I'm Knowing: AAE and the Verb *Know* in the Progressive

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1 Introduction

In this paper, I address an under-examined use of the stative verb *know*, e.g., "I'm knowing," in African American English (AAE). According to accepted AAE grammar, *know*, a stative verb, is possible in the progressive (*-ing*) form if preceded by a preverbal tense-aspect-mood (TAM) marker such as *BIN* (1) (Green 2000:8, Green 1998:118, Dayton 1996:712, Rickford 1975:114, Scott 2016:55).

(1) Sue BIN knowing he died.
'Sue has known for a long time that he died.'
(Green 1998:118)

Scholars also note that without these preverbal markers, progressive *know* (from now on referred to as *knowing*) is ungrammatical and unacceptable (Green 1998:120, Green 2000:8). One example cited of this ungrammaticality of *knowing* is from Green (1998:120):

(2) *She knowing how to drive.
(Green 1998:120)

Thus, *I'm knowing*, along with *she/they/we/you* (COPULA) *knowing*, is not considered a possible construction in AAE. This appears to be contradicted by Scott (2016:56), offering examples of *knowing* in the progressive without a preverbal marker (3).

(3) I'm knowing more about it each day.
(Scott 2016:56)

In this paper, I examine the usage rates of *knowing* without a preverbal marker (–PVM *knowing*) relative to several well-attested *knowing* constructions that include preverbal markers (+PVM *knowing*), demonstrating that there may be a language change-in-progress such that –PVM *knowing* is a new grammaticalization related to +PVM *knowing* constructions. This is not to say that –PVM *knowing* is in competition with +PVM *knowing* constructions, as they encode different temporal information, but rather that the ability for *know* to appear in the progressive after TAM markers may have facilitated the possibility of –PVM *knowing* in AAE.

I examine large datasets from the Corpus of Regional African American Language (CORAAL) (Kendall et al. 2024) and Twitter (currently known as X). CORAAL provides extensive demographic information about speakers including age, gender and occupation. While such demographic information is less accessible with Twitter, the platform nonetheless provides the researcher with relatively large amounts of data across the linguistic landscape.

Based on the contrast between previous research showing *knowing* as ungrammatical in AAE without preverbal markers (Green 1998:120, 2000:8) and my own experience as an AAE speaker whose dialect, for the past decade or so, allows for –PVM *knowing*, alongside the few occurrences in Scott (2016:56), I predict that –PVM *knowing* would be infrequently found in the CORAAL dataset as it is a slightly older corpus with more sporadic data. Moreover, I predict that in CORAAL, –PVM *knowing* would be used more by younger people. I also predict that *knowing* with and without preverbal markers would be more common on Twitter, a larger and more contemporary dataset.

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This paper is an expansion of the earlier work on *knowing* in AAE. I provide a wider analysis on the distribution of *knowing*, examining new datasets and drawing on my own usage as an AAE speaker, arguing that this –PVM progressive usage may represent a change in progress. I examine the usage rates of –PVM *knowing* in relation to several well attested *knowing* constructions that include +PVM *knowing*, demonstrating that there may be a recent language change such that the –PVM *knowing* is a newly grammaticalized *knowing* constructions.

2 Background

2.1 *Know* in the Progressive

In Mainstream American English[2] (MAE), stative verbs such as *know*, *believe*, or *understand* are usually limited to simple and perfect aspects (Ozyıldız 2021:11, Falhasiri et al 2012: 993). The rich aspectual system of African American English (AAE) extends possibilities of meaning with the use of preverbal markers. For example, invariant *be* is a habitual aspect marker which allows for the sentence in (4) with stative verbs.

(4) She be believing whatever I say.
'She regularly believes whatever I say'
(Twitter, October 20, 2024)

Note that the closest MAE equivalent does not use the progressive form (5a). The version of the sentence in (5b) allows for a progressive stative but it does not encode the same aspectual information. Additionally, although (5b) is acceptable, when tested with two MAE speakers, it was considered marked and dispreferred. While there may be a context in which (5b) is uttered, (5a) is preferred to express the meaning of (4). Sentence (5b) was connected to the context of 'believing' restricted to a set window of time, and not temporally indefinite nor habitual.

