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AAE Talmbout: An Overlooked Verb of Quotation

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Abstract

While there has been a wealth of research on verbs of quotation in recent decades (Butters 1980, Blyth et al. 1990, Tagliamonte and Hudson 1999, Buchstaller 2001, Singler 2001, Waksler 2001, Rickford et al. 2007, Vandelanotte 2012), including studies focusing on African American English (AAE) (Cukor-Avila 2002, 2012), the discussion has focused on a handful of variables, most notably *be like*, *go* and *say*. In this study, we draw on the Philadelphia Neighborhood Corpus (PNC), on popular media (novels, television, music), and on social media to describe an AAE-specific verb of quotation, *talkin' 'bout/talmbout*. Unlike other verbs of quotation, it is used to introduce both direct and reported speech, as well as unuttered thoughts and non-lexical sounds, and it co-occurs with a range of complementizers that are not available in other varieties of English. While it has not been discussed in the literature beyond mention as 'other' in typology of verbs of quotation, it has been present in AAE for at least a century. We argue that *talmbout* fulfills a fundamentally different role than *be like*: quotative *talmbout* is used for indignation or mocking and it often appears with secondary indignation markers like semi-auxiliary *come* (Spears 1982, Green 2002). Moreover, it is not always understood by non-AAE speakers, as it is an understudied camouflage construction (Spears 1982; Wolfram 1994; Collins et al. 2008; Lane 2014).

AAE Talmbout: An Overlooked Verb of Quotation

Taylor Jones*

1 Introduction

Verbs of quotation have been a prominent area of research in sociolinguistics for the last three decades, starting with an influential paper on quotative *go* by Butters (1980). In general, researchers have focused on a handful of variables, most notably *be like*, *go*, and *say* (Butters 1980, Blyth et al. 1990, Tagliamonte and Hudson 1999, Buchstaller 2001, Singler 2001, Waksler 2001, Cukor-Avila 2002, Rickford et al. 2007, Vandelanotte 2012).

The focus of this paper is an African American English (AAE) specific variable, alternately represented as *talkin' 'bout*, or more idiomatically on social media, *talmbout*. While both *talkin' 'bout* and *talmbout* can be used to represent phrasal “talking about,” as in *that's what I'm talmbout*, the present study is concerned with describing the AAE-unique verb of quotation, which will be represented below as *talmbout* to explicitly distinguish it from *talking about* in other varieties of English.¹ Verb of quotation *talmbout* is used to introduce direct or indirect quotation (in fact, it can do more, as discussed below), as in (1):

- (1) a. Everbody laughing nshit & here you come talmbout some “I don't get it.” (Twitter)
- b. Man I cannot stand Jackie w that trench coat talmbout she was getting her Hepburn on. (Twitter)

Verb of quotation *talmbout* is AAE specific. While undoubtedly derived from *talking about*, it behaves as a verb of quotation. It is, therefore, a CAMOUFLAGE CONSTRUCTION (Spears 1980, 1982, Baugh 1984, Spears 1998, Collins et al. 2008, Irwin 2009). While first described by Spears (1980), camouflage constructions are succinctly described by Wolfram (2004):

One type of sociolinguistic process associated with urban AAVE is *linguistic camouflaging*, in which a vernacular form resembles a standard or different vernacular form so closely that it is simply assumed to be identical to its apparent structural counterpart. However, this similarity may disguise the fact that the form carries a distinctive semantic-pragmatic meaning or is constructed in a subtly different way. (2004:114-115)

The fact that it is a camouflage construction is likely why it has gone undiscussed in the literature, despite existing in AAE for as long as we have remotely reliable records of African American speech (2). In fact, it is present in previous studies on verbs of quotation in AAE, but was categorized as “other” and not treated on its own (Cukor-Avila 2002) as in (3).

- (2) a. Yo' oughter see ol' gran'pa Elec!
 My dat ol' man sho is spy;
 Ain't it awful? Why dat ol' soul's
 Mighty nigh too ol' to die.
 TALKIN' 'BOUT he's gwine a marry,
 soon as he kin fin' a wife. (Berenice Wiggins, 1927)
- b. I hear my aunt come in one day en say, ‘Ma, I hear boss TALKIN BOUT dey gwine free de niggers.’ (Hester Hunter, ex slave, b. 1852) (WPA Slave Narratives)
- (3) a. Anthony TALKIN' ABOUT, “Sassy!” Anthony jus' kep' hollerin', “Get outta the sprinkler!” (Cukor-Avila 2002)

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¹The exceptions are instances when an author specifically chose to *write* it as “talkin' 'bout” or some variant thereof.

