

Phonological Restraints on Nicknaming Conventions in African American Vernacular English

1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this research is to determine the phonological rules governing nickname formation in African American Vernacular English, or AAVE. When compared to Standard American English (SAE), AAVE nicknaming conventions differ in two important ways:

- a) In the case of name-based hypocoristics, SAE utilizes two distinct morphological patterns: truncation (Robert → Rob) and suffixation (Rob → Robby) (Weeda, 1992). In AAVE, however, three morphological processes apply: truncation, suffixation and reduplication (Lee → Lee-Lee). In both variants, multisyllabic names must first undergo truncation before any other processes are applied.
- b) Truncation in SAE follows a pattern in which closed syllables are preferred (David → Dave) (Weeda, 1992); yet, as we will see below, truncation in AAVE favors open syllables (David → De-De [der-deɪ]).

The focus of this paper will be on how phonological properties such as syllable count, syllable weight and stress influence the morphology of nickname formation in AAVE, and also how phonology may determine the preference of one form over another.

1.2 Introduction to Features of AAVE

For the purposes of this research, some important features of AAVE (Bailey and Thomas, 1998; Green, 2002) must be considered to perform an analysis:

- a) Deletion of unstressed syllables [ə.'baut → baut]([open sylls only?](#))
- b) Front stressing of initial syllables [di.'tɔɪt → 'di.tɔɪt]([disylls only?](#))

2 Data

2.1 Methodology

The following data were collected from three speakers by the researcher. The speakers were first asked to provide possible nicknames for all forms (truncated, suffixed and reduplicated), and then were asked to indicate: (a) the well-formedness of a variant, and (b) their preference for a particular form. In circumstances where speakers' judgments varied, the majority (two out of three) was assumed to be more common [and that is the form \(or starred form\) that is presented in the Reduplicated column below](#). All data below are transcribed in IPA for clarity.

The [untruncated forms of](#) names have been divided into classes [on the basis of the following phonological factors as follows](#):

- 1) the overall syllable count
- 2) the open or closed status of the final syllable
- 3) stress placement
- 4) the open or closed status of the stressed syllable

The organization of the data into subclasses is intended to aid in the analysis and to give insight into which aspects of prosody affect nickname formation, and to what degree.

2.2 Data

Table 2.2.1 Monosyllabic, Open Final Syllable

Name	Truncated	Reduplicated	Suffixed	Preferred
1. [li]	N/A	[li-li]	N/A	[li-li] ¹
2. [ɔ̃ɑ]	N/A	[ɔ̃ɑ-ɔ̃ɑ]	N/A	[ɔ̃ɑ-ɔ̃ɑ]
3. [maɪ]	N/A	[maɪ-maɪ]	N/A	[maɪ-maɪ]
4. [feɪ]	N/A	*[feɪ-feɪ]	N/A	N/A

Table 2.2.2 Monosyllabic, Closed Final Syllable

1. [b.ɹus]	N/A	[b.ɹus-b.ɹus]	[b.ɹus-i]	[b.ɹus-i]
2. [klaɪd]	N/A	*[klaɪd-klaɪd]	*[klaɪd-i]	N/A
3. [weɪn]	N/A	*[weɪn-weɪn]	*[weɪn-i]	N/A
4. [mæɔ̃ʒ]	N/A	*[mæɔ̃ʒ-mæɔ̃ʒ]	*[mæɔ̃ʒ-i]	N/A

Table 2.2.3 Disyllabic, Open Final Syllable, Open Stressed Syllable (Initial)

1. [ˈɔ̃ʒi.nə]	[ɔ̃ʒi]	[ɔ̃ʒi-ɔ̃ʒi]	[ɔ̃ʒin-i]	[ɔ̃ʒi-ɔ̃ʒi]
2. [ˈkweɪ.lu]	[kweɪ]	[kweɪ-kweɪ]	*[kweɪl-i]	[kweɪ-kweɪ]
3. [ˈʃi.mou]	[mou]	[mou-mou]	*[ʃim-i]	[mou-mou]

Table 2.2.4 Disyllabic, Open Final Syllable, Closed Stressed Syllable (Initial)

1. [ˈʌn.dɪɪ]	[dɪɪ]	[dɪɪ-dɪɪ]	N/A	[dɪɪ]
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Table 2.2.5 Disyllabic, Closed Final Syllable, Open Stressed Syllable (Initial)

1. [ˈlou.ɪs]	[lou]	[lou-lou]	N/A	[lou-lou]
2. [ˈɛ.ɪk] [#]	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
3. [ˈlou.nɪn]	[ɹou]	[ɹou-ɹou]	*[ɹouɹou-i]	[ɹou-ɹou]

Table 2.2.6 Disyllabic, Closed Final Syllable, Closed Stressed Syllable (Initial)