(5) a. She believes whatever I say.
b. She's believing whatever I say.

The distinctive use of preverbal markers such as invariant *be*, stressed *BIN*, perfective *dən*, continuative *steady* and unstressed *been* allow more flexibility for a verb like *know*. I assume that the meaning of *I'm knowing* (–PVM *knowing*) is basically equivalent to *I know*, for the purpose of this paper. More work is needed on the semantics and pragmatics of this construction, which is outside the scope of this paper.

2.2 Preverbal Markers and *Knowing* in AAE

In an extensive analysis of the AAE aspectual system, Green (1998:116) argues that AAE temporal markers together with the progressive verbs create tense aspect combinations in ways that are not possible in MAE. For instance, she argues that the preverbal *BIN* expresses eventualities within the remote past. When *BIN* is followed by a progressive or a stative (BIN_{STAT}), it is used to express "for a long time" (6). When it is followed by a non-stative verb it represents the remote past completive (BIN_{COMP}) or "a long time ago" (7).

(6) That house BIN_{STAT} brown.
'That house has been brown for a long time'
(Green 1998:118)

[2] African American English (AAE) is the language variety spoken by most, although not all African American people in the United States (Beyer et al. 2024:417). Mainstream American English (MAE) is used here to refer to the language variety that is associated with middle class, white mainstream Americans in the United States.

(7) He BIN_{COMP} ate.
‘He ate a long time ago’
(Green 1995:74)

Green further argues that while BIN_{STAT} constructions start in the remote past they are also interpreted as happening while the utterance is taking place. According to Green, *BIN* can also have a habitual aspect (BIN_{HAB}), easily discernible from the other aspect markers as it can appear with temporal adverbials (8).

(8) Bruce BIN_{HAB} running for ten minutes.
a. *‘Bruce has been running for ten minutes.’
b. ‘Bruce started to run for ten minute stretches a long time ago and he still runs for ten-minute stretches.’
(Green 1998:127)

Regarding constructions including *knowing*, Green argues that while it can show up after BIN_{STAT}, AAE usually (see (10) for an exception) does not allow for regular progressive states (compare (2) and (9)).

(9) I know about them. I BIN knowing about them.
‘I have known about them for a long time.’
(Green 1998:120)

Green does note that in some circumstances it is possible to use progressive statives in AAE (10). Similarly, Dayton (1996:241) shows AAE allows progressive statives with the preverbal marker invariant *be* (11).

(10) She wanting a Luther Vandross compact disk, now
(Green 1998:120)
(11) On days like this I be wishin’ things were different.
(Dayton 1996:241)

The well attested construction combining invariant *be* and *knowing* was discussed by Green (2000:5). She generalizes that progressive verbs (V-*ing*) that describe states show up with invariant *be* but do not regularly show up with the null auxiliary, giving the examples below (12).

(12) a. She be knowing the answer.
b. *She Ø knowing the answer
(Green 2000:8)

Scott’s (2016) dissertation on tense and aspect markers in AAE addresses the AAE construction allowing *knowing*, realized without preverbal markers (–PVM *knowing*). She argues speakers may use –PVM *knowing* to express surprising states (13a), counterfactual states (13b), changing degrees of knowledge (13c) and inchoative meaning (13d).

(13) a. He just two, but he already knowing how to read!
b. So you already knowing how to read, huh?
c. I’m knowing more about it each day.
d. I’m knowing more people in the community, so living here isn’t so bad.
‘I’ve started to know more people in the community, so living here isn’t so bad.’
(Scott 2016: 56)

–PVM *knowing* can also combine with *steady* to intensify the emotive effect of surprising states as in (14).

(14) He steady knowing everybody's business.
'He consistently knows everybody's business.'
(Scott 2016:55)

For Scott, *knowing* may be realized in some circumstances in the present form without any preverbal markers (–PVM *knowing*) as in (13c). This statement contradicts Green's (1998, 2000) statement above asserting that (2) and (12b) are ungrammatical. In this paper, I argue that this apparent contradiction may be a result of a language change-in-progress such that –PVM *knowing* has become grammatical and frequently used by younger speakers of AAE.

