₃ The equative copula	He <i>be</i> the happy man	He is the happy man (attributive)	The verb <i>be</i> is placed before the noun in a noun phrase

Regarding the semantic structure of the verb *be* in AAVE, Wolfram (2004) claims the invariant/habitual *be* can be used “beyond its reference to habituality [...] [the verb] *be* is commonly used in hip-hop equative sentences such as *I be the truth* [...]” (p. 119). Scholars such as Alim (2004) and (Cutler 2007) have also observed that there are different forms of the so-called copula in AAVE (p. 182). This way of using the verb *be* (as shown in Wolfram’s example), is what Alim (2004) calls “the equative copula” or “*Be*₃” (p. 182). The structure and function of *Be*₃ will be explained further in Section 3.1.3.

3.1.3 The AAVE verb *be* in Hip Hop music

The copula constructions in AAVE are not only to be found in the speech of many African Americans, but also in written language, within rap and Hip Hop lyrics. Cutler (2007) points out the invariant/habitual *be* and copula absence have been identified within the lyrics from “Busta Rhyme’s song ‘What it is’ off the album *Genesis* (cited in Alim 2004a:398) [...] This beat *be* the beat to rock for the street” (p. 521), and “[...] Get em High’ on the album *College Dropout* by Kanye West [...] And I won’t, give you that money that you ___ askin fo” (Cutler 2007: 522).

Besides this, previous research on the verb *be* in AAVE, has focused on the very nature of the structure of the invariant/habitual *be*, since it is not only different from the verb *be* in Standard English, but also has other characteristics which distinguishes it from the other types of *be* in AAVE. For instance, when scholars looked more closely at the structure of the AAVE verb *be* in Hip Hop lyrics written by black rappers, they discovered the equative copula or *Be*₃, which is claimed to be an extended feature of invariant *be* and is supposedly a prominent structure of Hip Hop Nation Language. Alim (2004) suggests “This form of invariant *be* differs from the descriptions of *be*₂ [invariant *be*] that we find in the literature in

that there is no presupposition of habituality or distribution in time for the subject or the predicate” (p. 176). In fact, the equative copula is one feature which is claimed to distinguish AAVE from Hip Hop Language. The equative copula is a linguistic phenomenon where the verb *be* is used to talk about “[...] permanent (or at least long term) attributes [...]” (Alim 2004: 188). Furthermore, the equative copula is used when the predicative is expressed by a noun in a sentence. Alim (2004) states “This form of invariant *be* differs from the descriptions of *be*₂ [invariant *be*] that we find in the literature in that there is no presupposition of habituality or distribution in time for the subject or the predicate” (p. 176). In the sentence, “[...] We BE the ones that first set it off down here [...] *be*₃ occurs in instantaneous or definite time” (Alim 2004: 183). In fact, the equative copula is a feature which is claimed to distinguish AAVE from Hip Hop Language. For example, Cutler (2007) explains the rules:

In spite of the high degree of overlap between HHL and AAE, however, the correspondence is not complete [...] for example, ‘Hip Hop lyrics provide examples of habitual *be* before noun phrases (e.g., “Dr. Dre be the name”) – an environment in which most conversation-based AAVE studies did not note it’ [...] (p. 521).

This not only shows that there is a wider copula variation in AAVE, but also it implies that the copula is used differently in spoken and written language: “the patterns of the features in Hip Hop lyrics differ from the [copula] patterns found in natural occurring speech [...]” (Alim 2006: 115). The equative copula has been found within Hip Hop lyrics from the late 90s and early 2000s: “We BE the ultimate lick. [Ice Cube, 1999] [...] [and] [...] Who BE the father of this? [Busta Rhymes, 2001]” (Alim 2004: 185). In addition, the equative copula is used in the grammatical environment “[...] Noun phrase *be* Noun phrase [...] as seen in the lyrics of the songs: “Dr. Dre be the name”.—Compton’s Dr. Dre” [...] “Brooklyn be the place where I served them thangs”.—New York’s Jay Z [...]” (Alim 2006: 76-77).

It can clearly be seen in previous research, regarding the use the AAVE verb *be* in Hip Hop music, that the equative copula was used by various rap artists during the period of time between the 1990s and the 2000s. In general terms, this means that the new form of copula is frequently used within the lyrics in Gangsta rap; it is a genre of Hip Hop music which “paints vivid scenarios of the violent, often misogynistic culture of the streets” (Campbell 2005: 61). However, Alim (2004) believes that there are many reasons why the copula in AAVE is interesting and important to study:

[...] it is one the features that gives [AAVE] its distinctiveness, setting it apart from other varieties of American English [...] the copula has been used to support the

notion that [it] is diverging (growing further away) from other varieties of American English [...] the copula plays a crucial role in heated debates about the historical reconstruction of [AAVE], as it is perhaps the best indicator of [AAVE's] Creole-like origins [...] recent research on the [...] copula in Hip Hop Nation language (Alim 2002) suggests that speakers can, in fact consciously vary their usage of copula absence based on issues of identity and ideology (p. 143).

There is no doubt that the verb *be* in AAVE is of great significance to scholars. One reason is that it is considered to have a complex structure, since it is often discussed in relation to the origin of AAVE, and is a structure commonly used by rappers in order to construct a “street-conscious” identity” (Alim 2004: 143). Another significant aspect of the AAVE copula, as the topic of interest among many linguists, is the fact that “the artists and participants in the Hip hop Nation [...] are the main preservers and maintainers of [AAVE]” (Alim 2004: 143). The verb *be* in AAVE has been studied in contexts, other than music and lyrics. For example, Green (2002) discusses the use of verb *be* and other features of AAVE in literature and in the media and talks about how AAVE is represented in books and films. Other scholars, such as Lanehart (2001) have compared speakers of African American English in different regions and cities throughout the U.S.

