African American English Grammar
(based on pages 109-128 of Rickford and Rickford 2000)

I. Introduction

Today we will see that AAE is perfectly systematic not only in terms of its vocabulary and pronunciation but also when it comes to its morphological/syntactic patterns.

II. Grammatical features of AAE

Plural *s* and *dem*

Speakers of AAE sometimes ditch the plural *s*. Also, AAE has other means of marking plurality, as with *dem*. Consider (1), where the nominal expression refers to John and his friends.

(1) John an dem

The word *dem* can also occur right before the noun to mark plurality, as in (2).

(2) dem books
   ‘those books’

Existential *it is*

The AAE counterpart of the *there is* construction is *it’s* or *i’s*, which can occur with either singular or plural forms. This is shown in (3).

(3) it’s/i’s a lot of girls
   ‘there are a lot of girls’

Absence of third-person singular *s*

AAE seems to make the rules of Standard English more regular when it comes to endings on verbs with various subjects. In this vernacular verbs are conjugated in the same way regardless of the number and person of the subject. The examples in (4) are illustrative of this.

(4) a. John have a car.
   b. She have three kids.

Absence of possessive *’s*
The possessive ‘s is also systematically omitted in AAE. Possession is indicated by the juxtaposition of the two nouns, as in (5). This is actually a feature characteristic of many pidgins and creoles.

(5) girl house  
‘girl’s house’

**Invariant be**

The following examples show that AAE uses the invariant be to express situations with future or hypothetical reference and to mark habituality.

(6) If I be the winner, I be glad.
(7) He be talkin’ with his lady every day.

If (7) illustrates a sentence expressing habituality, the question is how ongoing actions are described in AAE. (8) provides an answer to this.

(8) He talkin’ to her right now.

Now, when AAE speakers want to intensify the continuous nature of an action, they will sometimes use the word steady, as in (9).

(9) He be steady runnin’.

**Zero copula**

Another noteworthy feature of AAE is that the copula is often omitted, as in (10).

(10) People crazy.

That AAE is constrained, just any other language or dialect, is shown by the fact that there are some copula forms that cannot be left out. This applies to past-tense copulas and the contracted form of am. The infinitive be can neither be deleted.

**Been and BEEN**

The form been is the unstressed counterpart of BEEN. They more or less correspond to the forms has been and have been in Standard English. The stressed from BEEN is often called a remote time marker because it describes an action that took place or a state that came into being a long time ago.

(11) She ain’t tell me that today, you know. She BEEN tell me that.

Also, when BEEN brings a state into being, that state remains in effect up to the moment of speech. (12) means she is still married.

(12) She BIN married.

**Toni Morrison’s five present tenses**
With all the above in mind, we can now provide a list of examples illustrating the five “present tenses” of AAE.

(13) a. He runnin.
    b. He be running.
    c. He be steady running.
    d. He been running.
    e. He BEEN running.

Q: Can you recall how these sentences are different in terms of meaning?

**Tense-aspect markers**

AAE has a number of tense-aspect markers, which are used to express various temporal properties of situations.

*done*

*Done*, for example, expresses the completed nature of an action. It’s often more or less equivalent to Standard English forms with *has* or *have*.

(14) I done that enough.
    ‘I have had enough.’

*be done*

*Done* is sometimes combined with the copula *be* in sentences like (15).

(15) The children be done ate by the time I get there. (habituality is expressed by the copula)

*finna*

The marker *finna* is used for immediate futures. It is derived from *fixing to*, which a common form used by both black and white speakers in the South. Consider (16).

(16) This thang finna get turned out.
    ‘This thing is about to get rowdy.’

**Negative forms and constructions**

The most common negative form in AAE is *ain’t*, as in (17).

(17) He ain’t never had a job in his life.

Another distinctive feature here is the use of the double negative.

(18) I don’t want nothing.

Q: How is (18) interpreted?
Indirect questions

When it comes to indirect question, speakers of AAE often use inverted forms, as in (19).
(19) I asked him could he come with me.

Double (or triple) modals

A final interesting feature that we discuss today is the use of double or triple modals in a single verbal expression. This is shown in (20).

(20) a. He might could do the work.
    b. They might should oughta do it.

III. Conclusion

Systematicity regarding the morphology and syntax of AAE is apparent. One final thing that should be mentioned here is that speakers use AAE in various contexts to mark differences of social class, gender, and age, and to express how comfortable they are with their audiences and topics. For this reason, AAE is dynamic and variable in everyday use.