- b. The woman TALKIN' ABOUT, "I'm sorry ma'am but you can't return these." 'Cause she didn' even have a receipt or anything. (Cukor-Avila 2002)

While it won't be discussed here because of space constraints, *talmbout* also seems to have become lexicalized for some speakers, and for some is even on its way to grammaticalization, with emerging past and future verbal morphology in some communities, although the evidence is somewhat sparse.

The goal of this paper is a description of an un(der)studied variable. Quantitative studies may be possible, potentially even with existing corpora, but the focus here is description. For this reason, data are from diverse sources, to illustrate the range of uses. The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 introduces the data and methods; Section 3 discusses the semantics of *talmbout* comparing against other verbs of quotation and demonstrating that *talmbout* is more flexible; Section 4 discusses syntactic points of interest, specifically focusing on AAE-specific complementizer use; Section 5 relates *talmbout* to the literature on marking indignation in AAE; and Section 6 is discussion.

2 Data

As mentioned above, because the goal is description, a wide variety of data sources were used. *Talmbout*, and a number of other variant spellings (*talmbout*, *tombout*, *taumbout*, etc.) are extremely common on social media, including Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and so on. While Twitter in particular is an easy source for a high volume of data, *talmbout* is ubiquitous in AAE, and other sources are useful. Data here are from Twitter,² from traditional audiovisual media (television, film, radio), from books (primarily noted in the author's personal collection, but also after some investigation using Google Books), from the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives, from previous studies, from the Philadelphia Neighborhood Corpus (PNC), and from observation in Harlem and West Philadelphia. It is not just ubiquitous in AA(V)E speaking communities, but is used across AAE registers and is used without comment or irony by celebrities and public figures, including President Obama, Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison, Langston Hughes, the popular comedians Key & Peele, radio disk jockeys, rappers, and more.

Different data sources have their own benefits and weaknesses. For instance, textual examples have the benefit of making it extremely clear when *talmbout* is introducing direct quotation because authors frequently use quotation marks (4a). Moreover, informal spelling suggests that speakers differentiate *talmbout* (verb of quotation) from *talking about* (i.e., discussing), and are, at a minimum, aware of a difference in the phonetic realizations of these two variables (4b).

- (4) a. ...toward the young white voice talking about "Who that back in there?" (Toni Morrison, *Beloved*)
 b. My mama stay talmbout some "I don't wanna listen to that right now." Then when I play it be ALL into it. But I thought... (Twitter)

Spoken data corroborate that for many speakers it is in fact pronounced [tɔm.boʊt] or [tɔ?m.boʊt]. However, text data obscure that there is almost invariably a prosodic and an intonational component; speakers tend to distinguish their own perspective from the quoted or reported material by a higher pitch in their narrative, then a pause, followed by a drop in pitch for the quoted or reported material, consistent with the discussion in Podesva 2011 on vocal shifts and stance-taking in discourse contexts (Figure 1).

3 Semantics

Talmbout is more versatile than other verbs of quotation, in some respects. For instance, *say* can be used in Mainstream American English (MAE) to introduce direct and reported speech, but not

²Data from Twitter are explicitly *published* material. To protect author privacy, tweets mentioned here are not explicitly cited, although interested parties could still easily corroborate these data.

