

Understanding Linguistic Patterns: Uninflected *be* in African American English

Examining the data: Read each pair of sentences in list A, and decide which sentence in each pair sounds better. For example, in the first sentence pair, does it sound better to say, “They usually *be* tired when they come home” or “They *be* tired right now”? For each pair of sentences, place a check (✓) next to the sentence that sounds better with the *be*.

LIST A

1. a. ___ They usually *be* tired when they come home.
b. ___ They *be* tired right now.
2. a. ___ When we play basketball, she *be* on my team.
b. ___ The girl in the picture *be* my sister.
3. a. ___ James *be* coming to school right now.
b. ___ James always *be* coming to school.
4. a. ___ My ankle *be* broken from the fall.
b. ___ Sometimes my ears *be* itching.

Once we have gone over the answers, examine the data for a pattern:

Applying the rule: Now that you understand when African American English speakers use *be*, use your rule to predict whether or not a speaker of African American English would use the sentences in list B. Write Y for Yes if the sentence follows the dialect pattern, and N for No if it does not.

LIST B

1. ___ The students always *be* talking in class.
2. ___ The students don't *be* talking right now.
3. ___ Sometimes the teacher *be* early for class.
4. ___ At the moment the teacher *be* in the lounge.

Answer Key

LIST A

1. a. They usually be tired when they come home.
b. They be tired right now.
2. a. When we play basketball, she be on my team.
b. The girl in the picture be my sister.
3. a. James be coming to school right now.
b. James always be coming to school.
4. a. My ankle be broken from the fall.
b. Sometimes my ears be itching.

Linguistic pattern:

An AAE speaker can use uninflected *be* when talking about an action that occurs habitually (and not an action that occurs once or a permanent state as in sentence 2b). In Standard English, these sentences require the use of an adverb such as *usually*, *always*, or *sometimes*.

LIST B

1. The students always be talking in class.
2. The students don't be talking right now.
3. Sometimes the teacher be early for class.
4. At the moment the teacher be in the lounge.