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Talkin' Black: African American English Usage in Professional African American Athletes

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TALKIN' BLACK: AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH FEATURE USAGE IN PROFESSIONAL AFRICAN AMERICAN ATHLETES

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Abstract

Sports play an important role in the culture of the United States as does language, so the choice to use non-Standard dialects in a nation that privileges the Standard and negatively judges dialectical differences, especially those spoken by mostly people of color, is not undertaken lightly. Because of this privileging of Standard American English, it is assumed that only professional African American athletes are allowed to keep their native dialect if it is African American English (AAE) and still be successful. However, this is complicated by the historical and present increased criticisms women face in both sport and language. To investigate this claim, a quantitative analysis of post-game interviews of five men and five women in the National Basketball Association and Women's National Basketball Association, respectively, was conducted. The athletes were analyzed to see if they used dental stopping and *be*-leveling, two features of AAE. Four additional features of AAE were also investigated on an exploratory basis. Inter-gender variance was found among both genders. Across genders, women used the features of AAE studied an average of 30.6 percent less than men, demonstrating a clear gender difference in the usage of AAE. The results of this study illustrate disparities in women and men's language use that could be a consequence of the inherent and historical sexism women must face in the realms of both sport and language.

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1 Introduction

I have always been a lover of both sports and language and have struggled on how to combine both of my passions in my academic career. My professor, Dr. Nicole Holliday, witnessed my epiphany on how I could combine my interests in our linguistic discrimination class in the fall of 2017. When reading Lippi-Green's *English with an Accent,* we came upon her discussion of the criticisms of African American English (AAE). She quotes sports columnist Bob Greene talking about the supposed negative influence of media coverage of successful Black athletes on children who might look up to them: "if a Black child emulates one of the dumb-talking Black athletes he sees being interviewed on TV, he is not going to be thought of as a superstar. He is going to be thought of as a stupid kid, and later, as a stupid adult" (Lippi-Green, 2012). In this quote from Greene, the judgment of the speech of black people, men specifically, to be wrong and uneducated is apparent. The negative associations of the language of African Americans will be discussed further in the literature review to follow. In his quote, Greene implies that the athletes can talk the way they do—in AAE, keeping their native dialect—because they use their bodies for their work and that the children who look up to them will not be able to be successful employing the same language choices. This idea that professional athletes can maintain and use their native non-standard dialect in their very public professional lives and still be seen as very successful formed the basis of this thesis project.

Sports are ingrained in the popular culture of the United States. Of the twenty-five most-watched television broadcasts in the United States, nineteen of them were sporting events ("List of most-watched television broadcasts," 2019). There is almost always a game or match on any given day and fans flock to the stadiums and their televisions or radios to partake in them. The intersection of sports and race/racism is not a new concept, but in the current political situation and the ubiquity of sports media this relationship has been highlighted.

Language is even more ingrained than sports in our society as are the linguistic judgments taught and learned. We are surrounded by language in a way we are not by any other part of our culture. Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling have said that: "language difference, in fact, may serve as the single most reliable indicator if social position in our society. When we live in a certain way, we are expected to match that lifestyle with our talk. And when we don't match people's expectations of how we should talk, the incongruity between words and behavior also becomes a topic of conversation" (Wolfram & Schilling). This relates back to the idea that language is a gateway or impediment to educated professions as certain jobs require speaking the standard dialect. Language is "the means by which we both point to and reproduce our nuanced identities" such that there are a "range of ways of speaking that are appropriate to the complexities of identity construction by individual" (Fought, 2006). Thus, using specific features is a choice and should be recognized as such.

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To investigate the social belief that professional athletes are among the only African Americans that can successfully keep their native non-standard dialects, the language choices of ten professional basketball players, five men and five women, will be studied by analyzing two post-game interviews for each athlete. This study will focus on one phonological and one syntactic feature of AAE: the stopping of dental fricatives and *be*-leveling, to be described in more detail in the methodology section. An established sociolinguistic method of creating a ratio of usage compared to total instances in which the feature could be used will be the basis of the quantitative analysis. Four additional AAE features will be investigated based on their presence or lack thereof in the interviews studied to provide another data point that will further insight on athletes' language choices. By looking at an equal number of men and women within the same sport, a direct gender comparison can be made. I posit that there is a difference of AAE usage across gender as women are subject to the inherent sexism of sport, as discussed in depth in the literature review below. This sexism can be seen in the naming of the governing bodies of basketball: the National Basketball League vs. the National Women's Basketball League. Including the gender for only the women's league implies that men's sport is the default and women and their sport are merely a supplement. This naming convention extends beyond basketball into other professional sports, e.g. National Hockey League vs. National Women's Hockey League. This research will be guided by the following questions:

Is professional athletics an area where it is accepted for key public
figures to speak AAE?

Do professional African American athletes speak AAE in public
settings?

If so, is there a difference between phonological and syntactic feature
use?

Is there any difference between women and men athletes' use of AAE?
These questions are reproduced in Section 3 as are my hypotheses, but they
should be kept in mind when reading the literature review.

The following section will be a literature review of the current literature
regarding AAE, language, and sports and how those intersect with race and
gender within society. Section 4 lists the research questions guiding this study
and my hypotheses. Section 5 discusses how the specific athletes were chosen
along with short biographies of them as well as the methodology of analysis.
Section 6 presents the results of the study and Section 7 discusses the patterns
seen as I posit reasons for their occurrence. Section 8 gives areas for future
research. Section 9 concludes with an overview of my findings, limitations of
this study, and areas for future research.

2 Literature Review

2.1 African American English: Language and Race

African American English is a dialect of English governed by a complex set of
rules. Unlike many popular assumptions about dialects, specifically those of
people of color, AAE has a rule-governed grammar just as every other human

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language, and "to ignore this fact about [AAE] is to demonstrate ignorance, condescension and disrespect" (Lippi-Green, 2012). The term 'dialect' is a "neutral label to refer to any variety of a language that is shared by a group of speakers" and therefore has no judgments put on them. No dialect is inherently better or worse than the other, linguistically speaking, but it is important to note that there are socially favored dialects, either considered the 'standard' or prestigious form (sometimes these are one in the same) (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). The linguistic equality of all language and dialects is important to understand, but the negative social judgments placed on language varieties of subordinate social groups must be recognized. The naming of African American English is also important as names carry meaning. In their section on AAE, Wolfram & Schilling provide a list of the labels that the vernacular dialect of African Americans has been referred to for the past half century in approximate chronological order: "*Negro Dialect, Substandard Negro English, Nonstandard Negro English, Black English, Afro-American English, Ebonics, Vernacular Black English, African American (Vernacular) English,* and *African American Language"* (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). Reflected within this list are the changing attitudes and naming practices for social groups in the United States. For this paper I will primarily use the term African American English, though in quotes or in reference to other authors I may interchange with the term and abbreviation African American Vernacular English (AAVE). I have chosen to use this one specifically to indicate that AAE is deserving of the same

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respect as other varieties of English and is of the same linguistic caliber as more privileged ones like British and Irish English[1].

In his book *African American Vernacular English,* John R. Rickford provides a comprehensive list of the main distinctive phonological and grammatical features of AAE. There are far too many features of AAE to list and describe within this thesis, but the book mentioned has a great overview. It is also beyond the scope of this work to detail all of the controversy over AAE's origins and the social/cultural judgments placed on AAE and its speakers though there are a number of works which discuss these in detail (e.g., Green 2002, Lippi-Green 2011, Rickford 1999, Wolfram & Schilling 2015). Within this work, I will give a brief overview of AAE usage and attitudes toward AAE[2].

Rickford notes that while males are reported as using AAE features more than women, this finding could be because a majority of the research on AAE has focused on males such as Wolfram's seminal 1969 study on men in urban Detroit (Rickford, 1999). These studies have reported that the most prolific speakers of AAE are generally from younger men from urban locales (Rickford, 1999). Various scholars have estimated the number of AAE speakers

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[1] This decision should not be taken as an assertion that this term is somehow superior to the other. My choice of term for this variety of English should not be considered statement or stance that AAE should be considered a language or a dialect as those distinctions are mostly based on sociopolitical and sociocultural terms rather than purely linguistic, nor should it be assumed that my use of this term erases the many sub-varieties that exist within AAE based on region, gender, and social class, among other factors.

[2] For a more extensive description of AAE, its history, and the judgments it faces, Green 2002, Lippi-Green 2012, Rickford 1999, Baugh 1983, and Wolfram & Schilling 2015, are just a few of the works that explore these topics.

to be around 80 to 90 percent of the African American population though this number cannot be said with much certainty (Lippi-Green, 2012). What can be said with a fair amount of certainty is that AAE speakers come from all types of gender, socioeconomic, and geographic backgrounds. There is also variance within the speaking community on usage of AAE, with variance even within a single speaker that is influenced by audience and context (Rickford, 1999). Overall, there is a great variability of AAE usage that is dependent on a number of factors.

AAE and the use of it in speech is often viewed negatively and as 'wrong' in comparison to Standard American English (SAE) (Lippi-Green, 2012). Lippi-Green explains that in the social domain of the United States, SAE is thought to be "the language of the educated, in particular those who have achieved a high level of skill with the written language…or those who control the written or broadcast media" (2012). In opposition to SAE, AAE is regarded as the language of the poor, uneducated, and unwilling to assimilate through "explicit and unapologetic condemnations of AAVE which extend to unfounded criticisms of African American culture and values" (Lippi-Green, 2012). The negative ideologies surrounding AAE are then disseminated and reproduced through the rhetoric of the educational system and professional workplace. These adverse judgments AAE have culminated in the belief, as Smitherman (1997) explains, that "the price of the ticket for Black education and survival and success in White America is eradication of Black Talk" (Lippi-Green, 2012). Though AAE and its speakers face discrimination, the use of AAE is a

signal of linguistic solidarity and identity among African Americans that unifies the community across geographic and social boundaries (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). To elect to use features of AAE when it is widely criticized, is a deliberate choice and should be viewed as such.