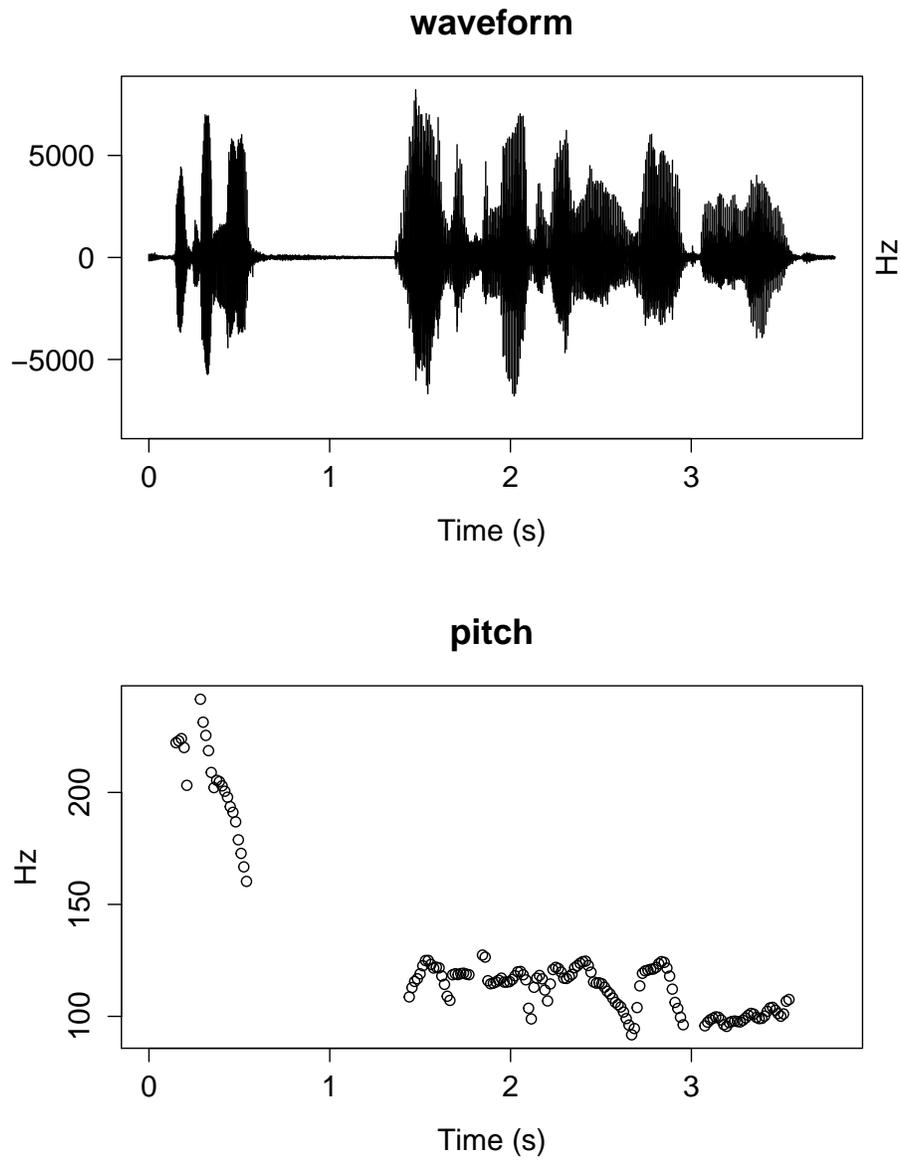


Figure 1: Waveform and pitch track for *he's talmbout* "I guess I'm bout to go out here and jam," from an interview in the PNC. Note both the pause and marked drop in pitch.

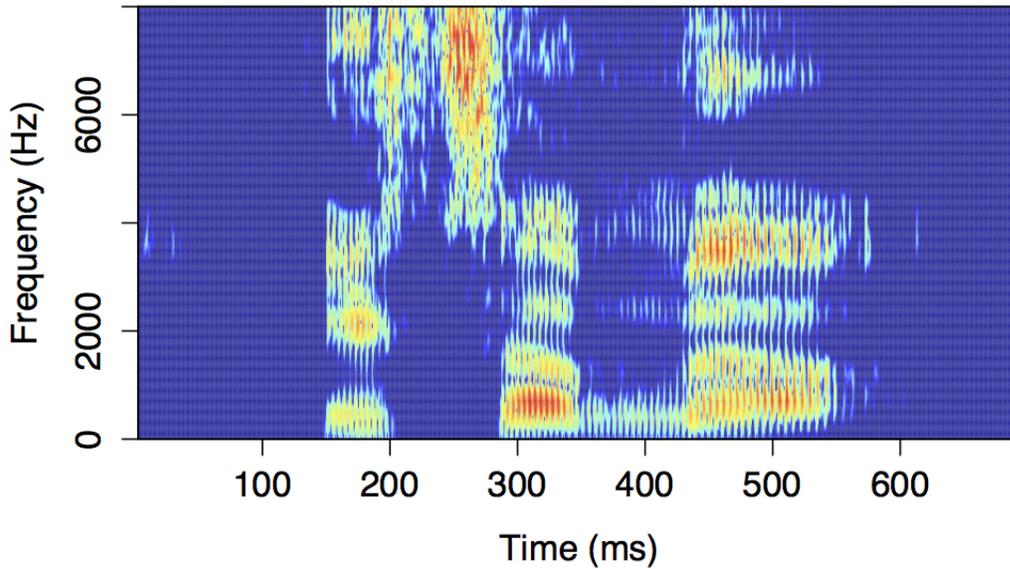


Figure 2: Spectrogram for [hi:s.təʔm.boʊt], (*he's talmbout*) from an interview in the PNC.