1. [ˈwʊlf.gæŋg]	[wʊlf]	*[wʊlf-wʊlf]	[wʊlf-i]	[wʊlf]
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Table 2.2.7 Disyllabic, Open Final Syllable, Open Stressed Syllable (Final)

1. [lə.ˈneɪ]	[neɪ]	[neɪ-neɪ]	N/A	[neɪ-neɪ]
2. [mə.ˈɪi]	[ɪi]	[ɪi-ɪi]	N/A	[ɪi-ɪi]
3. [fə.ˈlu]	[lu]	[lu-lu]	*[lu-i]	[lu-lu]
4. [i.ˈsaɪ]	[i]/[saɪ]	*[saɪ-saɪ]	N/A	[i]

¹ In circumstances where there was only one form for the nickname, that form is listed as the preferred form.[#] In circumstances where a suggested nickname is orthography-based, it is disregarded.

Table 2.2.8 Disyllabic, Closed Final Syllable, Closed Stressed Syllable (Final)

1. [ɪɑ.ˈul]	[ɪɑ]	[ɪɑ-ɪɑ]	N/A	[ɪɑ]
2. [i.ˈvɛt]	[i]	*[vɛt-vɛt]	*[vɛt-i]	[i]
3. [ou.ˈlɛn]	[ou]/[lɛn]	[lɛn-lɛn]	[lɛn-i]	[ou]
4. [ə.ˈdaɪf]	*[daɪf]	*[daɪf-daɪf]	*[daɪf-i]	N/A

Table 2.2.9 Trisyllabic, Open Final Syllable, Open Stressed Syllable (Initial)

1. [ˈma.ɪ.ou]	[maɪ]/[ˈɪ.ou]	[maɪ-maɪ]	*[maɪ-i]	[ˈɪ.ou]
2. [ˈzi.ni.ə]	[zɪn]	*[zɪn-zɪn]	[zɪn-i]	[zɪn]
3. [ˈɑ.mə.li]	[ˈɑ.mə]	[li-li]	*[ɑm-i]	[ˈɑ.mə]
4. [ˈzæ.nə.du]	[zæɪ]	[zæɪ-zæɪ]	[zæɪ-i]	[zæɪ]

Table 2.2.10 Trisyllabic, Closed Final Syllable, Open Stressed Syllable (Initial)

1. [ˈbou.li.vɑɪ]	[bou]	[bou-bou]	*[bou-i]	[bou-bou]
2. [ˈdeɪ.mi.ɪn]	[deɪ]	[deɪ-deɪ]	*[deɪm-i]	[deɪ-deɪ]
3. [ˈæ.zə.bɛθ]	[ˈæ.zə]	[zɑ-zɑ]	[æz-i]	[ˈæ.zə]
4. [ˈbra.də.ɪk]	[ɪk]	[ɪk-ɪk]	[ɪk-i]	[ɪk]

Table 2.2.11 Trisyllabic, Open Final Syllable, Open Stressed Syllable (Medial)

1. [fə.ˈla.nə]	[la.nə]	[la-la]	[lan-i]	[la.nə]
2. [æɪ.ˈva.ɪou]	[vaɪ]	[vaɪ-vaɪ]	*[vaɪ-i]	[vaɪ]
3. [ə.ˈja.meɪ]	[ˈja.meɪ]	[ja-ja]	[jam-i]	[ja-ja]

Table 2.2.12 Trisyllabic, Closed Final Syllable, Open Stressed Syllable (Medial)

1. [mou.ˈha.mid]	[mou]	[mou-mou]	*[mou-i]	[mou-mou]
2. [ɪb.ˈteɪ.sæm]	[teɪ]	[teɪ-teɪ]	N/A	[teɪ-teɪ]
3. [æs.ˈfou.dəl]	[fou]	[fou-fou]	*[fou-i]	[fou-fou]

Table 2.2.13 Trisyllabic, Closed Final Syllable, Closed Stressed Syllable (Medial)

1. [ɛks.ˈzeɪv.jəɪ]	[ɛks]/[zeɪv]	[zeɪ-zeɪ]	*[zeɪv-i]	[ɛks]
2. [ou.ˈwɛn.θu]	[ou]/*[wɛn]	*[wɛn-wɛn]	*[wɛn-i]	[ou]

3 Analysis

3.1 Truncation

3.1.2 Syllables and Syllable Weight

Because truncation is the basis for both suffixed and reduplicated forms, we must begin our analysis here; yet, before we can continue, a brief review of syllable weight is in order. The majority of languages allow only two syllable weights: the light syllable, which has one prosodic unit of weight called a mora; and the heavy syllable, which has two moras. These two types of syllables would be called monomoraic and bimoraic, respectively (Kenstowicz, 1994; Weeda, 1992). Both vowels and consonants may carry one or two mora (Kenstowicz, 1994) [\(with consequent phonetic differences\)](#).