2.2 Attitudes Toward Language and Gender

In a blog post entitled "Just don't do it" on her blog "language: a feminist guide," linguist Deborah Cameron discusses the ways in which women's speech is criticized. She begins by citing the many mainstream news and opinion articles which likened the rise of 'vocal fry'-officially creaky voice in linguistic terms-to the degeneration of English as a language. Many of these articles also expressed their distaste for the speech pattern by making negative judgments about the people who used it (Cameron, 2015). Cameron then speaks about how men are generally less criticized for their speech, referencing men's speech is never a hot topic of conversation in the news and media. She likens the policing of women's speech to that of women's bodies stating they are "uncomfortably similar" (Cameron, 2015). Cameron goes on to assert that "just as the media and the beauty industry continually invent new reasons for women to be self-conscious about their bodies, so magazine articles and radio programmes…mentioned encourage a similar self-consciousness about our speech" (2015). Cameron finishes her piece by claiming "the problem isn't women's speech, it's the way women's speech is pathologized and policed" (2015).

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In another of her blog posts on gender differences and language, Cameron discusses what she coins as the "gender respect gap" such that "women get less respect than men" (Cameron, 2017). She relates a personal anecdote about the frequency with which she is not called by her proper title of 'Dr.' or even 'Professor,' and how this practice serves to subtly undermine her status. She then connects her experience to a recent study done at a medical conference which found that women were significantly less likely to be referred to by their formal title of 'Dr.' than the male participants. The study showed that women almost always introduced their colleagues using the correct title, but men used the title for 72 percent of other men and only 49 percent of women. Cameron demonstrates a pattern of men undermining women's positions in the workplace by citing other studies that show men dominate professional discussion and use endearment terms with their female coworkers. The multiplicity of evidence corroborates Cameron's assertion about the existence of a clear respect gap between men and women, specifically in professional settings.

<u>2.3 Gender, Race, and Inequality within Sport</u>

The professional sports industry is an integrated one and as such the athletes who make up this small percentage of the population can be thought of as a *community of practice*. The term was originally coined by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in 1991 and is now defined as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" ("Introduction to communities of practice | Wenger-

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Trayner," n.d.). In a description of communities of practice, Wenger and Trayner detail the three crucial characteristics that must be met to be considered under this definition. These are: "identity defined by shared domain of interest"; the community in which members come together to share information, help each other, and otherwise engage; the practice to develop a "shared repertoire of resources" ("Introduction to communities of practice | Wenger-Trayner," n.d.). The sports community, especially the specialized group of professional athletes does meet these requirements and can therefore be viewed as a community of practice in itself.

Taking this into account, there have been a number of studies on the sports industry particularly on how sports and gender interact. In an analysis of television coverage of professional tennis and collegiate basketball, Messner et al. found that the men's games and tournaments were "presented as the norm, the universal" while the women were gender marked, thereby making them 'the other' (Messner, Duncan, & Jensen, 1993). Marking the women's sports as 'other,' effectively promotes the idea that they are inferior to the men's teams. They also found that women athletes were more likely to be referred to as "girls," "young ladies," and by their first name only. This tactic, whether a conscious or unconscious effort by sports casters, serves to cut down women and trivialize their athletic achievements.

George, Hartley, & Paris conducted a similar study on the representation of female athletes in the media by studying the coverage of women in sport by newspapers and television companies in the UK. Their first focus was on

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newspaper coverage of the 1995 World Championships. They analyzed six national British newspapers will a combined circulation of over 26 million for eight aspects of reportage. They found significantly more headlines and photographs were dedicated to male athletes, with the tendency to print more active photographs of males than females and that men received seventy-two percent of line coverage compared to the women's twenty eight percent. They also found that female athletes were often referred to as 'girls,' as a way to emphasize their femininity as well as trivialize them by using a word that usually references children, their achievements were trivialized in comparison to those of their male counterparts, and their physical appearance was often highlighted while there were no corresponding descriptions of male competitors (George, Hartley, & Paris, 2001).

In their analysis of television coverage for a period of a week in January 1996 on UK networks, George et al. found that there was asymmetrical gender marking for women's sports, a gendered hierarchy of naming in which women were more often referred to by their first name only, and an emphasis was placed on the achievements of men but the failures of women. Their findings support the idea that sport is still considered to be the rightful domain of men with women as the afterthought to the main event. They argue that because the media forms such a large part of the image of athletes, specifically women athletes, "in order to gain coverage a woman must fit the accepted female persona" or she could lose the already limited percentage of coverage she gets (George et al., 2001).

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With a five-year article update to a twenty-five-year longitudinal study titled "'It's Dude Time!': A Quarter Century of Excluding Women's Sports in Televised News and Highlight Shows", Cooky, Messner, and Musto have tracked changes in the coverage of men and women's sport, focusing on the discrepancies between the treatment of the two genders. Published in 2015, this update incorporates new data collected in 2014 and compares it to same style studies conducted in 1989, 1993, 1999, 2004, and 2009 (Cooky, Messner, & Musto, 2015). Each of the previous and most recent studies, analyzed the 6pm and 11pm sports news and highlights segments of three local network affiliates of Los Angeles as well as the 11pm broadcast of ESPN's program *SportsCenter* for three two-week periods. In their comparison to past years, they found that in the past decade "portrayal of women's athletes has become increasingly 'respectful,' and news and highlights commentators have become far less likely to joke about women or portray women as sexual objects" (Cooky et al., 2015). While this is some improvement, it is a very mediocre one, especially since it means that women were not taken seriously and were objectified to begin with. Congruent to other studies, they found that most coverage by the media focuses on men's sports and male athletes. The data from the local networks showed that dedicated women's sports coverage accounted for only 3.2 percent of all coverage surveyed. This ratio indicated coverage had actually decreased such that the authors claimed, "the news shows' coverage of women's sports remains substantially lower than its coverage in 10, 15, 20, and 25 years ago" (Cooky et al., 2015). This discrepancy in the amount of coverage was further evidenced

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by the comparatively low number of segments featuring women, they had in the sample to begin with. The media is so male-focused that none of the news and highlights shows in the 2014 sample began with a women's sports story (Cooky et al., 2015).

When comparing to past iterations of the study, one improvement they found was in the amount of ticker time. Ticker time refers to the ticker, running lines of text found at the bottom of the screen which report scores and news. Although this is more coverage, Cooky et al. argue that it is "a kind of visual and textual ghetto for women's sports, allowing the sports anchors to focus their main coverage almost entirely on men's sports, while relegating women's sports literally to the margins of the screen" (2015). This shows the priority put on women; they are relegated to the margins of sports just as they are in society. In direct contrast to the 3.2 percent, Cooky et al. reported that 74.5 percent of the time was dedicated to the 'big three' of men's professional and college football, basketball, and baseball. Even when those sports were in the off-season, they were still featured more than in-season and successful women's teams (Cooky et al., 2015). The authors state that these gender asymmetries of out-of-season and in-season reporting were particularly apparent in the coverage of the NBA versus that of the WNBA. Within the extremely limited coverage women's sports did get, basketball was the most commonly featured sport, with 81.6 percent combined main segment and ticker coverage (Cooky et al., 2015). Basketball being the most included women's sport by a large margin, further underscores the differences between the NBA and WNBA in- and out-of-season

coverage. If the gender discrepancy is so evident within the sport that garnered the most media time, the comparison between other sports is even greater. There is a vast incongruity in the quantity of coverage of men's and women's sports in sport media, with a decrease of women's coverage in the past ten years.

Not only did Cooky et al. find a noticeable disparity in the amount of media coverage men's and women's sports and athletes received, but also a difference in the *way* in which these topics were covered and presented. They found that "men's sports were presented with far more enthusiasm and excitement, the commentators consistently deploying vocal inflections, high-volume excitement, and evocative descriptors" whereas women's sports were reported in a more matter-of-fact style, marking them as less interesting and unworthy of attention (Cooky et al., 2015). The presentation of women's sports does not excite or entice the audience into wanting to know or watch more, thus validating programmer's decisions to not highlight them as much as the men. This keeps women's sports on the outskirts of prime-time coverage and is yet another hurdle they must overcome for equal representation. In addition to this distinct change in delivery styles, when women were featured, their sports stories focused on accomplishments of motherhood or other forms of traditional female roles. Cooky et al. argue that sports media covers women athletes when they can have the segment "conform to conventional gender norms that position women as either objects of men's (hetero)sexual desire or mothers, wives, or girlfriends" (2015). They believe that this shift in coverage shows a move away

from the overt sexism and objectification of the past towards ambivalence to women's sport and female athletes. While women athletes may be included in the media more than the past, the quality of their media coverage continues to showcase the unequal treatment between genders.

In his book *Sports in Society,* Jay Coakley tackles the ways in which sports are influenced and dependent on societal values, focusing on the United States. The most important sections of Coakley's to this project are his sections that analyze and report on the relation of sports and gender, race, social class, commercialization, and media. In the following paragraphs, I will briefly describe his observations and conclusions about sport culture. In regard to gender, he recognizes that women are inherently at a disadvantage within our society because of orthodox gender ideology which leads people to "see males and females as different *and* unequal" (Coakley, 2017). He argues that because men have more privilege, they are more likely to "police" gender boundaries because "maintaining gender distinctions reaffirms orthodox gender ideology and legitimizes disproportionate male power in society," thereby being beneficial to them (Coakley, 2017). Coakley states that because men were the ones to establish modern sport in the first place, they created and shaped sport culture around ideals that would benefit and privilege themselves. This lasting legacy continues to play a role in maintaining sports as a male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered field. Further demonstrating this male-centered field is the fact that athletic competence is defined in relation to masculine/male traits and thus, "female bodies and traits are viewed as athletically inferior"

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when in fact they are just different and should not be held to the same, biased standard of excellence (Coakley, 2017).