generally unuttered thoughts or non-linguistic sounds (*#he said [gəgəgə]!*). Similarly, *be like* and *go* can introduce direct speech, thoughts, and non-linguistic sounds, but not reported speech (Blyth et al. 1990).³

- (5) *he said “Oh my god!” (intended meaning: he thought but did not utter “Oh my god”)
- (6) *He_i was all like he_i went. (intended meaning: he said he went)

In contrast with the above, *talmbout* can introduce direct speech, reported speech, thought or imagined but unuttered phrases (evident from context), and non-linguistic material (7).

- (7) a. Talmbout “Can you stay late for work?” Not when I have a haircut appt. Forget it. (Twitter)
- b. Dj taught me how to play the game and i beat him.. and he lying Talm bout he let me win (Twitter)
- c. (Dragons in *Game of Thrones*) “talkin’ ’bout [æ:↓]...Just straight roastin’ goats!” (Key & Peele).⁴

That is, *talmbout* is completely unrestricted in terms of what it can introduce. Both direct and indirect speech can be introduced with *talmbout*, as with *say*, but it also patterns like *be like* and *go* with respect to unuttered or non-linguistic material. We may then expect *talmbout* to be in competition with these other forms. However, it does not seem to be in direct competition with *say*, *be like*, or *go*. Below, it will be argued that this is because it fulfills a fundamentally different social and pragmatic function.

³Somewhat confusingly, they use “reported speech” to mean direct speech in places.

⁴[æ:↓] is pulmonic ingressive.

	direct	reported	thought	non-linguistic
say	✓	✓	X	✓ (AAE); X (MAE)
be (all) like	✓	X	✓	✓
go	✓	X	✓	✓
talmbout	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 1: Verbs of quotation by type of quoted material.

4 Complementizers

4.1 Complementizer *that*

Syntactically, *talmbout* behaves differently from other well-described verbs of quotation, however since other verbs of quotation in AAE behave similarly this pattern of behavior is almost certainly because it is AAE and not because it has unique selectional properties. *Talmbout* can take an optionally null complementizer (as compared to *be like*'s obligatorily null complementizer), or, like *say*, it can take an overt *that*. The choice of overt complementizer, optionally null complementizer, or obligatorily null complementizer is a function of what the quoted material is: for direct speech overt *that* is not possible. For indirect speech, complementizer *that* is optional.

- (8) a. she said *that “I love you.”
 b. she said (that) she loves me.
- (9) a. she was like *that “I love you.”
 b. she was like *that she loves me.
- (10) a. she talmbout “I love you.” (Twitter)
 b. ? she talmbout that “I love you.”
 c. now she talmbout that she love me. (Twitter)

4.2 Complementizer Camouflage QPs: *some*, *any*, and *no*

Given that *talmbout* can introduce both direct and indirect speech, the above behavior is not unexpected. Where *talmbout* differs structurally from *be like*, *go*, and *say*, is in allowing what appear to be quantifiers to function as a complementizer. While there may be other possible complementizers, *talmbout* frequently occurs with *some*, *any*, and *no*.⁵

- (11) a. The cashier at Target ask me for my # in front of my momma, she talmbout **some** “I hope it’s for a job” (Twitter)
 b. Dont chu come talmbout **any** “ion wan do it” (Twitter)⁶
 c. LMAO don’t be talmbout **no** “Chris” (Twitter)

It should be noted that there is a tendency for the material following *no*, in particular, to be less than a full clause—usually an adjective or noun phrase. In spoken AAE it is clear that this is, in fact, quotation and not equivalent to a topic (where *talmbout* would function here as something like DISCUSS), because it is accompanied by intonational changes (usually a pitch drop) indicating quotation. Moreover, it can introduce adverbs, adjectives, and imperatives (12).

- (12) don’t be talkin bout **no** do you a favor (Twitter)

This behavior is not necessarily unique to *talmbout*, although it has not yet been discussed in the literature (to the author’s knowledge). For instance, compare against (13).

- (13) quit lying, you know she ain’t say **no** sorry (Twitter)

⁵The last being another Negative Polarity Item equivalent to *any*, but triggered by negative concord.