3.3 Hip Hop Culture

When talking about Hip Hop, it is important to understand that Hip hop is more than just a genre of music. It is a lifestyle for many African Americans living in the urban areas in the US. Speer (2014) points out that “Hip Hop is not just music: it is comprised of fashion, arts, icons, and it is a unique culture” (p. 713). Thus, Hip Hop is culture itself, with members that have their own verbal and non-verbal language. Alim (2006) claims that there is such thing as “Hip Hop Culture [...] [which consists of] [...] four major elements: MC'ing (rappin), DJ'ing (spinnin), breakdancing (street dancing), and graffiti art (writing)” (p. 4). However, verbal language plays the most central role in Hip Hop Culture, since rappers not only use language to express their view of the world, but also their experiences of it. Therefore, Alim (2006) clarifies, “[...] language is perhaps the most useful means with which to read the various cultural activities of the HHN [Hip Hop Nation]” (p. 4). Hence, it is the language that represents life of the streets: “Hip Hop is cultural practice embedded in the lived experience of Hip Hop-conscious beings existing in a home, street, hood, city, country, continent [...]” (Alim 2006: 12).

When studying the language of Hip Hop lyrics, one becomes familiar with the African American culture, since AAVE “[...] stems “from a somewhat disseminated rejection of the

lifestyles, social patterns and thinking in general of the Euro-American sensibility [...]” (Alim 2006: 74). Furthermore, Baugh (1983) believes black “[l]inguistic behavior is [a] vivid indicator of black survival [...]” (p. 7).

Despite the importance of AAVE in establishing African American identity, Hip Hop has been criticized for the lack of AAVE features, especially in regard to grammar. Nowadays, many rappers not only use AAVE inconsistently, but they have also changed their lyrics in a style in order to better correspond with Standard English:

In the new millennium, critics from within the hip-hop community have argued that many contemporary artists have abandoned anti-racism messages and focused instead on money and sexual exploits [...] They go on to say the corporate control and the desire to reach a “wider and Whiter” audience has led rap away from overtly antiracism sentiments (Sullivan 2003: 608).

In fact, Sullivan (2003) believes that the lack of features of AAVE in rap lyrics, not only has to do with rappers frequent use of Standard English, but also due to the fact that current rappers have changed their themes in their lyrics, in order to appeal to and build a bigger fanbase. Therefore, Hip Hop has been questioned for its authenticity by many rappers and other members of the Hip Hop community. For instance, the rap artist Eminem who released the album *Kamikaze* in 2018, in which he blatantly attacks black and white rap artists for not being representative artists in the Hip Hop community, due to change in music style and lyrics (HipHopDX 2018: online).

Today Hip Hop music is considered by many as being “mainstream” or “commercial” (Belle 2014: 290). Sullivan (2003) explains that there is a difference between mainstream rap and its earlier incarnations, or to say, the “underground hip hop” (p. 290):

Mainstream hip-hop refers to songs that cross over to White and international audiences, receiving considerable radio play. Artists that are considered mainstream, are signed to major recording labels and often rap about issues that are popular: drugs, sex, crime and violence (Sullivan 2003:290) [whereas in] Underground hip-hop [...] the music is *real* while focusing on issues such as inequality, racism, the problems with mainstream hip-hop, and urban story telling (Sullivan 2003: 292).

Hence, this is what distinguishes current rap and Hip Hop from its earlier form and style. In fact, the mainstream artists choose to rap about other things than racial and social issues and the street life which are claimed to be themes commonly found in Hip Hop genres such as

Gangsta rap (see Section 4.1 for more details about the genres). Despite this, Smitherman (1997) believes “Even when the message in music does not overtly speak to racial resistance, the use of the Black speech community’s syntax covertly reinforces Black America’s 400-year rejection of Euro-American cultural, racial and linguistic—domination” (p. 11).

When analyzing the lyrics of four current rap artists, from different genres of Hip Hop music, the present study aims to explore the use of the verb *be* in AAVE, and how current rappers apply the features to identify themselves with the African American culture.

4. Material and Method

4.1 Material

The materials for this study are lyrics written by four black male rap artists, Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole, Gucci Mane and *Future*.

When selecting the rappers for the study, there were certain aspects that were needed to be considered. For instance, the different genres of Hip Hop, fame, the numbers of albums released, age, and race. Before deciding what artists to include in this study, it was necessary to browse through various rappers on Spotify. I ended up choosing to examine the AAVE verb *be* within the lyrics of two different genres of Hip Hop music, such as, Conscious rap (Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole) and Trap music (Gucci Mane and *Future*). These artists were chosen due to their contrast in music style and lyrics. For example, Conscious rap lyrics often contain political messages, and poetic language, whereas in Trap music, rappers often rap explicitly about one’s social status, power, money and drugs. Additionally, Trap music is a genre of Hip Hop which is considered to be mainstream in music style. According to Forman (2010) Conscious rap is defined as the type of “rap that is socially aware and consciously connected to historic patterns of political protest and aligned with progressive forces of social critique [...]” (online). Gangsta rap is identified “as the most controversial type of rap music, having received global attention for “its vivid sexist, misogynistic, and homophobic lyrics, as well as its violent depiction of urban ghetto life in America” (Kubrin 2005: 360).

When it comes to the artists of the genre Conscious rap (Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole), New York Times (2017) explains:

Mr. Lamar is, [...] a hip-hop savior and also a representative of values that have ceded their centrality in the genre [Conscious rap]. He is also, along with J. Cole [...] part of the center [...] that recalls the hip-hop of the late 1980s into the mid-1990s, in terms of aesthetics, politics and technique (online).