He then points out the numerous places in which gender inequalities persist within sport: participation, support for athletes, and access to positions of power[3] (2017). Coakley cites what he believes to be the biggest barriers to equity as "budget cuts and privatization of sport programs, resistance to government regulations, few models of women in positions of power, a cultural emphasis on 'cosmetic fitness' for women, trivialization of women's sport, and male-dominated/identified/centered sport organizations" (Coakley, 2017). Budget cuts disproportionately affect women's sports teams because most of the time they do not have a fan base already and must use extra money to generate that base through marketing and other promotion, which the men's teams do not have to do. Societal ideals about what women should look like physically also deter young women from continuing in sports if they feel they are getting too muscular or bulky to be attractive. Coakley concludes his section on gender and sport by declaring that these "persistent gender inequalities are not due to a lack of interest among girls and women as much as they are due to sports and sport organization that do not directly reflect girls' and women's lived experiences in the same way that they reflect and reaffirm the lived experiences of boys and men" (Coakley, 2017). Sports and sport culture have been designed in ways to validate masculinity so much that female athletes have continually been viewed

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[3] This concept of lack of access to positions of power is explored further in following paragraphs covering the racial and gender report cards from The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport.

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as inferior and less worthy than their male counterparts, and still face many inequalities within the field.

The contrast in the treatment and value placed on men and women's sport is evidenced by the disproportionate salaries the athletes earn. The eighth edition of Sporting Intelligence's Global Sports Salaries Survey, published in November of 2017, actually focused on this imbalance as it was titled The Gender In(Equality) issue. The purpose of the report is to "measure 'first-team pay' to assess the earning of athletes in widely different sports and leagues around the world" (2017) This was done by summing the salaries of all the players on a team and diving by the number of players find an average figure per team, though it should be noted that this average salary figure does not include endorsements or sponsorships that many top athletes have which can greatly supplement their league salary. Sporting Intelligence found that the WNBA is the best paid women's league in the world of professional sports with an average income of $74,759 (2017). Their counterpart, the NBA, is the best paid sports league in the world with the average pay across all NBA players in 2017 being $7,147,217. This means that the men of the NBA "earn 96 times as much as the women of the WNBA," or approximately twice as much each week as a WNBA player will earn in a year (2017). When comparing the salaries in this manner, the inequality is incredibly apparent. Sporting Intelligence states that "as the best paid women's sports league in the world, [the WNBA] is a pertinent example to hold up against men's leagues to illustrate the gap. No WNBA team is higher than No.327 on our list of 348 teams by average

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earnings" showing that the gender disparity is "precisely, quantifiably massive" (2017).

Gender inequalities are not the only ones that remain and persist in sport as with race, there are vast disparities to be seen as well. If you look at most major sports leagues, the breakdown of the race of players is quite one-sided. Coakley asserts that "black men and women are absent or nearly absent in…all but five of the dozens of professional sports in the United States" with similar patterns in Canada and Europe (Coakley, 2017). He argues that the only reason we don't notice this discrepancy is because the most popular spectator sports have a high percentage of black athletes. The sports he is referencing with this high ratio are basketball and American football. The difference becomes most apparent when thought of in comparison to other sports such as ice hockey or golf whose participants are primarily white.

Social class is also an area in which there is inconsistency among the men and women that become famous professional athletes. Sports are expensive, especially in higher and more elite levels. The gear required for each sport is different but still costly and needs to be replaced quite often. Additionally, wealthier families can afford to pay for the best equipment, private coaching sessions, and participation fees and costs to be in travelling clubs. Sports are also time-consuming. If a family relies on the supplemental income of their work-age children, those children probably do not have adequate time to dedicate to school, work, and sports successfully. Even though these are all reasons as to why sports are not equally accessible to all social

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classes, the industry is seen as an equal opportunity space with stand-out examples of athletes 'rising' out of their working-class backgrounds to achieve their form of the "American Dream". It is important to remember, though, that these are exceptions and not the rule. Coakley claims that although sports are seen as removed from inequalities, they actually "reproduce the very inequalities that so many people think are absent in them" (2017). Social class/background are yet another way in which disparity in society is replicated in sports.

The commercialization of sport may not be as easily related to professional athletes, but it does have an impact on the players and the ways in which the ideals of sport are spread. Sports are a global phenomenon, with many matches and tournaments being televised worldwide. Coakley reports that the NBA finals and All-Star[4] games are televised in over 200 countries, annually (2017). There are also many international players on American teams, so that their home communities will also be invested in sports in the United States. Regular season and exhibition games are played in other countries by the major men's leagues to promote expansion. This is done by leagues for sports that are characteristically North American like ice hockey or American football. Because of this, Coakley says that the globalization of commercial sports creates "global cultural trade that is exported and imported in a manner similar to other products" (2017). Thus, "sports organizations become exporters

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[4]It is of interest that the men's games and tournaments are so widely broadcast internationally, but the WNBA struggles to get prime-time and live coverage of their games in the United States even. This lack is yet another indicator of the discrepancy between the treatment of men and women's sport.

of culture as well as products to be consumed" (Coakley, 2017). Mass media, which will be discussed in the following paragraph, then extends the commercialization and globalization process and its effects. In addition to the more global effects of the commercialization of sport, it is worth noting its consequences for the athletes themselves. Because sport is a multi-billion dollar industry, "control in sport organizations shifts away from the athletes" so that they "generally lose effective control over the conditions of their own sport participation" (Coakley, 2017). An example of this loss of agency, are the reality that players can be traded to other teams with little to no warning, forcing them to move their entire lives. The intense commercialization of sport has led to the commodification of athletes as well as the spread of sport culture ideals.

The commercialization of sport is closely intertwined with sport's dependence on media. To show this connection, Coakley quotes Michael Real to state that there is "no greater force in the construction of media sport reality that 'commercial television and its institutionalized value system [emphasizing] profit making, sponsorship, expanded markets, commodification, and competition" (2017). The media portrayal of sports is carefully calculated and planned such that Coakley affirms that "what we see, hear, and read is a series of narrative and images selected for particular reasons and grounded in the social worlds and interests of those producing the event and controlling the broadcast" (2017). Thus, there is no coincidence in what is presented in media covering sport as it is all purposeful to present and reaffirm ideals central to sport culture. He then cites business reporter Karl Greenfield who reports that

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twenty-five percent of all cable channel revenue goes to ESPN which affords the media conglomerate lots of influence which they then use to shape "the ways in which leagues, teams, and athletes, are packaged, promoted, marketed, and consumed by the public" (Coakley, 2017).

Coakley then connects this relationship between commercialization and the media to women's sports in that one of the reasons they do not get more coverage is because the key demographic who would watch women's sports is already reached by advertisers through other means, therefore there is not a lot of advertising money interested in women's sports which makes it not as profitable as the men's (2017). He likens sports media to symbolic constructions which showcase "the ideas that certain people have about [the game], values, social life, and the characteristics of the viewing audience" (Coakley, 2017). The media will spread the ideas and values of the people in power and if those happen to be biased in any form (racist, sexist, misogynist, which we saw in past reports of coverage of women's sports), those reach large groups of people. A quote from an editor of *Newsweek* claims that "sports may be America's most successful export to the world…our most visible symbol has evolved from the Stars and Stripes to Coke and the Nike Swoosh" (Coakley, 2017). This is related to the exhibition games that are played in different countries which were touched on earlier. Mass media and commercialization of sport has created a new way for American elite to influence international communities as well as the values of people at home. He also observes that sports coverage does not touch on either race or ethnicity and instead media

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"assumes that sports is a racially and ethnically level playing field" which "allows whites in the media and media audiences to be comfortably color blind and deny the legacy and continuing relevance of skin color and cultural heritage in society and sports" (Coakley, 2017). Ignoring the role that race plays within the domain of sport thereby reaffirms the privileging of whiteness. Mass media and the global reach it has, act to spread the ideas of those in power.

Gender and race also play roles in the makeup of the people who work behind the scenes: the owners, the front office employees, the coaches, the executives, etc. The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport (TIDES) is run through the DeVos Sport Business Management Program at the University of Central Florida. According to their website, TIDES is "a comprehensive resource for issues related to gender and race in amateur, collegiate and professional sports" ("TIDES," n.d.). Annually, they publish the Racial and Gender Report Card which is an "assessment of hiring practices in coaching and sport management in professional and college sport" ("TIDES," n.d.). Each report focuses on a different professional sports league, collegiate sport, and sports media in the United States with a comprehensive report also available. For the purpose of this study, only the most recent reports for the National Basketball League and Women's National Basketball League will be considered. It is worth noting, that the WNBA is the only professional women's league that is studied in comparison to the four men's leagues researched. Data is gathered from the leagues offices themselves. Grades are issued in relation to overall patterns in society based federal affirmative action policies which state

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that a workplace should reflect the ratios of people in the population. The most recent census data shows that the number of people of color and minorities in the United States is around thirty-five percent of the population and thus "to get an A for race, the category now needs to have 30 percent people of color and to get an A for gender, 45 percent is needed" (Lapchick, Estrella, Stewart, & Gerhart, 2018). The report cards provide an objective view on the status of women and people of color's involvement in professional sport both as athletes in the office.