⁶i.e., *Don’t you come talmbout any “I don’t want to do it.”*

Interpreting *sorry* to mean APOLOGY, while possible, is a stretch, and the more natural interpretation is (imagined) direct speech: *she didn't say, "I'm sorry."* It should be stressed that while these appear to be quantifiers, they are functioning as complementizers. Moreover, they do not seem to be QPs raising to CP, as this behavior is not possible for other QPs (14), and it is not immediately apparent what structural position the QP would be originating in and moving from.

- (14) *he talmbout a few/several/many/twelve "I'm sorry."

	∅	that	some	any	no
be like	✓	X	X	X	X
go	✓	X	X	X	X
say	✓	✓	?	?	✓
talmbout	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 2: Verbs of quotation by type of complementizer.

4.3 Complementizer *how*

In other varieties of English, *talking* (meaning SPEAKING) can take the complement *about*, which can further take *how*, for *talking about how*, to mean DISCUSSING (the manner...). This construction only introduces reported speech, and cannot introduce direct speech.

Given the above discussion of the camouflaged behavior of both *talmbout* and the complementizers it selects, it is worth investigating whether *how*, is used in AAE in the same way. That is, whether it is possible to use quotative *talmbout* with *how*, distinct from the *talking about how* to mean DISCUSSING. While prosodic cues can provide some evidence, ideally we'd want both prosodic cues, and variation in complementizer selection from the same speaker. In fact, we see just this in Al Green's performances over the years of his hit song "Love and Happiness." In the well-known studio recording on *I'm Still in Love With You* (1972), he uses *how*; in live performances he uses other complementizers (15). What's more, there is there a prosodic break built in (four beats between *talkin' 'bout* and the next word).

- (15) Wait a minute, something's goin' wrong
 someone's on the phone
 three o'clock in the mornin'
- talkin' 'bout, **how** she can make it right (on *Soul Train*, 1972)⁷
 - talkin' 'bout, ∅ she can make it right (on *Soull*, 1972)⁸
 - talkin' 'bout, **that** she can make it right (Vienna Jazz Festival, 2007)⁹

In this instance, it is likely that for the phrase in (15a) the structure and meaning are equivalent in AAE and MAE, however it is also clear that this may be an accidental (or historical) overlap in now radically different systems. Moreover, while speakers of MAE who do not speak AAE may understand and accept (15a), examples (15b) and (15c) are not generally grammatical for non-speakers of AAE.

It is clear from the above that not only is *talmbout* a camouflage construction, but the complementizers it selects may *also* be camouflaged.

⁷<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCXEtvbJkkY>

⁸<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ig7yLiOVpy0>

⁹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FYZfGO01FWc>

5 Indignation and Mocking

There is a stream in the literature on AAE that concerns itself with the syntactic, morphological, and discourse expression of indignation, mocking, or disapproval in AAE, and other African diaspora language varieties. Most notable are the work of Spears (1982) on ‘indignant’ semi-modal *come*, Rickford and Rickford (1976), Alim (2005) and Goodwin and Alim (2010) on cut-eye and suck-teeth, Labov (1972) on ritual insult (the dozens), and Podesva (2011) on voice quality and stance-taking in discourse. In any discussion of indignation, mocking, or stance-taking in AAE, it is important to bear in mind that there is a common stereotype that positions black people and AAE speakers as ‘sassy,’ and it is therefore important that analyses are grounded in linguistic data and not based on the researcher’s intuition alone (and therefore subject to unconscious racial bias). Keeping this in mind, here it is suggested that *talmbout* is often consistent with indignation, mocking, derision, or some other manner of negative stance toward the quoted material or person being quoted. The evidence for a mocking interpretation of *talmbout* is fivefold: intonational changes indicating affect and (negative) stance-taking, its frequent co-occurrence with ‘indignant’ *come*, its frequent co-occurrence with the camouflage CPs discussed above, discourse context and explicit discussion of the use of *talmbout* with AAE speakers.

Vocal shift is the most salient marker, especially in speech, while simultaneously being the hardest to convey in a text discussion of *talmbout*. Over considerations of space, further pitch tracks are not presented here, but Figure 1 above is representative. Following Podesva 2011, vocal shift will be marked below with underlining. Across media, and across registers, vocal shift is a strong cue for the mocking use of *talmbout* (16).