In fact, due to the social and political content in the lyrics, many people believe Conscious rap is regarded as similar to Gangsta rap. Trap music, as opposed to Conscious rap:

began to reach on the mainstream Billboard music charts 2009, with artists such as Young Yeezy, Gucci Mane, and Future [...] [whose] music is [...] often perceived as devoid of deeper meaning, promoting immoral behavior, talking mostly about money, drugs, women, criminal and other stories of “real” life (Jernej 2018: 25).

In spite of the differences in lyrics in terms of content, these four rappers involved in the examination, at least share the social background, that is to say they all are African Americans who come from the urban streets of America: “Their social backgrounds, education, regional history [...] span the broadest spectrum” (Baugh 1983: 1). Therefore, it is much likely to find the AAVE verb *be* within the lyrics by the artist in both genres.

The songs included in this current study have been chosen in part randomly. However, when selecting the songs, it was important to pay attention to the year when the songs and albums were released and the length of the song, since this can affect the frequency and occurrence of the grammatical feature in a song. Moreover, it was crucial to look closely into the name of the songs and analyze the themes of the songs, in order to analyze the lyrics in terms of cultural identity.

Other factors such as gender, can also determine the way one uses language. The current paper only focuses on male rappers at the age of early and late 30s, this was done in order to limit the number of variables involved in the light of limited scope of the present study. Another reason for focusing on male rappers is that Hip Hop started out with male rappers in urban areas. In addition, Hip Hop is generally considered to be a male-dominated industry.

It is important to emphasize that this is a pilot study, which aims to compare eight songs each by rappers from two different Hip Hop music genres. The fact that this is a very small study, means that the results cannot be generalized at this point. However, future research may make this possible. AAVE is not only used by black people and rappers, but also in other social

groups, in order to identify within the Hip Hop and the African American culture. For future research in this area scholars such as Cutler (2007), suggests exploring the use of AAVE and Hip Hop in the context of globalization. For instance, one could study some AAVE features in Korean Hip Hop music *Blingish* where features of AAVE are used: “[...] by Korean hip hop artists as an informal language to express subcultural identity and style” (Lee 2011:2). Indeed, African American English is an important identity marker, for many of its speakers, including African Americans and other social groups, who are a part of the Hip Hop Nation. Although this subject is closely related to the present study, it would, due to the limitation and length of this paper, require a separate study on its own.

4.2 African American Hip Hop and Rap artists

In order to contextualize the study, it was somehow necessary to get some more information about the rappers involved in my investigation, as for example, where they come from and age, since these are all factors which can affect the choice of language. The additional information about the rappers, was retrieved from online newspapers, such as CNN Entertainment (2015) “*9 things about Kendrick Lamar*”, Forbes (2018) “*J. Cole Debuts His Surprise Album 'KOD' At No. 1 With The Largest Opening Week Of 2018*”, along with the article by Childs (2014), “*Let's Talk About Race*”: *Exploring Racial Stereotypes Using Popular Culture in Social Studies Classrooms*.

Kendrick Lamar Duckworth (born 1987) is an African American rapper from Compton, California. He is regarded as a rap artist, who has “[...] much more to talk about than the typical drugs, women and money message that pervades most [new] rap songs” (Carlsbad 2015: 1). His music is often described as being “political, focusing on race and social issues” (CNN Entertainment 2015: online). Lamar has also won Grammy awards for his albums *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City* in 2012, *To Pimp a Butterfly* in 2015, and *DAMN* in 2017.

J. Cole, (birth name Jermaine Lamarr) was born in 1985 in Frankfurt, Germany. He was raised in Fayetteville North Carolina, USA by his father, who is African American, and his mother from Germany. Cole was first discovered by Jay-Z, who signed him into his record label Roc Nation. J. Cole is “[k]nown for his emotional and passionate lyrics and delivery [...]” (Flavouring Team 2011: online). Many of J. Cole’s songs are based on his personal experiences growing up in the streets of Fayetteville. J. Cole released his best-selling records *Cole World: Sideline Story* in 2011, *Born Sinner* from 2013 and his fourth mixtape *The Blow*

Up in 2014. In 2018 J. Cole released his fifth and latest album *KOD*, which became the number one album on the Billboard 200 (Forbes 2018: online).

Gucci Mane, Radric Delantic Davis, is a black rap artist born in 1980, in Atlanta. His music belongs to the Hip Hop genre, trap, along with other rap artists such as Jeezy, T.I and *Future*. Gucci Mane got his breakthrough as an artist in the year of 2005, with his studio album *Trap House*. Mane has collaborated with a wide range of famous artists such as Selena Gomez, Chris Brown and Lil Wayne. In December 2018, Gucci Mane launched his latest and thirteenth album *Evil Genius*. According to Childs (2014), Gucci Mane is an “[...] influential rap artist among African American youth [...]” (p. 295), and many of his songs “[...] perpetuate [...] the stereotype of African Americans being preoccupied with materialism, flashy jewelry, sexual promiscuity, carrying guns [...]” (Childs 2014: 295).

Future is a rapper, whose real name is Nayvadius DeMun Wilburn, and he was born in 1983 Atlanta, Georgia. In 2012, *Future* debuted his first album *Pluto*. HipHopDx (2017), explains *Future* has “[...] dropped multiple projects each year since at least 2010, scored four #1 albums with *Honest*, *Dirty Sprite 2*, his collab with Drake *What A Time To Be Alive*, last week’s self-titled release, *FUTURE* (this week’s *HNDRXX* will likely go #1 as well)” (online). Despite the fact that *Future* is a successful rapper, with three number-one albums, his music has been criticized, because of his distinct song style. HipHopDX (2017) further explains: “Hip Hop purists have been critical of the Atlanta rapper’s often inaudible lyrics and autotune and arguably simplistic approach [...] many have questioned whether modern mumble rap is awful or awesome” (online).