The 2018 Racial and Gender Report Card for the NBA was published in June of 2018. TIDES awarded the league an overall grade of an A, with an A+ in racial hiring and a B in gender hiring. They state that the NBA "remained the industry leader among men's sports for racial and gender hiring practices" with the league office having the best score for people of color at 36.4% in men's professional sports (Lapchick, Estrella, Stewart, et al., 2018). Of all NBA athletes, 73.9 percent self-identity as African Americans, while 80.7 percent are more generally, people of color. However, within this there is still an unequal power structure in place as most of the managerial and executive positions are filled by white people. In an all-time high, 25.4 percent of team NBA vice president or higher positions were held by people of color. The percentage of people of color who held team management positions increased from the previous year as did the percentage of women in those positions. People of color in other professional staff positions also increased while the number of women in those roles decreased slightly. Though the increase of people of color

and women in the league and team's offices is important, the controlling/majority owners of the teams are overwhelmingly white at 91.4 percent (Lapchick, Estrella, Stewart, et al., 2018). While there is a definite trend of inclusion in other jobs, those with the most control over the teams are still predominantly white, reinforcing an unequal power structure.

The WNBA had a stellar report card published in November of 2018. They set a new record for their combined score for racial and gender hiring practices. They scored an A+ for race and gender which is not a surprise as for the past fourteen years, the league has received at least As for its overall race, gender, and combined grades. In fact, since their inaugural season, the WNBA has held the top position in the Racial and Gender Report Cards. This year, they earned an unprecedented score of 99.9 points for their gender hiring practices. With these accomplishments, there were slight decreases in the percentage of people of color as head coaches and assistant coaches as well as the number of women employed by the league's office. The percentage of players of color decreased marginally, but the number of players that identified as African American or Black increased from 76.4 percent in 2017 to 78.1 percent in 2018. Overall, the WNBA is "the most diverse league in professional sports with 52 percent of all team professional positions being held by women and 27.7 percent of all team professional positions being held by people of color" (Lapchick, Estrella, & Gerhart, 2018). Their precedent is followed closely by the NBA, though the WNBA is the clear winner in inclusion and diversity.

3 Research Questions

As stated in the Introduction, this study will be guided by the following research questions:

> Is professional athletics an area where it is accepted for key public figures to speak AAE?
>
> Do professional African American athletes speak AAE in public settings?
>
> If so, is there a difference between phonological and syntactic feature use?
>
> Is there any difference between women and men athletes' use of AAE?

Regarding these questions, I hypothesize that professional athletes can keep their native dialects in professional settings and still be seen as highly successful. However, because of the history and present increased criticism of both women's language and women in sport, I speculate there is a gender difference in athletes' use of AAE such that the women use features of AAE considerably less than their male counterparts.

4 Methodology

4.1 Selecting Sport and Athletes

This study focuses on basketball because it is a team sport that is not viewed as a traditionally 'white sport' and is played at the professional level by both men and women. It is also the highest paying professional women's sport, though there is still a great disparity in salaries as discussed in the literature review. To determine which athletes would be studied, I cross-checked rankings of the top

players in their respective leagues done by multiple sources as well as the NBA or WNBA Most Valuable Player (MVP) distinctions. I then, took the top five African American players that were referenced the most and in the highest positions in the rankings, accounting for the yearly winners of the MVP awards as well.

During this research, there was an obvious difference in the sources I cross-checked for each gender. The ones that ranked the male players were all nationally well-known sports companies/networks: ESPN, Sports Illustrated, and CBS Sports. This was not the case for the rankings of players in the WNBA; I gathered information from High Post Hoops, the WNBA page itself, Ranker, and Yard Barker, three of which are not nationally well-known or publicized organizations. I choose to use four sources instead of the three which I used for the NBA players because there was less agreement among the top five players. The difference in prominence of the sources between rankings for NBA and WNBA players continues to show the disparity of value and relevance placed on women's athletics.

4.2 Athletes of Focus

The athletes I have chosen are listed in Table 1 below which includes relevant personal and geographic details which could inform their language choices along with how many MVP awards they have received, if any, and how many of the ranking lists they were included in.

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Table 1: *Athletes of Study*

	Player	Age	Hometown	Current Team	# of List Appear-ances[5]	# of MVPs Awarded
Female	Tina Charles[6]	31	Jamaica, New York	New York Liberty	3	1
	Sylvia Fowles[7]	34	Miami, Florida	Minnesota Lynx	3	1
	Maya Moore[8]	30	Jefferson City, Missouri	Minnesota Lynx	4	1
	Nneka Ogwumike[9]	29	Tomball, Texas	Los Angeles Sparks	3	1
	Candace Parker[10]	33	Naperville, Illinois	Los Angeles Sparks	2	2
Male	Anthony Davis[11]	26	Chicago, Illinois	New Orleans Pelicans	3	0
	Kevin Durant[12]	30	Seat Pleasant, Maryland	Golden State Warriors	3	1
	James Harden[13]	29	Lakewood, California	Houston Rockets	3	1

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[5] (CBS Sports Staff, 2018; ESPN.com, 2018; "League Leaders," n.d.; "NBArank 2018-19 - 1-10 best players this season," n.d.; "The Best Current WNBA Players," n.d.; "Top 10 WNBA player power rankings," 2018; "Top 20 WNBA players countdown, ranked for the 2018 season: Part 2," n.d.)

[6] ("Tina Charles")

[7] (*Sylvia Fowles - WNBA.Com - Official Site of the WNBA*)

[8] (*Maya Moore - WNBA.Com - Official Site of the WNBA*)

[9] ("Nneka Ogwumike")

[10] ("Candace Parker - WNBA")

[11] ("Anthony Davis Stats")

[12] ("Official NBA bio of Kevin Durant," n.d.)

[13] ("James Harden")

| | Lebron James[14] | 34 | Akron, Ohio | Los Angeles Lakers | 3 | 4 |
| | Russell Westbrook[15] | 30 | Hawthorne, California | Oklahoma City Thunder | 3 | 1 |

The following subsections briefly describe the athletes of this study beyond the basic statistics and information that is provided in the table above. I expand on their personal and then professional lives to give more context to their person and their language choices.

4.2.1 Tina Charles

Born and raised in Jamaica, a middle-class neighborhood in Queens, New York, Charles has received recognition for her philanthropic efforts which include donating her entire salary to the Hopey's Heart foundation that she founded. The foundation has placed more than 260 Automatic External Defibrillators (AEDs) worldwide. In addition to her foundation work, Charles has donated to the construction of a school in Mali and has recently committed to funding five four-year secondary-school scholarships for girls in Africa through the organization Connect To Learn

Tina Charles, a center, is a five-time WNBA All-Star and holds the best rate in WNBA history for rebounds per game. In her eight years pro, Charles has accomplished much including being the fastest player in the league's history to record 400, 500, 600, and 700 career rebounds as well as voted the WNBA's

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[14] ("LeBron James")
[15] ("Russell Westbrook")

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Most Valuable Player in 2012. She has also played internationally in Turkey, Poland, and China. In college at the University of Connecticut, Charles holds the all-time leading score and rebounding record ("Tina Charles," n.d.).

4.2.2 Sylvia Fowles

Born to mother Arrittio Fowles, she has three brothers and one sister. Fowles is currently majoring in mortuary science at the American Academy McAllister Institute and hopes to be a mortuary beautician one day. In terms of philanthropy, Fowles founded the Sylvia Fowles Family Fund in 2010 to help needy children and serves as a spokesperson for the Citizens United for Research in Epilepsy with a personal connection to the cause as two of her nephews suffer from the disorder ("Sylvia Fowles," 2019).

During her time at Louisiana State University, Fowles became the first player in the Southeastern Conference history to record a double-double (double digit number totals in two of the five statistical categories: points, rebounds, assists, steals, and blocked shots in a game) in every conference game as a junior. In her ten years with the WNBA playing as a center, she has been voted the Most Valuable Player in 2017 and the WNBA's Defensive Player of the Year three times. Outside of US professional basketball, Fowles has also played professionally in Beijing, Shanghai, and Turkey ("Sylvia Fowles - WNBA.com - Official Site of the WNBA," n.d.). Her college years spent in Louisiana may have influenced her speech choices with the inclusion of Southern features, many of which overlap with features of AAE.

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4.2.3 Maya Moore

Moore was born in Missouri and went to high school in Georgia. She is a Christian and has been outspoken about her faith. In fact, she announced that she will be not be playing in the 2019 season to focus on her family and "some ministry dreams that have been stirring in [her] heart for many years" ("Lynx's Moore to sit out '19, focus on ministry," 2019). Moore is also very invested in the prosecutorial reform in the American justice system. Her father was also a talented basketball player but was not present in her life growing up ("Maya Moore," 2019).

At the University of Connecticut, in her position as a forward, Moore became the second player in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) to be named an All-American four times. She captained her team to a NCAA record-breaking 90 consecutive wins and finished her college career with a 150-4 record, setting the all-time NCAA mark for career wins in either gender. In the WNBA, she was the Most Valuable Player in 2014 and has won the championship four times in her seven years with the league. Overseas, she has played professionally in Valencia, Spain and Shanxi, China ("Maya Moore - WNBA.com - Official Site of the WNBA," n.d.).

4.2.4 Nneka Ogwumike

Born Nnemkadi, Ogwumike is a first-generation Nigerian-American and with one of her sisters, has partnered with the U.S. Fund for UNICEF to support their efforts in Nigeria to raise awareness among American about the current

situation in Nigeria and raise money for the organization's Nigerian emergency fund that helps fund programs for girls' educations and empowerment. She grew up in Tomball, Texas with her parents and three younger sisters.