English has a minimal syllable of {V} and a maximal syllable of {CCVCC}, with a special adjunction rule for [s] (Kenstowicz, 1994). Vowels in open stressed syllables tend to be bimoraic, and vowels in closed syllables are monomoraic, while the second mora is assigned to the coda, which can be distributed among multiple consonants (Kenstowicz, 1994; Weeda, 1992.) Additionally, English is a trochaic language, which means that metrical feet are left-strong, i.e. the stress falls to the left syllable (Weeda, 1992). In SAE, stress tends to fall on closed syllables, yet in AAVE open syllables seem to attract stress (see section 1.2.b). Therefore, if the AAVE syllable inventory is {V*, VC, CV*, CCV, CVC, CCVC} (also see 1.2.c), where (*) indicates the optimal syllables, we should expect to see Front Stressing in the data.

3.1.3 Applying Truncation to the Data

Returning to our data, as we begin an analysis, the first few data would suggest simple stress-conditioned apocope and aphaeresis of multisyllabic syllables, respectively.

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According to Weeda (1992), truncation in English entails the maximal (i.e. {CCVCC}) mapping of a bimoraic syllable template to a source name, beginning from the left word-edge. After mapping, syllable deletion may occur. With this in mind, it is possible to see how [ˈmɑ.ɹi.oo] truncates to [mɑɹ]. A mapping template explains much of the data, yet it fails to explain why many other names do not include the onset consonants from the following syllable. To account for this, a Submaximization Parameter (Weeda, 1992) may be invoked:

(3.1) Submaximization Parameter

Template mapping may be less than maximal under certain conditions to be specified by the grammar of an individual language (Weeda, 1992).

If we assume that AAVE may optionally choose to include an onset consonant, then much more of the data may be accounted for. From here, we may expand Weeda's specification of template mapping: Because names are subject to the submaximization parameter, various stems may result from one source name (Weeda, 1992), for example [i] or [saɹ] from [i.'saɹ]. So long as the stem is bimoraic, it satisfies the minimal requirements for a truncated form.

Another point to address in this section is how some forms [ˈɑ.mə.li], [fə.'lɑ.nə] truncate to [ˈɑ.mə], [ˈlɑ.nə], which are disyllabic. Weeda (1992) suggests that a source may be truncated to a disyllabic form if “an identifiable suffix” ([looks like a typo doesn't it](#)) is available. He cites [-ə] and [-o] as acceptable “suffixes” in English: [hɛn.ɹi.'ɛ.rə] → [ˈɛ.rə]; [stiv] → [stivo] ([non-standard diminutive suffixes; the usual one is -i: Stevie](#)). We may also expand upon Weeda's suggestion of nominal suffixes and posit that [ɛɹ] is also an acceptable ending in AAVE, possibly through analogy with monosyllabic forms ending in [ɛɹ]. If this

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theory of English nominal suffixes is accurate, then [ˈɑ.mə] and [ˈlɑ.nə] will be fully accounted for. Additionally, based on the above data, we will suggest that preferred nicknames in AAVE are foot-based; thus truncation to a bisyllabic stem is quite natural.

Most of the stem derivations have been accounted for thus far. Nevertheless, three names continue to pose a problem: [ɪk] from [ˈbrɑ.də.ɪk], *[dɑɪʃ] and *[wɛn]. In the first case, [ˈbrɑ.də.ɪk] is perplexing because it meets all of the structural requirements to have a stem of [ˈbrɑ.də], particularly when compared to forms like it: [ˈɑ.mə], [ˈlɑ.nə] and [ˈjɑ.meɪ] all contain stressed low vowels in open syllables, followed by mid vowels in the next syllable. Unfortunately, the best suggestions to account for this form are sociolinguistic factors (disyllabic forms may be reserved for feminine names) and local analogy ([ˈsɛ.də.ɪk]

→ [ɪk]: [ˈbrɑ.də.ɪk] → [ɪk]). [\(maybe there is a preference for nicknames ending in closed syllables? but then \[bou-bou\] is a problem\)](#)

3.1.4 Front Stressing

If we recall from section (3.1.2), Front Stressing is a phenomenon that occurs in AAVE, and we propose here that rather than simple movement to the initial syllable, stress reassignment may be best described as leftward movement to an open syllable. In the data above, we see four instances of stress moving leftward from a stressed closed syllable to an open unstressed syllable (data 2.2.8.1-3, 2.2.13.2). The closed syllable then apocopates. (In (2.2.4.1), we see an opposite process, wherein stress moves right and the closed syllable is subjected to aphaeresis, but there is not enough evidence here to propose that stressing is

generally bi-directional.) With stress fronting and optimal syllables in mind, the process by which unstressed vowels become the truncated stem is rather straightforward.

