

## What's *ain't* got to do with tense in AAE?

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This paper presents new data on the expression of tense in African American English (AAE) and adds to previous literature (Fasold and Wolfram 1970, DeBose 1994, Green 2002) describing variation in the morphological form of verbs following *ain't* in simple past and present perfect sentences.

AAE sentences containing *ain't* that describe past events are ambiguous between a simple past meaning (where *ain't* varies with *didn't*) and a present perfect meaning (where *ain't* varies with *hasn't*) when temporal anchoring is absent (definite/indefinite adverbs, narrative context, etc.).

- (1) Andre ain't say nothin' to you?  
"Andre didn't say/hasn't said anything to you?"

DeBose (1994) proposes that the morphological form of the verb following *ain't* disambiguates the tense-aspect meaning, with dynamic verbs contributing a past, completive meaning (2a) and stative verbs a non-past, non-completive meaning (2b).

- (2) a. Jamal ain't write/wrote/written a new song. [Simple Past]  
"Jamal didn't write a new song."  
b. Lucious ain't know/knew/known that. [Present Perfect]  
"Lucious hasn't known that."

On the other hand, Green (2002) notes that verbs appear in either base or preterit form (Table 1) following *ain't* in simple past sentences (3a), while verbs appear only in preterit form (3b) following *ain't* in present perfect sentences. Thus, the only sentences that are unambiguously simple past are those with a verb in base form.

- (3) a. Cookie ain't walk(ed) into the meeting. [Simple Past]  
"Cookie didn't walk into the meeting."  
b. Cookie ain't walked into the meeting. [Present Perfect]  
"Cookie hasn't walked into the meeting."

This paper tests these proposals using a corpus of spoken AAE collected in Philadelphia. 164 sentences containing *ain't* followed by a verb were coded for tense-aspect meaning (simple past/present perfect) with ambiguous cases excluded. Verbs were coded for lexical stativity and morphological form as base, preterit, or participle (Table 1). Final consonant cluster deletion was controlled for by excluding susceptible *-ed* verbs (Guy 1991).

Results demonstrate that, although dynamic and stative verbs appear in both tense-aspect contexts, dynamic verbs are more likely to appear in simple past sentences while stative verbs are more likely to appear in present perfect sentences ( $\chi^2, p < 0.001$ ), confirming DeBose 1994 (Fig. 1). We also find a correlation between verb form and tense-aspect meaning (Figure 2): 73.91% of simple past sentences have a main verb in base form while 88% of present perfect sentences contain a main verb in either preterit or participle form. Given the prevalence of participle to preterit leveling in this variety of AAE, preterits and participles can be combined in

one category. These findings confirm Green’s (2002) description of variation in main verb morphology following *ain’t* in the past tense, and further reveal previously undocumented variation in form following the present perfect use of *ain’t*. Interestingly, though these results demonstrate a clear relationship between the morphological form of verbs following *ain’t* and tense-aspect meaning, they are not categorical. Thus, this work raises important questions about the relationship between verbal morphology and the expression of tense in AAE.

Verb Type	Base	Preterit	Participle
Regular	<i>walk</i>	<i>walked</i>	<i>walked</i>
Irregular	<i>get</i>	<i>got</i>	<i>gotten</i>

Table 1: Main verb morphological forms.

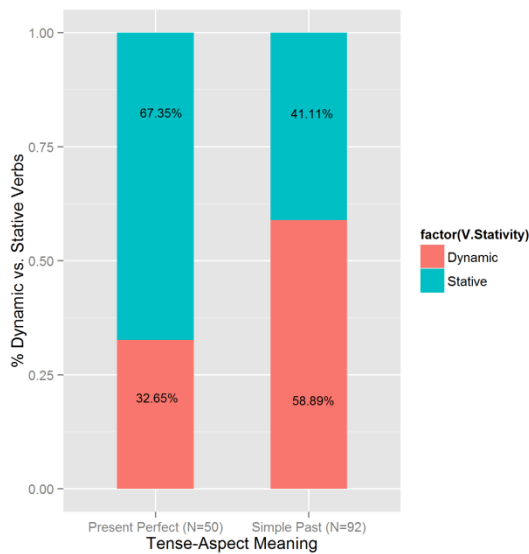


Figure 1: Lexical stativity of main verbs following *ain’t* by tense-aspect meaning; no significant difference between the use of non-stative and stative verbs for either tense-aspect meaning.

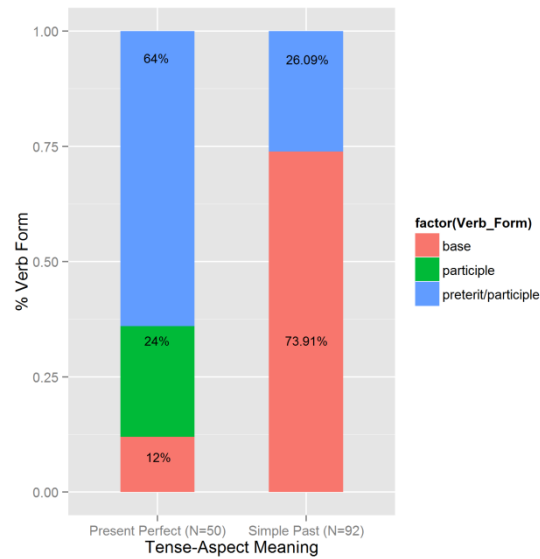


Figure 2: Morphological form of main verbs following *ain’t* by tense-aspect meaning.

## References

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