The lyrics examined in the present study are from the following:

Kendrick Lamar’s songs: *The Blacker the Berry* (from the album *To Pimp a Butterfly* in 2015), *Duckworth* (from the album *DAMN* in 2017) *DNA* (from the album *DAMN* in 2017), *Humble* (from the album *DAMN* in 2017).

J. Cole’s: *No Role Modelz* (from the album *2014 Forest Hills Drive* in 2014), *G.O.M.D* (from the album *2014 Forest Hills Drive* in 2014), *Immortal* (from the album *4 Your Eyes Only* in 2016), *1985- Intro to “The Fall Off”* (from the album *KOD* in 2018).

Gucci Mane: *Money Do* (from the album *Meal Ticket* in 2016), *Tell Dem Boyz* (from album *Meal Ticket* 2016), *Members only* (from the album *Mr. Davis* in 2017), *By myself* (from the album *Evil Genius* in 2018).

Future: I Be U (from the album *Honest* in 2014), *Good Dope* (from the album *Future* in 2017), *Ain't no Time* (from the album *Evol* 2016), *When I was broke* (from the album *Future* in 2017).

4.3 Method

The lyrics was obtained from the website www.azlyrics.com, which is an online resource for lyrics from all types of genres from different periods of time. By examining the lyrics, the songs were listened to repeatedly, in order to hear the flow of the song, the beat and lyrical rhythm, which not only can be different in the two genres of Hip Hop music but also, affect or force the way in which these rappers uses the copula constructions in AAVE within their lyrics. The collected songs were copied and pasted into text documents, in order to be examined.

The method for this study is quantitative, as each instance of the AAVE verb *be*, (whether absent or present) was written down and counted. When scrutinizing the material, I compared the frequencies and occurrences between two different genres of Hip Hop, to not only get a better understanding of the use of the verb *be* of AAVE, but also to see if the genres affect the way the copula was used. In addition, the method is partly qualitative, since this paper aimed to identify the features within the lyrics by using the textual data to i.e., make distinctions between the various forms of the AAVE verb *be*, and by looking into what context they were used in, demonstrate how these features were used as a marker of cultural identity in rap and Hip Hop music.

The lyrics and themes of the songs were not only interpreted through carefully listening to the songs and through close reading of the lyrics, but also based on previous research about the copula constructions in AAVE, the Hip Hop culture, and the given information about the rappers involved in this study. In addition, in the current paper a comparison between the two genres of Hip Hop was made when there were possible discrepancies of the use of the verb *be*.

In order to analyze the lyrics in terms of cultural identity, the songs are classified according to common themes that deals with racial and social inequalities, such as, violence, crime and poverty. Thus, these themes are addressed during the analysis process, through the pieces of lyrics that reflect them.

5. Results and Analysis

The two tables below show that all the copula constructions have been identified within the selected Hip Hop lyrics, though in varying degrees (see in Table 2 and Table 3). While Table 2 presents the absolute statistics of the compared frequencies and the occurrences of the verb *be* in AAVE between the two different genres of Hip Hop, Table 3 shows how many times the verb *be* is used by each of the four artists.

Table 2

The distribution of the use of the AAVE verb *be* in the two genres of Hip Hop (Conscious rap and Trap).

The categories of AAVE “ <i>Be</i> ”	Conscious rap	Trap	Numbers of scores
(i) <i>Be</i> ₁ (Copula absence)	84	79	163
(ii) <i>Be</i> ₂ (Invariant/habitual <i>be</i>)	2	11	13
(iii) <i>Be</i> ₃ (The equative copula)	3	5	8
Total	89	95	184

Table 3

The presentation of the number of times the AAVE verb *be* is used by each of the four rap artists (Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, Gucci Mane, and *Future*)

The categories of AAVE “ <i>Be</i> ”	Conscious rap (Artists)	Trap (Artists)	Numbers of scores
--------------------------------------	----------------------------	-------------------	-------------------

	Kendrick Lamar	J.Cole	Gucci Mane	Future	
(ii)Be₁ (Copula absence)	35	49	20	59	163
(ii) Be₂ Invariant/habitual be	2	0	3	8	13
(iii) Be₃ (The equative copula)	2	1	2	3	8
Total	39	50	25	70	184

5.1 *Be₁* (Copula absence)

Be₁ (i), copula absence, is the feature which is most frequently used by all four rappers within the Hip Hop lyrics of the two different genres of Hip Hop music, Conscious rap and Trap. It occurred 163 out of 184 possible hits (see Table 1). The data also shows that *Be₁* (i) is used the most within the lyrics of the Hip Hop genre Conscious rap, where it appears 84 times, as opposed to its use in Trap music, where this structure occurs 79 times. However, in the genre Trap, overall, the verb *be* was utilized 95 times, in contrast to Conscious rap, where it was found 89 times.

Judging from the statistics of Table 3, *Be₁* (i) is employed the more often in the lyrics written by the rap artist *Future* since it appears 59 times in total. Not to mention, he was also the rapper who applied all constructions the most, since he utilizes it 70 times. In J. Cole's songs *Be₁* appears 49 times, 35 times within the lyrics by Kendrick Lamar. Last but not least, Gucci Mane incorporates the copula absence least, 20 times.