- (16) a. “...when you hear the critics talkin’ about ‘well, it’s a bad deal, we coulda got a better deal’...” (President Obama, on *The Daily Show*, July 21, 2015)
 b. He stands up, turn around like this, talmbout, “um, Are you [name]?” (PNC interview)
 c. I went to a party, and a chick was talmbout “Man, I don’t wanna get makeup on your shirt.” (Kevin Gates, on *The Breakfast Club*, on Power 105.1, January, 27, 2016).

Indignation is also explicitly marked with semi-modal *come* (17) and with the complementizers mentioned above (11). (18) is marked with both *come* and *some*.

- (17) a. The man had the nerve to come talmbout, uh, “you buyin’ steak.” (overheard by author at a Juneteenth cookout in Harlem)
 b. They come talkin’ ’bout they is scared of *me!* (Langston Hughes, 1950)
 (18) Every time I get some food or something to snack on, my brother always come talmbout some “lemme get some” NO GO GET YOUR OWN #ITSMINE (Twitter)

Finally, discourse context often makes *talmbout*’s affective character clear (19, 20).

- (19) a. They talmbout we don’t play no new jazz here on WPFW. Well, listen to *this!* (DJ on WPFW FM, 11:33am, Nov. 26, 2015)
 b. Our whole freshman class had problems. They brought us in, talmbout “you bringin’ down the name of the whole school.” (Conversation between author and friends about incompetent administration, Harlem)
 c. big tall motherfucker, talmbout “I’m Slim!” (PNC interview).
 (20) Fat ppl in the city b walkin up the hills like the lil engin that could talkin bout “i think i can i think i can” (Twitter)

It should be noted that while the interpretation that *talmbout* is often indignant, mocking, or dismissive is shared by most native speakers informally surveyed by the author, it is neither inherent to *talmbout* (and therefore always the case), nor is it a universally shared interpretation. Given the above evidence (co-occurrence with other well-described markers of indignation and stance-taking, and discourse context), it seems reasonable to conclude that there is an affective element to use of

talmbout for many, though perhaps not all speakers, and that this has been an element of its use for at least 65 years (17b). That said, it is possible to argue that negative affect is supplied solely by context or the other markers of negative affect that co-occur with *talmbout*, and it is clear that more research is needed to tease out exactly what the affective component of *talmbout* is.

6 Discussion

The focus of the present paper was on a thorough description of an underdescribed phenomenon. In principle, it is possible to perform a traditional quantitative sociolinguistic study, assuming enough data. Twitter is an easy source of a high volume of data, however there are a number of confounds that future research will need to account for. Firstly, there are a number of ways of representing the variable: *talking about*, *talkin' about*, *talkin' 'bout*, *talmbout*, *talm bout*, *tombout*, *taumbout*, and so on. Second, and more importantly, it is sometimes homophonous with uses that are not quotative. Therefore, if social media data are used, the process cannot be automated and each token in the gathered corpus must be evaluated manually. However, it happens at a relatively low rate in existing corpora. For instance, there are just over a dozen tokens in the PNC; a sample size that does not allow for robust statistical analyses.

From the above, it should be clear that *talmbout* is an AAE specific verb of quotation with unique properties. Moreover, it's extremely widely used, and has existed in AAE as far back as we have reliable records (see 2, 17). Crucially it differs from other verbs of quotation in that there are no restrictions on what it can introduce (direct and indirect speech, unuttered-but-thought speech, and non-linguistic sounds), it co-occurs with a range of complementizers that are not available in other varieties of English, and it likely has a fundamentally different pragmatic function, placing it outside of direct competition with other verbs of quotation. That said, despite its differences from other verbs of quotation it has gone almost entirely unnoticed. This is not surprising, though, given that not only is *talmbout* a camouflage construction, but it co-occurs with two other camouflage constructions: semi-modal 'indignant' *come*, and complementizers *some*, *any*, and *no*.

AAE *talmbout* is, then, relevant to work on AAE and sociolinguistics more broadly in two ways. First, it bears on the ongoing investigation in sociolinguistics of verbs of quotation. Much of the research in the past three decades has been on a small handful of variables with, now, well-described properties. It has also been primarily focused on variables in mainstream, white speech communities. To the extent that research on verbs of quotation has investigated minority communities, it has been with an eye toward the extent of their use of these same variables. Second, because *talmbout* is a camouflage construction and co-occurs with other camouflage constructions, it has implications for cross-dialect comprehension and our understanding of camouflage constructions more broadly.

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