Ogwumike is Stanford University's second all-time leading scorer with 2,491 points. With six years playing professionally with the Los Angeles Sparks as a forward, she was the league's Most Valuable Player in 2016 and chosen as an All-Star for five of those seasons ("Nneka Ogwumike," n.d.).

4.2.5 Candace Parker

Born in St. Louis, Missouri but raised in Naperville, Illinois Parker is the youngest of three children, growing up with two older brothers, one of which is former NBA player Anthony Parker. She was introduced to basketball at a young age as her father played at the University of Iowa in his collegiate days. She is the mother of eight-year-old daughter Lailaa Williams and shares custody with her ex-husband, Shelden Williams, a former NBA athlete. Parker also works as sports analyst and broadcaster ("Candace Parker," 2019).

Parker has spent her ten years in the league with the Los Angeles Sparks as a power forward/center. During her time with the Lady Vols of the University of Tennessee, Parker was named the National Player of the Year in 2007 and 2008 by all major award committees. She was also the fastest UT player to reach 1,000 career points and the first female to dunk in an NCAA Tournament and the first woman to dunk twice in any game. In the WNBA, Parker has been awarded the Most Valuable Player in 2008 and 2013 and was an All-Star five times ("Candace Parker - WNBA," n.d.).

4.2.6 Anthony Davis

Davis was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois with twin sister, Antoinette, and older sister Iesha. His high school is a charter school that focuses on math and science, but generally has had limited athletic success ("Anthony Davis," 2019).

A power forward and center, Davis has spent his six years in the NBA in New Orleans. During his time there, he has received the NBA Cares Community Assist Award twice (in January 2015 and March 2016) for his charitable efforts in the area. Davis was awarded the All-Star MVP award in 2017. Before being drafted into the NBA, Davis played one year for the University of Kentucky where he broke school, SEC, and NCAA records for the blocks in a season by a freshman. In his singular collegiate year, he won six of the seven major National Player of the Year awards. Aside from the game, Davis is known for his iconic unibrow and has even trademarked sayings in relation to it ("Official NBA bio of Anthony Davis," n.d.). The location of his NBA team in the south may affect his speech choices as he may adopt more non-Standard features to position himself as belonging to the Southern community of New Orleans.

4.4.7 Kevin Durant

Durant grew up in the Washington D.C. area and is very close with his mother. He identifies as a Christian and even has various religious tattoos. He has been cited as one of the highest-earning basketball players through his endorsement deals with companies such as Nike, Sprint, and Gatorade. He has participated in many philanthropic causes, working with the American Red Cross and P'Tones

Records, a nationwide non-profit music program for after-school ("Kevin Durant," 2019).

During his one year playing for the Longhorns at the University of Texas at Austin, Durant he earned National Player of the Year awards from five organizations. Durant also won the Adolph Rupp Trophy, the Naismith Award, and the Wooden Award, becoming the first-ever freshman in NCAA history to be honored with any of those awards. He plays as a small forward and has been in the NBA for eleven years, nine of which were with the Oklahoma City Thunder where he holds the record for free throws and three-point field goals. Durant was named the NBA's Most Valuable Player in 2014 with the Golden State Warriors and has been an All-Star eight consecutive times from 2010 through 2017 ("Official NBA bio of Kevin Durant," n.d.).

4.4.8 James Harden

Born in Bellflower, California as the youngest of three children, Harden cites his mother as his biggest influence in life. Off the court he is known for his trademark beard, over-the-top fashion choices, and his James Harden Foundation. He identifies as a Christian and as openly spoken about his faith.

Harden has spent nine years playing professionally. In 2018, he was selected as the league's Most Valuable Player and has been an All-Star seven times. Additionally, in 2018 he became the first player in NBA history to score sixty points while getting a triple-double. During his college career at Arizona State, he was named the Pacific-10 Conference's Player of the Year, becoming

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only the third sophomore to receive this distinction ("James Harden," n.d.;

"Official NBA bio of James Harden," n.d.).

4.4.9 Lebron James

James is married to his high school sweetheart and they have three children together, a daughter and two sons. He is often cited as one of the most popular and influential athletes worldwide. In March of 2008, he became the first black man and third man overall to be features on the cover of *Vogue*. James has had many endorsement deals and has appeared in numerous television shows and movies. He is also known for his philanthropic efforts focusing on underprivileged children and their access to education through his Lebron James Family Foundation. In 2017, he helped fund the "I Promise School," a public elementary school in his hometown of Akron aimed at at-risk children.

James has played in the NBA for fifteen years and has earned an All-Star selection fifteen times. He has been awarded the league's Most Valuable Player award four times and is the all-time NBA-playoffs scoring leader. He decided to forgo playing collegiate basketball and was drafter to the Cleveland Cavaliers in his native Ohio in 2003 as the first overall draft pick ("LeBron James," 2019; "LeBron James," n.d.).

4.4.10 Russell Westbrook

A point guard from Long Beach, California, Westbrook grew up in Hawthorne learning to play basketball from his father. In 2015 he married his college sweetheart and the pair have a son and twin daughters. Off the court, he is known for his creative outfits and his interest in fashion has led to

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collaborations with Barneys New York, his own eyewear brand, and a line with True Religion. Westbrook founded the Russell Westbrook Why Not? Foundation in 2012 to support education and family service programs.

During his two years at the University of California, Los Angeles, Westbrook was named the Pacific-10 Conference's Defensive Player of the Year as a sophomore. In his ten years with the NBA, he has been an All Star eight times and was named the league's Most Valuable Player in 2017. Westbrook has also been the NBA's scoring champion twice as well as the league's assist leader twice ("Russell Westbrook," 2019; "Russell Westbrook," n.d.)

4.3 Data Collection

To research this topic, videos of post-game interviews of the specified athlete were analyzed[16]. I have studied two videos for each of the ten athletes I have chosen, limiting the videos to a time frame of five years or less. Post-game interviews were deliberately chosen as the data source as they are shorter and more spontaneous than formal interviews or press conferences which are thoroughly planned and coordinated in advance, including the questions that interviewers are permitted and approved to ask. In addition, post-game interviews are often part of a player's contract meaning that they are part of their professional responsibilities and this professional, but relaxed setting could provide interesting linguistic patterns. These interviews also focus on sports—

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[16] A list of the interviews studied and the links to the videos themselves can be found in the Appendix.

generally the game that just occurred—instead of other possibly gendered topics that might influence speech choices. Each of the video clips chosen are between one and three minutes in length.

<u>4.4 Features to be analyzed</u>

As described in Section 2.1, there are a number of features of AAE that are available to all speakers. For the purpose of this research, we will focus on two of them: one phonological feature and one syntactic feature as described in the following subsections, with four other features providing supplementary information about the athletes' language choices.

<u>4.4.1 Stopping of Dental Fricatives/Occlusivization</u>

Fricatives are stopped in a phonological process known as occlusivization. In AAE, the voiceless dental fricative [θ] is realized as /t/ and the voiced dental fricative [ð] can be realized as /d/, specifically word-initially such as in the words *three* [θɹi] and *that* [ðæt], respectively. The stopping of dental fricatives is a well-known feature of AAE (Green, 2002; Rickford, 1999; Wolfram & Schilling, 2015).

<u>4.4.2 *Be*-levelling</u>

Be-levelling is the regularization of present and past forms of the conjugated verb *to be*. Examples of this in the different tenses are *We was winning* and *We is a team* for SAE *We were winning* and *We are a team. Be*-leveling can occur with plural and second person subjects (Rickford, 1999). In the context of post-game interviews, we should expect to see many instances of past tense usage

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which provide the opportunity for this *be*-levelling. Although *be*-levelling is not unique to AAE, Wolfram has stated that "be-levelling, particularly with past tense, remains an integral and robust pattern within urban AAE" (Wolfram, 2000).

4.4.3 Additional Aspectual and Syntactic Features

To provide more insight beyond the two focused features detailed above, the use of four additional aspectual and syntactic features of AAE has also been investigated. These additional four features are: copula deletion; the use of *ain't,* habitual *be,* and the use of *they* as a possessive pronoun. The four are all prominent features of AAE but the conditions for each were not thought to be found in post-game interviews and as such they are not the focused features of this research. Copula deletion[17], or null copula, is the absence of the copula/auxiliary verb *be*, conjugated as *is* and *are* in the present tense. Examples of this are *We capable* and *They gainin'* for SAE *We are capable* and *They are gaining,* respectively. *Ain't* is a lexical choice used as a general preverbal negator. It occurs in instances for SAE "am not", "isn't", "aren't", "hasn't", "haven't", and "didn't" as in *They ain't playing* for SAE *They aren't playing* and *He ain't score* for SE *He didn't score.* Habitual *be* is the use of the verb *be* used for habitual aspect as in *He be playing well* for SAE *He is usually playing well/plays well usually* (Rickford, 1999). A distinctive trait of AAE is

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[17] For a more detailed discussion of the copula in AAE and its variation, see chapter 4 "Rappin on the Copula Coffin: Theoretical and Methodological Issues in the Analysis of Copula variation in African American Vernacular English: with Arnetha Ball, Renée Blake, Raina Jackson, and Nomi" in Rickford's book *African American Vernacular English.*

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its use of the possessive pronoun *they* in constructions such as *Bring they son* and *It's they game*. This feature is quiet robust and "distinguishes AAVE from benchmark European American vernaculars" (Wolfram, 2000). These four features briefly described here were used on a more exploratory basis and while they are reported on, they are not the main empirical findings of this study[18].