5.1.1 *Be₁* (Copula absence) in Trap

In *Future's* song *Good Dope*, *Be₁* occurs the most times, 23 times. In this song, the rapper brags about being wealthy, which gives him a lot of benefits such as making the best drugs, getting any woman he wants, and taking her to go shopping at Tiffany's, which is a famous American luxury jewelry and accessory store, as seen in the example:

1. a). Tiffany's, Tiffany's, we _goin' shoppin' at Tiffany's. (before progressive verb phrase)
(from *Good Dope*)

The rapper uses *Be_I*, as the progressive auxiliary verb, in the chorus of the song, which appears 3 times throughout the song. In this particular sentence, *Be_I* is used in the grammatical category before progressive verb phrase (be+V-ing), first person plural (we) and deletion with *are*, in order to refer to himself and the woman, with whom he probably goes shopping at Tiffany's.

When looking closely at the structure of the sentence, the rapper omits the verb *be* which in this case is used as an auxiliary verb, it helps and follows the main verb *go* and it also forms the progressive aspect. Here, it is important to mention that there is a difference between a progressive verb phrase in Standard English, and the one in AAVE. In Standard English the progressive verb phrase is usually concerned with the tense of a verb, it is used to refer to actions that are either in the present, past or future time. On the other hand, in a progressive verb phrase, the AAVE verb *be* can be used to mark aspect, it denotes the duration of an event or how the action is done. As mentioned earlier, in Standard English, the verb *be* is either used as a grammatical entity or as a copular linking verb (Payne 2010: 1-2). In this case, the verb *be* in Standard English has grammatical meaning, and this sentence can either mean “We are going shopping right now” (present tense), “We will be going shopping” (future tense), “We went shopping” (past tense). According to scholars such as Alim (2006), Smitherman (1997) and Cutler (2007), the copula absence in AAVE always occurs in present time. In fact, this piece of lyrics does not carry multiple interpretations. *Be_I* is not only used in present time, but also it depicts completed actions. Therefore, in the meaning of this sentence in this context “We are going shopping at Tiffany's right now”, he is describing what he and the woman are doing at the moment of the utterance.

5.1.2 *Be_I* (Copula absence) in Conscious rap

As previously stated, *Be_I* occurs most frequently in Conscious rap lyrics. J. Cole applies this feature 49 times, and he is the rapper who utilizes it the most in this particular genre. Hence, he employs it 20 times in the song *1985- Intro to “The Fall Off”*. In this case, the structure appears in the verse of the song, as seen in the example:

2. a). Jokes on you motherfucker, we_ alive. (before adjective phrase)
(from *1985- Intro to “The Fall Off”*)

In this song, the rapper uses the copula absence, in the grammatical environment before an adjective phrase, first person plural, to talk about rap music throughout the years, and the experiences of being a black rap artist in the Hip Hop industry. Campbell (2005) explains that this is where “[...] the absence of the verb to *be* after, in this case, the subject pronoun *we*” (p. 13).

In this particular sentence, Cole applies copula absence to describe a physical condition of his and other rappers of his generation who are still a part of the Hip Hop industry and despite their past struggles they manage to survive and have become successful. The adjective (alive) that follows the copula deletion with *are*, denotes a state or condition that is permanent. Moreover, alive is the sentence predicative, or to say subject complement, since the adjective that follows the absent verb form *be*, is describing and identifying the subject.

The rapper uses the copula absence to put emphasis on the fact that he and other rappers are alive, and at the same time he expresses a strong emotion of excitement. Green (2002), believes that the copula absence in the sentence indicates an “Emphatic affirmation [...] [which means that] [t]he overt auxiliary/copula form [...] occurs in emphatic contexts in which it is stressed (IS)” (p. 38). In other words, this means that although the form of the verb *be* is not present in a sentence, it carries (emphatic) stress.

5.2 *Be*₂ (Invariant/habitual *be*)

*Be*₂ (ii), appears very rarely within the lyrics of the rappers selected in this investigation (13 out of 184 hits). Three out of four rappers examined in this study have used this feature. In fact, in the lyrics written and performed by J. Cole, this copula pattern is not present at all.

This feature was not only used the most within the lyrics of Trap, but also *Future* utilizes this verb *be* construction the most in his lyrics, as he uses it 8 times. For instance, he applies it 2 times in the verse of his song *Ain't No Time* and 6 times in the chorus of the song *Good Dope*. Gucci Mane employs this structure 3 times in the verse of his songs: 1 time in the song *Members only* and 2 times in *Money Do*. *Be*₂ (ii) is used the most in Trap music, it shows up 11 times, whereas this feature shows up 2 times in Conscious rap lyrics. In fact, only Kendrick Lamar, from the genre Conscious rap, uses *Be*₂ (ii) 2 times in his song *Humble*.

5.2.1 *Be*₂ (Invariant/habitual *be*) in Trap

In AAVE, *Be*₂ is used to indicate habitual and repetitive actions. In addition, there are two ways in which this feature can be used: either as a copular linking verb or a progressive auxiliary, as seen in the following examples below:

3.
 - a). My niggas in the street *be* shootin'. (before progressive verb phrase)
 - b). My niggas in jail *be* stabbin'. (before progressive verb phrase)
 (from *Good Dope*)

Future uses *Be*₂ 6 times, in the chorus of the song. In this song, he raps about violence and crimes, as seen in the two examples above. In (3a) and (3b), the rapper applies *Be*₂ before a progressive verb phrase together with a possessive pronoun and the determiner (my), which precedes the noun (niggas²), to refer to the black people in his neighborhood who are usually or often out shooting in streets, and in jail stabbing other people or perhaps inmates. In this piece of lyrics, the invariant *be* is used as a progressive auxiliary, where the verb *be* helps the main verb (shoot), to denote an ongoing action in the present moment of speaking. Additionally, in this case, the copula construction “is that of indicating habitual or iterative aspect” (Baugh 1983: 71). To put it in another way, *Future* utilizes the copula construction, to talk about repetitive actions of the black people who come from the urban streets around neighborhoods in Atlanta where he grew up.

