

Eem Negation in AAVE: A Next Step in Jespersen’s Cycle

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Introduction Jespersen’s Cycle (JC) is the diachronic process by which negation in a language changes from a single marker of negation (NEG1) to negation with an emphatic (NEG1 + optional NEG2), which may then be reanalyzed as a single marker of negation (NEG1 + obligatory NEG2), culminating in the loss of the original negation and reanalysis of emphatic as marker of negation (NEG2 only).

The Claim In this paper we demonstrate the existence of a change in progress in AAVE: the intensifier *eem* is being reanalyzed as a second negative marker (NEG2), which appears both in combination with *n’t* or *not* (NEG1), and on its own serving as the sole marker of negation in the clause.

The Evidence Using data collected from field work, social media (where it is spelled *eem* or *een*), and popular media, we demonstrate that *eem* is related to Mainstream American English (MAE) “even,” but appears preferentially in irrealis contexts (1), and even more so in the context of negation (2):

- (1) I knew what this was before I **eem** clicked it
I knew what this was before I **even** clicked it
- (2) that ain’t **eem** cool man
that’s not *even* cool, man

We show that *eem* is not equivalent to “even,” as it is not just the result of different AAVE phonology (3), and it cannot be used in all syntactic environments (4):

- (3) even/**eem* numbers
- (4) even/**eem* Jamal was at the party

Finally, we show that for some speakers, *eem* is now optionally the *only* marker of negation in a sentence (5, 6) even where a reading with “even” is possible and ambiguous without context (7); it can trigger negative concord (8); and it can be intensified with “even” (9):

- (5) I **eem** do nothing!
I **didn’t** do anything!
- (6) u should **eem** have care about them, they r delusional
you should **not** have cared about them, they are delusional
- (7) I can **eem** explain
I can **not** explain
- (8) you **eem** neva met em
you **haven’t** ever met him

- (9) Imma act like I **eem** **even** see dat
 I'm going to act like I **didn't** **even** see that

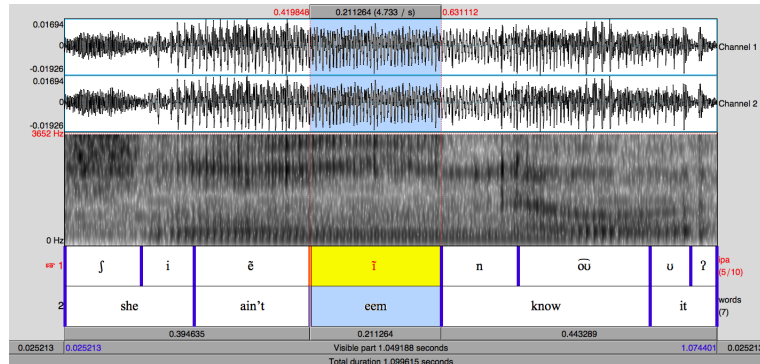


Figure 1: MAE “she doesn’t even know it.”

Phonological Processes *eem* is sometimes spelled *een*. In all spoken tokens we collected, it is pronounced as a long nasalized high front vowel [ĩ:] (Figure 1). There is strong evidence that people writing on social media attempt to “write how they speak” (Eisenstein, 2013; Van Oostdijk & Haltern, 2012). Given that *eem* does not seem to interact with nearby phonemes and never appears as “*ng*,” we argue that it is not underlyingly an un- or under-specified nasal. Rather, we posit that both /i:ɻŋ/ and /i:ɸŋ/ (both attested in AAVE) result in [ĩ:], although we note that the form *eem* seems to be preferred over *een* on social media.

Significance There are competing hypotheses about the underlying mechanism of JC (Siani, N. 2011; Kiparsky, 2006; Kroch, 1989); discovering and describing *eem* early in its development allows us a unique opportunity to observe Jespersen’s Cycle unfold in real time. Interestingly, all four stages are attested synchronically, in the same population. *Eem* also marks another aspect of the continuing divergence of AAVE from other varieties of English.

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