4.4.4 Feature Choice Limitations

Though there are many features that could have been selected as the focus, especially ones that are more salient and specific to AAE, *be*-levelling and fricative stopping were chosen because the contexts in which they appear were likely to be found in post-game interviews. One of the most identifying features of AAE, copula deletion or null copula, was not chosen as the syntactic feature to focus on as the copula is almost invariably present in the past tense and these post-game interviews generally discuss the game that has just occurred (Rickford, 1999). Copula deletion was, however, chosen as one of the additional features to investigate as instances of this feature were noticed in the preliminary stages of data collection. It was thought that while the contexts for null copula were not to be found in post-game interviews, the feature was still being used and thus would provide an interesting data point. One syntactic and one phonological feature were chosen to mitigate any effects should they pattern differently. The additional aspectual and syntactic features that were chosen to contribute to the overall picture of an athlete's AAE usage, were chosen because

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[18] To read more on the features mentioned, I recommend Rickford, 1999 and Green, 2002.

of their possibility to appear in the context of post-game interviews as well as
their association to AAE (Green, 2002; Rickford, 1999; Wolfram & Schilling,
2015).

<u>4.5 Method of Analysis</u>

To form an analysis of the data collected, I will use an established
sociolinguistic method of creating a ratio comparing the number of times a
feature was used to the total number of instances in which it could have been.
The use of a ratio will level the various interview lengths, providing a clearer
snapshot of the linguistic choices being made. This quantitative method will be
used for the fricative stopping and *be*-leveling features that are of specific focus
in this research. For the four additional aspectual and syntactic features
described in subsection 4.4.3, the analysis will not be quantitative but rather will
be based solely on the presence or lack of the non-standard feature in the
interviews. This method of analysis will act as a check to see what other
prominent AAE features the athletes may or may not use. The combination of
both forms of language analysis will provide a multi-faceted assessment of the
athletes' language usage.

5 Results

Table 2 below provides the quantitative analysis of the number of times the
SAE dental fricative and the AAE dental stop were used along with the total
number of tokens that appeared in each video. The percentage of instances of
the AAE dental stop was then calculated using these numbers. The athletes are
listed in alphabetical order within their gender starting with the women. The

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two videos were assigned their letter (A or B) based on the date of the

interview.

Table 2: *Instances of Dental Stops and Fricatives*

Athlete	Video	Dental fricative (SAE)	Stop	Total Number of Tokens	Percentage of Instances of AAE Feature (%)
Tina Charles	Video A	43	1	44	2.3
	Video B	23	2	25	8.0
Sylvia Fowles	Video A	10	8	18	44.4
	Video B	11	3	14	21.4
Maya Moore	Video A	20	0	20	0.0
	Video B	9	0	9	0.0
Nneka Ogwumike	Video A	29	3	32	9.4
	Video B	14	2	16	12.5
Candace Parker	Video A	11	1	12	8.3
	Video B	19	1	20	5.0

Anthony Davis	Video A	12	9	21	42.9
	Video B	4	11	15	73.3
Kevin Durant	Video A	14	11	25	44.0
	Video B	3	10	13	76.9
James Harden	Video A	7	3	10	30.0
	Video B	4	2	6	33.3
Lebron James	Video A	8	9	17	52.9
	Video B	9	26	35	74.3
Russell Westbrook	Video A	5	9	14	64.3
	Video B	5	7	12	58.3

In Table 2, the averages within gender show variance but are generally within a similar range. Moore is noticeable as she had no instances whatsoever of the dental stop, whereas the other women at least had one occurrence. Fowles has noticeable higher averages of AAE, her lowest percentage still being more than ten percent higher than the highest from any other female athlete. Among the men, Harden stands out as having lower averages with an almost a ten percent margin between his highest average and the lowest average for any other male.

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Table 3 is formatted in the same style as table 2 given above but highlights the instances of SAE 'be' and AAE *be*-leveling within the videos analyzed. The percentage of AAE *be*-leveling was calculated by dividing the number of instances of *be*-leveling by the total number of tokens—a sum of SAE 'be' and AAE *be*-leveling—to create a ratio.

Table 3: *Instances of Be-leveling and Standard English 'be'*

Athlete	Video	Standard American English 'be'	*Be-*leveling	Total Number of Tokens	Percentage of Instances of AAE Feature (%)
Tina Charles	Video A	2	0	2	0.0
	Video B	0	1	1	100.0
Sylvia Fowles	Video A	0	2	2	100.0
	Video B	1	1	2	50.0
Maya Moore	Video A	0	0	0	—
	Video B	0	0	0	—
Nneka Ogwumike	Video A	3	0	3	0.0
	Video B	0	0	0	—
Candace Parker	Video A	3	0	3	0.0
	Video B	8	0	8	0.0

|					
Anthony Davis	Video A	0	1	1	100.0
	Video B	2	0	2	0.0
Kevin Durant	Video A	0	1	1	100.0
	Video B	0	3	3	100.0
James Harden	Video A	2	0	2	0.0
	Video B	1	0	1	0.0
Lebron James	Video A	0	3	3	100.0
	Video B	1	0	1	0.0
Russell Westbrook	Video A	0	1	1	100.0
	Video B	1	0	1	0.0

Comparing the two tables above, there is a noticeable difference in the total number of tokens that appeared in each video. The syntactic feature emerged much less often, with the highest number of contexts for the feature being only eight and three of the videos not even having the context for *be*-leveling to appear. As the data for this feature are quite small, the percentage of usage is somewhat skewed as one instance of either SAE 'be' or *be*-leveling has more of an impact on the ratio.

   For *be*-leveling, Moore notably had no contexts for the feature to appear in either of her interviews and Ogwumike had none in one of hers. Of the women, only Charles and Fowles used the AAE feature. Interestingly, Harden

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is the only male that had no instances of *be*-leveling across both of his interviews.

To provide a more visual snapshot of the data shown in the tables above, I have averaged the two percentages of each AAE feature across the videos for each athlete to create an average percentage of AAE feature usage. Figure 1 shows the average percentage of dental stop occurrence by athlete with the women represented by the purple bars and the men by the blue.

Figure 1: *Average Percentage of Dental Stop Occurrence by Athlete*
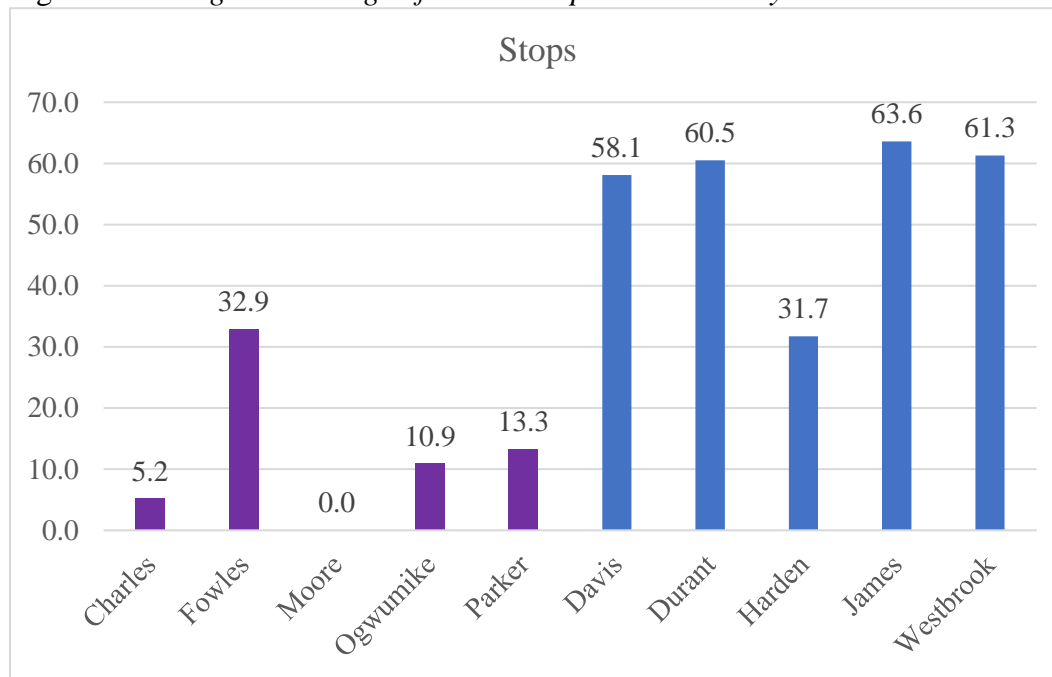
Above, Moore and Harden can be seen as standouts for having considerably less AAE usage than the other athletes within their gender. The men, excluding Harden, are all within five percent of each other.

Figure 2 below provides the average percentage of *be*-leveling instances by athlete across the two videos that were analyzed, with the women displayed in purple and the men in blue.