4.
 - a). That bullshit, I *be* on. (before an adverb phrase)
 - b). Gucci *be* fresh like the first day of school. (before an adjective phrase)
 (from *Money Do*)

In his song *Money Do*, Gucci Mane raps about his successful and lavish lifestyle, and all the money he has. In (4a), invariant/habitual *be* is used with first person singular before adverb phrase to talk about situations that are reoccurring in his life. Green (2002) claims when using *Be*₂ before an adverb phrase, is to “indicate being in a place on particular occasion [...] [and that] it is *usually* the case [...]” (p. 49). In fact, when the rapper uses *Be*₂ it creates a sense for the audience that he is, indeed, that rich and makes much money to be able to indulge himself in luxury on an everyday basis. More specifically, in (4a) the rapper applies *Be*₂ to describe that he is always a part of a rich lifestyle, in which he considers to be bullshit. In this context, the rapper means he views his rich and fabulous lifestyle to be nothing special or perhaps unusual to him. Lanehart (2001) believes, in this context, that “the use of invariant *be* [is] for habitual action” (p. 94). In Standard English, this sentence can be equal to “That bullshit I always on”. The verb *be* in the invariant/habitual *be*, indicates habituality, and it does not correspond with Standard English forms *am*, *is* and *are*. In this piece of lyric, the adverb (on), modifies another adverb (always), to describe how often a certain action happens.

² In AAVE the word “niggas” is commonly used in AAVE to refer to someone who is “Your best friend, you homey [...] Niggaz are those Bloods (Blacks) who are down for Blackness and identity with the trials as well as the triumphs of the Black experience [...]” (Smitherman 1997: 19).

Using the invariant/habitual *be* in this sentence, one can interpret that his intention is to brag about his rich lifestyle and his wealth. Green (2002) explains “One prominent feature in rap is bragging and boasting about strength, possessions and skills in using words” (p. 156). In other words, Gucci Mane uses the invariant/habitual *be* in a statement in which he expresses pride in himself and to boast about his achievements. In fact, the verb *be* is indicating that the subject is doing an action repeatedly, that of living a bullshit lifestyle.

In (4b) Gucci Mane utilizes *Be*₂ before an adjective phrase and with the pronoun (Gucci), where “The use of “be” means that the quality of “looking good” is not limited to the present moment [...]” (Smitherman 1997: 8). This means, Gucci Mane is always fresh (or good looking). Green (2002) states, “[...] that *be* is used to indicate a habitual condition as in ‘Johnny *be* looking good’, meaning that Johnny is a good person [...]” (p. 35). In this sentence, the rapper uses the invariant *be* as the copular linking verb *be* to state that he is not only looking good at the moment of speaking, but he always or regularly looks fresh because he is rich and lives a fabulous lifestyle.

5.2.2 *Be*₂ (Invariant/habitual *be*) in Conscious rap

*Be*₂ appears to a lesser extent in Conscious rap lyrics. For instance, there are no instances of this feature within the lyrics by J. Cole and in Kendrick Lamar’s song *Humble*, it was found only 2 times in the verse, as seen in the example:

5. a). Most of ya’ll *be* faking, aye. (before progressive verb phrase)
(from *Humble*)

In his song *Humble*, Lamar expresses his mixed feelings about being a successful rap artist. For instance, Lamar wants to communicate that too much pride can have a negative indication. In other words, he believes rappers who take too much pride in themselves show little or no respect for the work of others.

In (5a) the rapper applies *Be*₂ in second person plural to make a statement in which he says that most people in the Hip Hop industry are usually or often “faking” it. In fact, Lamar believes many rappers are not authentic or real rappers. This is not only due to the fact that these black artists are straightening their natural (afro) hair, make use of the editing software Photoshop to remove certain features of their bodies, but it also has to do with the way they deal with money and fame in general. In this statement, the rapper uses the copula *be* before a progressive verb phrase, third person plural and “he mean[s] that that’s what they REGULAR or USUALLY do” (Alim 2004: 175). When Lamar utilizes the invariant/habitual *be*, he says that these rappers are always or often acting fake; they

pretend to be someone they are not. Baugh (1983) further claims, this structure is not only used to signal habitual or repetitive actions or events, but also the verb to “[...] *be* occurs most frequently in habitual contexts where events are nonpast or incomplete [...]” (Baugh 1983: 71). This could be a possible interpretation in (3a). In fact, the verb *be* in this context, indicates that the rapper refers to events or actions that occur over and over again. Not to mention, the invariant/habitual *be* is, in this case, used as a progressive auxiliary. This means that the auxiliary verb *be*, which helps the following main verb (faking), indicates that the action is still in process or progress. Additionally, this is shown when the second verb in the sentence is formed with the present participle (-ing). This is also the case in the next example down below:

6. a). I might *be* buggin´. (before progressive verb phrase)
(from *Duckworth*)

In his song *Duckworth*, the rapper talks about a man called Anthony, who was about to rob and kill Lamar’s father, while working at the fast food restaurant KFC. However, twenty years later Anthony ended up being Kendrick Lamar’s manager. In the first verse of the song, Lamar expresses that he finds the whole situation absurd, as seen in the line (6a). The rapper employs Be_2 before a progressive verb phrase, in first person singular, together with the modal auxiliary verb (might) which is used in English to express a possibility in a conditional sentence. In fact, in this context, Lamar communicates that there is always a possibility that he is buggin´ (goes crazy) when he is about to tell the story of what a coincidence it is that he has become famous because of this man Anthony. The meaning of this particular sentence is similar to the following example by Cutler (2007): “[...] ‘Keysha *be* trippin’” (or overreacting) [the verb *be*] indicates that Keysha is *usually* or *always* trippin’ – not that she is just trippin’ *right now*” (p. 521). The line in (6a) can be interpreted that whenever or every time he tells the story about how he and his manager Anthony met, the rapper might always buggin´. Although Lamar feels that this situation is somehow funny to him, when using the copula *be*, he expresses strong emotions and feelings of excitement when telling the story to his audience.