3.1.5 Segmental Interactions

Aside from purely prosodic constraints, there are some segmental interactions to be considered. First, the pattern of template maximization is predictable: Lax vowels may not appear in open, word-final syllables, therefore onset consonants always resyllabify as the coda of the stressed syllable. Thus [zɪ.n] resyllabifies as [zɪn]. Low vowels seem to prefer being closed by consonants when possible, hence [vɑɪ] and [mɑɪ]. From this, a Low Vowel Condition may be formulated:

- (3.2) Low Vowel Condition [\(interesting\)](#)
Low vowels take codas when possible. When no coda is available, a word-final low vowel must be tense to remain open.

Beyond vowel qualities, voiceless fricatives seem to be disfavored, although not disallowed (forms such as [si-si] are attested), particularly in onset position. While it is difficult to determine why this may be, generally acknowledging this trend can account for speakers' choices of [v] and [z], yet not [f] and [ʃ]. This may also explain why *[dɑɪʃ] appears as ungrammatical.

3.2 Reduplication

Having laid the groundwork for truncation, we may now turn our attention towards reduplication. A cursory glance down the Preferred Names column illustrates the strong preference for reduplicated forms; although, there seem to be certain restraints against particular stems reduplicating (2.2.2.2-4). This is easily explained when stem onsets and

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codas are examined: all acceptable forms contain codas which are homorganic in place with their onsets, with the exception of [k-ɪ] (*[zɪn-zɪn] seems to be an arbitrary gap).

In the cases of *[sɑɪ-sɑɪ] and *[feɪ-feɪ], we determined in section (3.1.5) that voiceless fricatives are disfavored, so it is reasonable to assume that if a truncated form is avoided, then it may not reduplicate. *[feɪ] poses a challenge, simply because the stem is identical to the source name, but we may posit that it is ineligible for reduplication due to the restriction of voiceless fricatives.

3.3 Suffixation

Suffixation is more difficult: there appear to be three minimal constraints, and they account for 91% of the data:

(3.3) Viable Stem Constraint

A stem must be viable (i.e. grammatical) to be susceptible to any other morphological processes.

(3.4) Hiatus Intolerance

[-y] may not affix to a stem ending in a vowel.

(3.5) [-y]-Affixation Constraint

A stem must contain a monophthong for -y suffixation to apply.

Failure to account for all of the data is what makes the constraints problematic, but because the unexplained data are three names, it is also possible that they are an arbitrary gap.

(Although *[mɑɪ-i] may be socially conditioned: it may be considered too feminine.)

The Viable Stem Constraint and Hiatus Intolerance are the most straightforward rules, and need no further explanation. The [-y]-Affixation Constraint is more complicated, and involves syllable weight. Assuming that a syllable containing a diphthong is bimoraic, a mora will dominate each vowel. Because the second vowel will have somewhat less weight than the first, it may share its mora with a single syllable-final consonant (Kenstowicz,

1994). Whether a syllable under this condition is open or closed is irrelevant – either way the syllabic template has been maximized. If this is the case, then – assuming that this rule applies before Hiatus Intolerance – and the onset consonant from the following syllable attempts to resyllabify with the stem, the result is a stem which is to heavy. Although the consonant would be subject to continuous syllabification and would surface as an onset to the suffix (Kenstowicz, 1994), it seems that even temporary “overload” will mark the form as ungrammatical. While this theory would need further evidence to fully be born out, it seems to predict what we see in the data. (Regarding (2.2.2.2-3), one suggestion may be that the final consonant is not included in the bare stem.)

3.4 Preferred Forms

The pattern of preferred forms is generally consistent throughout the dataset, where the reduplicated form is most favored. In the dataset, 34% (eleven forms) of the preferred forms are monosyllabic, but two of them are easy to explain: [i] and [ɛks] cannot be reduplicated. The others seem to be subject to the preferences of the speakers, and it is impossible to know whether a speaker’s associations shape which forms they prefer.

4 Conclusion

While the general assumption by linguists has been that morphology feeds phonology, evidence exists to illustrate that the two must apply much more closely together, if not concurrently. Throughout the course of this paper, data have been presented which demonstrate that some phonological constraints must apply in order to derive the most suitable word-form. We have seen how templatic mapping, stress placement and individual segments help determine the bare-stem of a word; how place of articulation influences whether a viable stem is eligible for reduplication; and finally, the effect of hiatus tolerance

AAVE Phonology

and syllable weight on the suffixation of –y. In the case of names, which are highly personal and idiosyncratic, it is not always possible to determine why some forms are preferred over others, but there is concrete evidence to give us the foundations of nicknaming patterns.

Works Cited

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[very nice job. given the novelty of the data discussed and difficulties in analyzing it, I'd say you deserve 25/25](#)