Figure 2: *Average Percentage of Be-leveling Occurrence by Athlete*
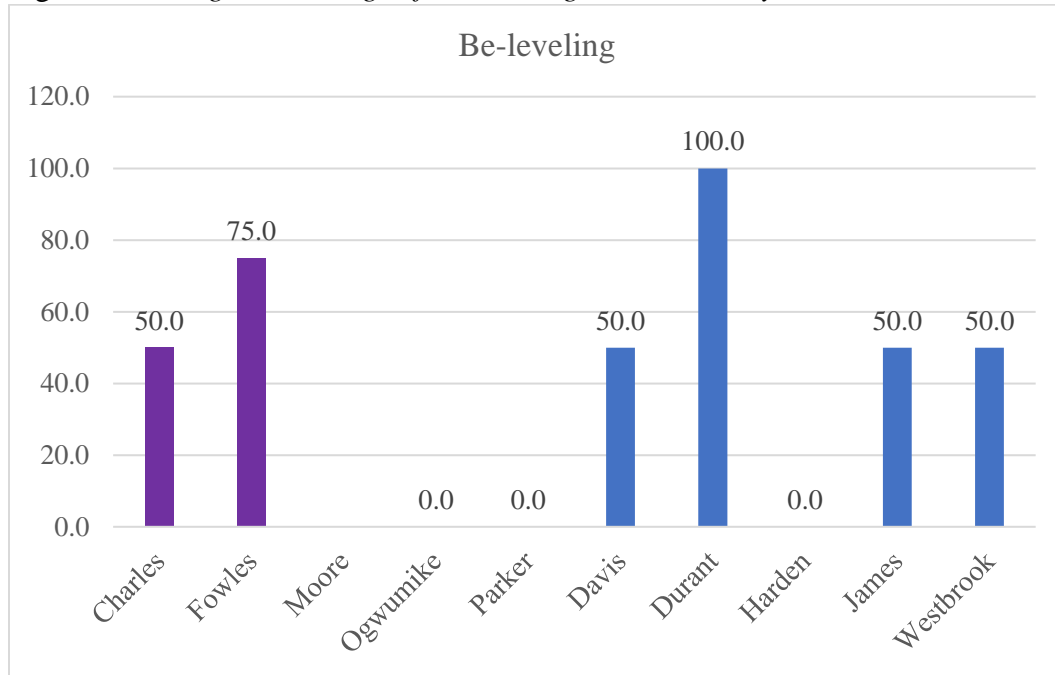
Moore and Harden continue to standout as athletes that have lower usage of AAE than the other athletes within their gender as can be seen in Figure 2, though any conclusion regarding *be*-leveling should be drawn with extreme caution based on the very limited sample sizes.

In order to see a more general gender-based comparison of AAE feature usage, I averaged all of the percentages of dental stops for each gender and this data is displayed in the figure below.

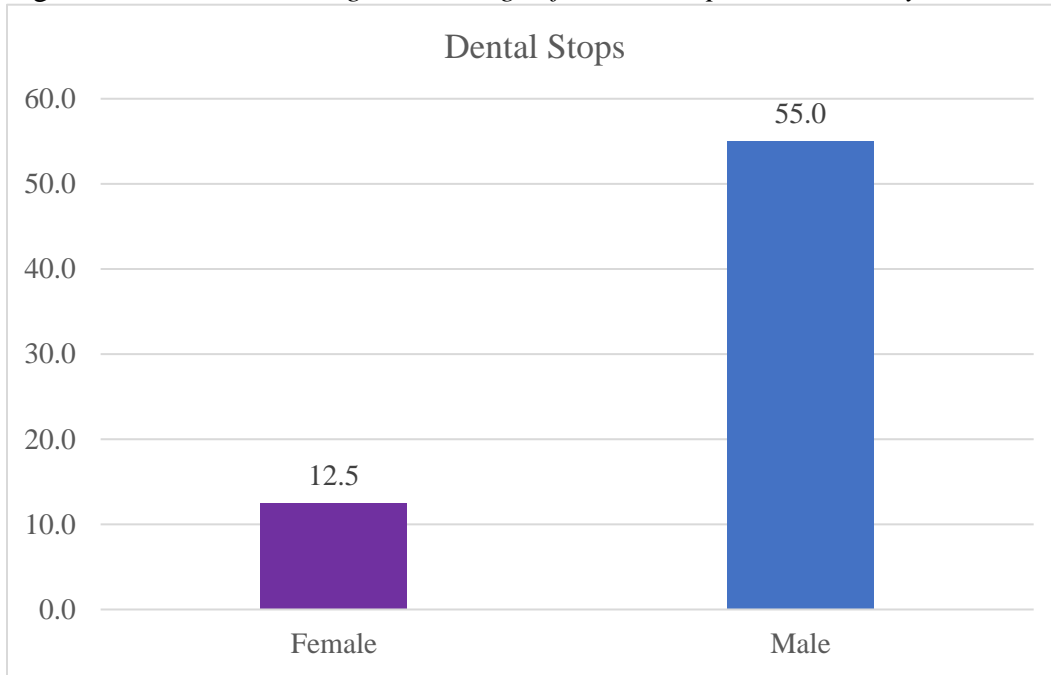Figure 3: *Combined Average Percentage of Dental Stop Occurrence by Gender*
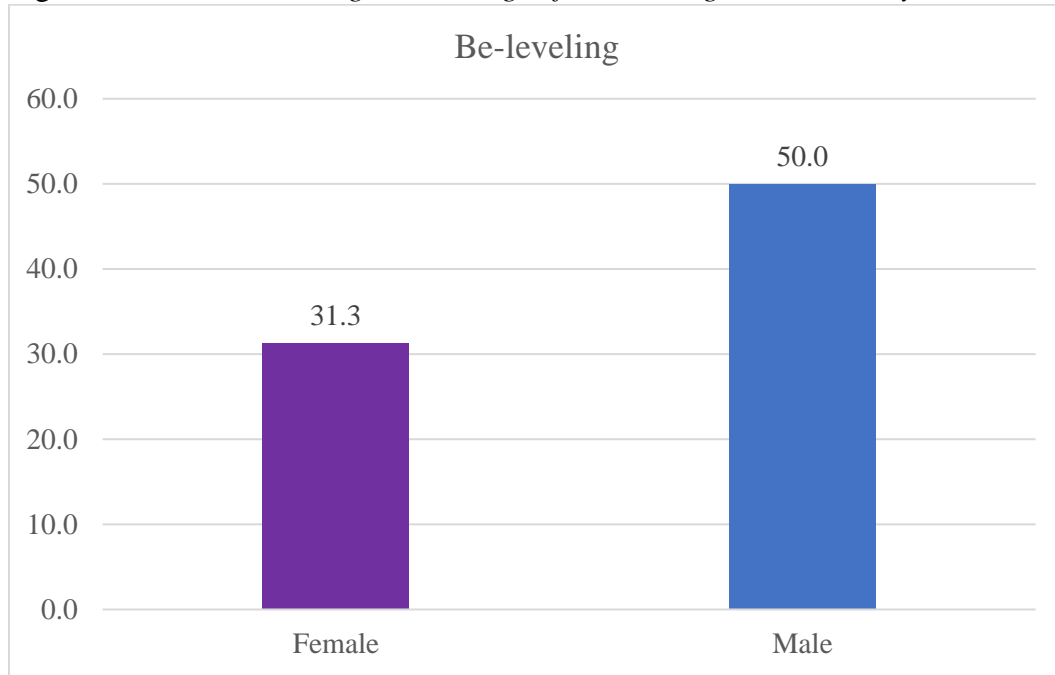

Figure 3 above demonstrates a clear gender difference in dental stopping. The males as a class, use dental stops over four times as often as the women.

In the same manner as Figure 3, Figure 4 gives the combined average percentage of *be*-leveling occurrence across gender.

Figure 4: *Combined Average Percentage of Be-leveling Occurrence by Gender*

Just as in Figure 3, there is a clear gap between the women and men's instances of AAE, though there the disparity for *be*-leveling is not as great as it is for dental stopping. Even so, the men use *be*-leveling almost twenty percent more than the women in the small sample size used.

Figures 1 through 4 demonstrate that there is not only a variance in AAE usage across gender, but also within gender. Fowles stands out at the woman with the highest percentages in both features. For both features, Moore and Harden consistently have the lowest percentages among their gender.

Table 4 details the presence or absence of the additional aspectual and syntactic features in the videos.

Table 4: *Additional Aspectual and Syntactic Feature*

Athlete	Video	Copula Deletion	*Ain't*	Habitual *be*	Possessive *they*
Tina Charles	Video A				
	Video B	✓			
Sylvia Fowles	Video A	✓		✓	
	Video B	✓			✓
Maya Moore	Video A				
	Video B				
Nneka Ogwumike	Video A				
	Video B				
Candace Parker	Video A				
	Video B				
Anthony Davis	Video A	✓			
	Video B				
Kevin Durant	Video A	✓			
	Video B				
James Harden	Video A	✓			
	Video B				
Lebron James	Video A				✓
	Video B	✓		✓	
Russell Westbrook	Video A				
	Video B	✓		✓	

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Ain't was never used in any of interviews studied. Interestingly, all the men used at least one of the additional features studied, but Charles and Fowles were the only women that did. Copula deletion or null copula was surprisingly the most commonly used feature of the additional four considered. This was not expected as the copula is almost always present in the past tense, and speech in post-game interviews was thought to be primarily in the past about the game that just occurred.

6 Discussion

Between the dental stopping and *be*-leveling, there is an obvious gap in the number of instances for either the SAE or AAE feature. The contexts for *be*-leveling appear much less often in the span of the videos as compared to the dental fricatives and stops. The lack of instances could be a result of the content of the interview as well as many other factors one being, that *be*-leveling specifically, or syntactic features generally, are less salient in AAE or the specific dialects of the athletes chosen. Though the results are largely congruent with that of the dentals, any conclusion drawn from the *be*-leveling data should be in caution due to the small sample size available.

When looking at the averages of the player's videos within their respective genders, there is a definite difference between the percentage of AAE usage. It is impossible to know why these athletes make the specific language choices that they do without personally knowing them or asking. That said, I will try to make connections between their language choices and parts of their identity that could affect such decisions. For dental stopping, the women had

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average percentages between 0.0 and 32.9. Fowles is the highest at the top end

of the range, almost twenty percent more than the second highest women. The

women's range for *be*-leveling is from 0.0 to 75.0, though these numbers are

conflated due to the small sample size. Fowles also has the highest percentage

of *be*-leveling at 75.0 percent and of the four additional features studied, uses

two per interview. Fowles' time in Louisiana for her college years could be a

reason that she uses more non-standard features as Southern dialectical features

can and do overlap with those of AAE (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). Though

Charles has the second lowest percentage of dental stopping, she is the only

other female that uses *be*-leveling and one of the four additional features.