5.3 Be_3 (The equative copula)

Be_3 (iii) or the equative copula, turns out to be the structure least used in the selected rap lyrics, since it is utilized by these rappers only 8 times in total. Like copula absence, this feature is used by all four rappers investigated in this paper. The equative copula occurred 5 times in Trap lyrics and only 3 times in Conscious rap music. For instance, Kendrick Lamar applies the equative copula 2 times in the verses of his two songs, *The Blacker the Berry*, J. Cole employs it only 1 time in the verse of his song *No Role Modelz*. This feature appears 2

times within the lyrics in Gucci Mane's *Money Do*. This construction is utilized the most within the song *Ain't No Time* by *Future*, as it can be found 3 times in the chorus of the song.

The equative copula in Hip Hop lyrics occurs in a noun phrase, before noun phrases, as clearly illustrated by Alim (2004): “(Noun Phrase—> *be* —> Noun phrase)” (p. 182), as seen in the examples found in the rap lyrics written by Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, Gucci Mane and *Future*:

5.3.1 *Be*₃ (The equative copula) in Trap

7.
 - a). Man this paper *be* the reason why we talk
 - b). Let this paper *be* the reason why we talk
(from *Ain't No Time*)

In the lyrics of the song *Ain't No Time*, *Future* talks about how he struggled to be recognized for his rap music. Once he became famous, people hated him and were jealous of him for being rich and famous. In (7a) and (7b), one can interpret that he is boastful because he talks about his money. In (7a) *Future* uses the noun (man) in the first part of the sentence, in which he uses *Be*₃ to state directly that the paper (money) is the reason why he talks. In other words, the verb *be* in this sentence, is used in present tense, together with third person singular noun (it) or in this case the paper, to inform or insist that money is the reason why he talks. This is a clear example of the equative copula because the verb *be* in the sentence is followed by a noun (Alim 2004: 182).

8.
 - a). And all my kicks, they *be* the flyest, call me Bruce Lee
 - b). I'm super chillin, but my money *be* the rudest.
(from *Money Do*)

In the song *Money Do*, Gucci Mane talks about the fact that he is extremely rich. In (8a) the rapper states that all of the kicks (shoes) that he owns are the flyest. According to Lanehart (2001) the word or “[...] the verb *fly* [...] functions as an adjective in Hip Hop that embellishes the noun as in: “Those boots are sure fly [...]” (p. 199).

The examples in (8), are not typical examples of the equative copula. This is due to the fact that, in (8a) the word (flyest) that follows the verb *be* is an adjective (in the superlative), which normally is placed before a noun, and it can either function as a modifier/attribute to a noun, subject or as an object compliment. This is not the only reason why it is not a very clear example of *Be*₃. This sentence contains nominalized adjectives, which are adjectives that functions as nouns. In this case, Gucci Mane, when using *Be*₃ in this way, states that his shoes are being of a certain kind.

In (8b), Mane conveys the message, to let the money speak for itself. This becomes evident when he sings at the very beginning of the verse in the song, “*I don’t talk, my money do the talkin’ [...]*”. In this particular verse, the rapper describes his money to be the rudest, which in this case implies that he has a lot of money that makes him powerful. In other words, Gucci Mane emphasizes the power of money, and the fact that he is rich enables him to do or buy everything that he wants. In this piece of lyric, the verb *be*, just like the previous example in (8a), follows an adjective in the superlative.

In the examples in (8a-b), the rapper uses the superlative adjectives (flyest and rudest), to denote that his shoes (that are extremely desirable and/or of high quality) and his money (which is of great value), are “one-of-a-kind” things, or to say nouns of a particular types. Additionally, both these sentences have an implicit meaning. For instance, in the example (8a) the meaning could be that his money *be* the rudest one or *be* the rudest money, and in (8b) that his shoes *be* the flyest one or *be* the flyest of them all. In other words, in this context the two words (money and one) need not to be stated, since they can be assumed to follow the adjective (the rudest) in the utterance.

Although this is not a straightforward example of the equative copula construction, given the actual circumstances of the utterance, it can be considered as a representative example after all. It is also worth mentioning, in this context, there were very few examples in which the use of the equative copula was not easy to detect or perhaps inaccurate. Further research on this topic is definitely needed in order to give answers to how the copula is incorporated in current rap lyrics, and how this particular feature is used to express culture identity in Hip Hop music.

5.3.2 Be_3 (The equative copula) in Conscious rap

In the genre of Conscious rap, the Be_3 is only evidenced 3 times, as oppose to the five instances in Trap music. It occurs in the verses of the songs *Humble* and *The Blacker the Berry*, and in J. Cole’s *No Role Modelz*, as seen in the example below:

9. a). If I quit this season, I still *be* the greatest, funk.
(from *Humble*)

In his song *Humble*, Lamar applies Be_3 with first person singular, in a conditional sentence, to tell the audience that if he decides to quit making music, he would still consider himself to be the greatest funk. Alim (2004) further explains that the equative copula or “[...] be_3 occurs in instantaneous or definite time [and] [...] THERE IS NO UNDERLYING PRESUPPOSITION OF HABITUALITY”

(p. 184). This sentence can be read as “If I quit this season I still is the greatest funk”, where the equative copula is used to describe what the rapper believes is the truth at the moment of the utterance.

10. a). Church me with your fake prophesying that I'mma *be* just another slave in my head.
(from *The Blacker the Berry*)

*Be*₃ is used 1 time in his song *The Blacker the Berry*, where Kendrick Lamar raps about himself and other black people, who are being cursed evil because of their dark skin, and is therefore punished by society. In fact, this is a clear example of the equative copula, since the “[...] *be*₃ equates the subject and the predicate nominal in such a way as to reveal what the speaker believes to be “realer than real” state of affairs” (Alim 2004: 190). In (10a), the equative copula is used to identify the subject (he is just another slave), and it is used after the word *gonna*, which is the short form of *going to*, as in “[...] I’m gonna/ “I’m going to” is written Ima [...] reflecting the reduction of “gonna”/ “going [...]” (Lanehart 2001: 204).

Like Standard English, in AAVE, *going to* is used as an expression to talk about events or actions that are predicted to happen in the future (I will) or someone’s intentions (I am going to). However, the only difference is that in AAVE contraction or reduction is more common than the standard use of the future marker and form of the verb form *gonna/gon*, although it is optional. In this context, the rapper, when using the equative copula together with the word *gonna*, is talking about what is going on in his mind after experiencing racial discrimination. In fact, he is perceiving himself to be no other than just another slave, due not only to how poorly society treats him, but also to (fake prophesizing) the false stereotypes society has about African Americans in general. Additionally, Lamar applies *Be*₃ to give a command, as seen in the first part of the sentence (church me with you fake prophesying). By doing so, he calls the American society for immediate action or perhaps attention. This means that the rapper uses the equative copula to urge them to stop making these negative and false assumptions about black people, because they are harmful and cause him racial self-hatred.

In J. Cole’s song *No Role Modelz*, the equative copula occurs only 1 time, as seen in the line (11a). In this example he uses *Be*₃ together with the future marker *gonna* and in first person, to claim that he is going to be a better role model, than his mom was when he grew up. In fact, Cole states that he knows that he will not only become a better parent to his child, but also a better husband to his wife.

11. a). I get my bitch pregnant I'mma *be* a better you.
(from *No Role Modelz*)

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The current paper has focused on the use of the verb *be* in AAVE such as Be_1 (the copula absence), Be_2 (invariant/habitual *be*) and Be_3 (the equative copula), in selected rap lyrics of two different Hip Hop genres, Conscious rap (Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole) and Trap music (Gucci Mane and *Future*).

The results of the study and the analysis of the selected rap lyrics showed that the various patterns of the AAVE verb *be* were present, although not to the same extent. For instance, the copula absence was used the most by all four rappers and this feature appeared in all sixteen songs examined, which gives some indication that this is a feature prominent in current rap lyrics.

When it comes to the use of invariant/habitual *be* within rap lyrics, compared to the use of copula absence, this particular feature occurred more frequently in Trap. It is also worth mentioning that this feature was not present in any of the songs by J. Cole. In the case of the equative copula, this structure was used the least of all copula patterns of AAVE. It was used 5 times in Trap music and only 3 times in Conscious rap. Once, again *Future* was the rapper who applied the copula patterns the most in the chorus of his songs *Good Dope* and *Ain't No Time*.

When looking at the use of the verb *be* in AAVE in current Hip hop music, this study both does and does not corroborate with previous research. Firstly, the research conducted by Alim (2004) the copula is the most street-conscious feature of AAVE used in Hip Hop rap lyrics. However, in this study only the copula absence can be considered to be the most street-conscious feature in AAVE, since it was not only a structure that was frequently used by all selected rappers in this investigation, but also copula absence occurred within the lyrics in all sixteen songs examined. There is no doubt that the copula patterns in AAVE is used by these rappers to portray their view of their world (Alim 2006: 12).

From the results of this study, there is also some evidence that these rappers utilized the AAVE verb *be* not only to talk about the street life, such as violence, crime and poverty, but also boasting about fame and money, which according to Green (2002) is “one prominent feature in rap” (p. 156). However, the analysis suggests, due to the many instances of the copula absence in the lyrics, despite the differences in genres, all four rappers in this investigation are constructing a street conscious identity.

In the other study by Sullivan (2003) it suggests that the reason why current rap lyrics lacks features of AAVE features (such as the copula contractions), has to do with the fact that rappers of today have changed the themes and content in their songs (p. 607). However, in this study one finds that the main reason why the copula appears more or less within the lyrics of the two different genres of Hip Hop, has to do with the beat, rhythm and the flow. In this case, this study disagrees with the previous research. In fact, the possible reason for the high frequency and occurrence of the invariant *be* and the equative copula in Trap music, or more specially in *Future*'s songs, is that the copula constructions occurred was found in the chorus of the song.

Last but not least, due to the limited number of instances of the equative copula in the selected rap lyrics, it is impossible to state whether HHNL is the same as AAVE (Smitherman 1997). Neither is it possible to say if it is an extended version of the invariant/habitual *be* (see Cutler 2007 for further discussion of this matter), nor if the equative copula is a recent phenomenon used in current rap lyrics. However, the findings of this study suggest the opposite to the study by Alim (2004) who believes that Be_3 (the equative copula) is a feature of AAVE used frequently in current rap lyrics. This is not only due to the fact that there were a few more examples of the invariant *be*/habitual *be* in Trap music than the equative copula, but also because of the two rare examples of its use in (8a-b). Whatever the case might be, much more research is needed to find out more about the structure of Be_3 , and how it is used by rappers to construct cultural identity.

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