For both features, Moore has the lowest percentage of the women.

Regarding the syntactic feature, she had no contexts for it to appear in either of

her interviews. Ogwumike is the only other person that did not have context for

be-leveling to occur, and this only happened in one of her interviews.   A lack of

data for these videos means that any analysis is inconclusive, though, based on

the absence of dental stopping and any of the other four features in her

interviews, I expect that Moore would likely use SAE 'be' conjugations.

Moore's lack of AAE features could be because she spent her college years at

the University of Connecticut in New England which is known for being

primarily white-centered. She has also been very outspoken about her identity

as a Christian and that part of her identity could affect her language choices.

Inter-gender variance in AAE usage was also found among the men.

Their range for dental stopping is from 31.7 to 63.6 percent. Four of the five

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men were all within five percent of each other. For *be*-leveling, the range is from 0.0 to 100.0 percent of the time, with Harden at 0.0, Durant at 100.0, and the other three men at 50.0. Each of the men used null copula at least once across their two interviews. James and Westbrook are the only men that used more than one of the additional features: James used possessive *they* in one video and both copula deletion and habitual *be* in another while Westbrook used copula deletion and habitual *be* together in an interview. Based on the relative closeness in averages, there is not one specific male that stood out to use more AAE than the others.

Of the men, Harden had considerably less than the others in terms of dental stops. The other four men had percentages in the high fifties or low sixties within five percent of each other, however, Harden's percentage of dental stops was almost half that at 31.7. He also was the only male did not have any instances of *be*-leveling. His difference from the other men studied, could be a result of him being born in Southern California and going to university in Arizona, as those places are not particularly known for their non-Standard dialects. He also identifies as a Christian and this religious aspect may result in more monitored speech.

Moore and Harden are the two standouts as the athletes in their respective genders that had the least (or no) amount of AAE feature usage. There are several factors that could affect their language choices. One aspect of their identities that they have in common is their faith, and this may have contributed to their similar patterning. However, Durant also identifies as

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Christian and has much higher percentages, which implies that religion is not the only factor at play here.

Using the gender averages, the disparity of AAE usage can be easily seen across gender for both features. The women use dental stops an average of 12.5 percent of the time while the men use them at an average percent of 55.0. This is a disparity of 42.5 percent, meaning the men use the AAE phonological feature almost four and a half times more than the women. For *be*-leveling, the women's average was 31.3 percent compared to the men's at 50.0. This gap is smaller than that of the dental stopping, but still illustrates that the men use the AAE feature 18.7 percent more, or just over one and half times than the women. The men also each used at least one of the supplemental features investigated across their two interviews, but only two of the women used any of the additional features. Overall, finding the average of total AAE usage by gender, women use AAE features 30.6 percent less than the men. This, along with the other averages, indicates a clear gender difference in the employment of AAE features such that men use them much more often than women.

Men were found to use AAE features more than women in this study. I propose that the reason women have less AAE in their speech is because of the increased outside pressures they face in the sports industry as well as the increased judgments on women's speech. As detailed in the literature review, women in sport are at a disadvantage socially and economically compared to men. Women and women's sport are not granted nearly the same legitimacy and prestige as men and men's sport are. Thus, due to this power dynamic,

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women would be more likely to closely monitor their speech to not give critics any more reason to belittle them. The implications of this study's findings are that women may feel more pressure to conform to socially acceptable standards to be recognized. These findings point to inherent sexism within the sports industry that affects women, not only in matters of finance and prestige, but in influencing their language choices as well.

7 Conclusion

The speech of five male and five female professional African American basketball players were studied to determine if they used two specific features of AAE in public settings, and if so, to what extent. The sample size for be-leveling was quite small and because of this, conclusions made from such data must be taken with caution. Though the sample size was small, the data was congruent with that for dental stopping. It was observed that there was AAE usage by the studied athletes in the context of post-game interviews. Based on the limited sample size for the syntactic feature of *be*-leveling, it appears that phonological dental stopping is more common. This could mean that phonological features are more used than syntactic features in AAE, generally, or that this pattern is specific to this data set. Intra- and inter-gender differences were found with the women using 30.6 percent less AAE features than the men on average. The obvious gender variance of AAE usage is consistent with my hypothesis that women would use AAE less than the men. I believe this disparity to be a result of the historical and present increased criticism and

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judgments that women face for their language choices and in the realm of sports.

7.1 Limitations of this Study

Though this study shows obvious inter- and intra-gender differences in AAE usage, there are limitations to the scope of coverage. The limitations in the feature choices were already briefly covered in the methodology section. This study was also limited in the number and choice of athletes investigated as well as the sport of focus. Different athletes and different sports would surely pattern differently. The number of interviews analyzed per person was also a constraint. A larger number of interviews analyzed would provide a greater sample size and thus a more concrete conclusion regarding the syntactic feature. The interviews chosen, though random, could affect language choices as they were not controlled for the interviewer's race or gender.

7.2 Areas for Future Research

This study only breaches the number of things that could be studied at the cross-section of sports and sociolinguistics. I would like to explore the language choices of athletes in other sports in addition to any difference that may exist between individual and team sports. Of particular interest to me is if non-native AAE speakers take on some features of AAE when their team is mostly native speakers as a means of team camaraderie. If so, what features are adopted (syntactic, phonological, lexical)? Is the use of some features seen as too much, but others are okay? And if non-native AAE speakers do implement some AAE

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features does this form a sort of sports/team dialect? Overall, there is still a lot of research to be done, and I hope to explore some of these topics in the future.

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Appendix

Videos of Each Athlete Analyzed

<u>Charles</u>

Video A:

Hidden Diamond Sports. (2016, July 10). *Tina Charles Interview | 2016 July |*

    HDS. Retrieved from

    https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXPrtREJXdQ&t=3s

Video B:

A Lot of Sports Talk. (2016, June 14). *ALOST Recap: Liberty 91, Wings 88;*

    Tina Charles postgame interview. Retrieved from

    https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fERi7eb2DTY

<u>Davis</u>

Video A:

New Orleans Pelicans. (2017, November 7). *Anthony Davis Postgame Interview*

    with Jen Hale - 11/3/17. Retrieved from

    https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLDgwpjRcnA

Video B:

House of Highlights. (2018, December 28). *Anthony Davis On Luka Doncic -*

    Postgame Interview | Mavericks vs Pelicans - Dec 28, 2018. Retrieved

    from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZkfMdjwlfrM

Durant

Video A:

House of Highlights. (2018, November 26). *Kevin Durant Postgame Interview |*

Warriors vs Magic | November 26, 2018. Retrieved from

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bz0GEUKjUKU

Video B:

House of Highlights. (2019, January 26). *Kevin Durant Postgame Interview -*

Warriors vs Celtics | January 26, 2019 | 2018-19 NBA Season.

Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AqutWQRVf3c

Fowles

Video A:

LASportsAccess. (2018, June 5). *Post-Game Interview LAvMIN: Sylvia Fowles*

Loss to LA, Nneka Ogwumike and WNBA Growth. Retrieved from

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImDg7TtDJGM

Video B:

Chicago Sky. (2014, July 9). *Sylvia Fowles Post Game 7-9-14*. Retrieved from

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ut0qr2ZwWXI

Harden

Video A:

House of Highlights. (2018, December 13). *James Harden Postgame Interview -*

Lakers vs Rockets | Dec 13, 2018 | 2018-19 NBA Season. Retrieved from

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XT4ax-qklN0

Video B:

House of Highlights. (2019, January 14). *James Harden Postgame Interview |*

Rockets vs Grizzlies - January 14, 2019. Retrieved from

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Q7az4YODbQ

<u>James</u>

Video A:

House of Highlights. (2018, November 21). *LeBron James Postgame Interview*

- Lakers vs Cavaliers | November 21, 2018. Retrieved from

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vRFy7bWEECM

Video B:

Los Angeles Lakers. (2018, November 4). *Postgame: LeBron James (11/04/18)*

- YouTube. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-

mVK1cpvk8

<u>Moore</u>

Video A:

My Mind On Sports. (2014, May 17). *May 16th Post Game: Maya Moore*.

Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2APBJEVAhc

Video B:

UConn Report. (2018, August 19). *Interview with Minnesota Lynx's Maya*

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i90GQbDFB7o

Ogwumike

Video A:

A Lot of Sports Talk. (2017, May 31). *WNBA: Nneka Ogwumike postgame*

interview (05.30.17). Retrieved from

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdh0U5tui_I&t=28s

Video B:

LASportsAccess. (2018, June 5). *Post-Game Interview LAvMIN: Nneka*

Ogwumike Reflects on Win over Minnesota and Candace Parker.

Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zrohlFNqL6w

Parker

Video A:

LASportsAccess. (2018, August 15). *Post-Game Interview LAvNY: Candace*

Parker on Playoffs and Closing the Season. Retrieved from

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehMowd6dBnI&t=

Video B:

FinestMagazine. (2018, June 17). *Washington Mystics vs LA Sparks - Candace*

Parker post game. Retrieved from

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFCgfY2snLc&t=

Westbrook

Video A:

MLG Highlights. (2018, February 6). *Russell Westbrook Postgame Interview /*

Thunder vs GS Warriors / Feb 6. Retrieved from

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y65fsfMBBKE

Video B:

The Oklahoman. (2018, November 24). *Thunder vs Nuggets - Russell*

Westbrook. Retrieved from

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UiYev1sDS6w