3 Methodology

CORAAL (Kendall et al. 2024) is a database that includes 220 sociolinguistic interviews with AAE speakers born between 1888 and 2005. I analyzed CORAAL online by searching for all instances of the progressive verb *knowing* in the database. In CORAAL these include bare (–PVM *knowing*) and *knowing* with the preverbal TAM markers including unstressed/auxiliary *been*, stressed *BIN*, and invariant *be* (+PVM *knowing*). CORAAL provides audio and transcription data which allowed me, as a native AAE speaker, to distinguish between *BIN* and *been*. I recorded the birth year of the speaker to test for a difference in distribution based on age. The birth year is unavailable for one speaker.

As mentioned above, the other primary source of data in this study was the social media platform Twitter. While not many studies have used this method of data gathering, it is not unprecedented. In his study on AAE regional dialect variation, Jones (2015) uses Twitter data to research regional variation in AAE. The two main problems with using Twitter data that Jones points out are: (i) Twitter is not reliable for location data; and (ii) researchers cannot be sure that the users speak AAE. In order to address the former, Jones (2015:404) as well as Austen (2017:306) suggest that using the geotag feature as well as the user-specified location feature of Twitter can work for mapping the location for some of the speakers of these tweets. While this study does not utilize them, the location demographics available on Twitter are vital to understanding the regional distribution of *knowing* in future work. Jones's solution for determining the authenticity of speakers as native AAE users is to check for sentences which have the co-occurrence of specific AAE features such as invariant *be*.

On Twitter, I consider only first-person singular constructions. This is due to several factors. Firstly, there is a need to limit the scope of data collection as Twitter is a vast database. Secondly, in AAE, first-person constructions are realized relatively uniformly with regard to phonological and orthographic representations. Other person constructions have more variation including the possibility for non-pronoun subjects. For example, in addition to the common spellings *you* and *u*, the second-person singular pronoun may be spelled *ya, yhu* or *yu* by AAE speakers. The other persons have similar issues. The constructions that I looked for include *I been knowing* (15a), *I BIN knowing* (15b), *I be knowing* (15c), and *I'm knowing* (15d).

(15) a. I been knowin you how long?
'How long have I known you?'
(Twitter, July 24, 2018)
b. Yeah I BIN/been knowin trust me
'Yeah, I've known for a very long time, trust me' (BIN)
(Twitter, January 23, 2022 been edited)
c. i know you be knowin. i be knowin, too.
'I know that you are usually in the know. I'm usually in the know too'
(Twitter, March 20, 2023)
d. yea das dat shyt i'm knowin
'Yeah, that's how it is. I feel you.'
(Twitter, March 20, 2023)

The collection of the non-target constructions *I be knowing*, *I BIN knowing* and *I been knowing* was in order to use their usage rates as comparison points against the new construction *I'm knowing*. As mentioned above, these are not thought to be in competition with each other as they have different functions. Still, they serve as distinctly AAE sentences that are used frequently enough to be a good measuring stick for *I'm knowing*. There is no reason that I am aware of to believe that the usage rates of these comparison constructions are fluctuating.

The distinction above between *BIN* and *been* (15a) and (15b) is made based on time adverbials that can usually only be included with *been*. For items labeled *been*, the presence of time adverbials make the meaning clear. Due to the limitations of Twitter data, which is exclusively in written form, when there is no time adverbial, it is not certain that the speaker is using *BIN*. For this reason, I count *been* and *BIN* together as one category. This is not to imply that they are equivalent in AAE.

In order to examine the possibility of a grammatical change-in-progress, I collected tokens of *I'm knowing*, *I be knowing*, and *I been/BIN knowing*, sampling the total number of *knowing* tweets over a fixed three-to-nine-day period in each January from 2010 to 2024. During each period, I collected at least one thousand total tokens of *knowing* constructions for each month. The Twitter data includes 19,297 tokens of *knowing* constructions from 2010 to 2024. This token count-oriented sampling method of collection allows comparison of the frequency of *I'm knowing* in relation to the longer established +PVM *knowing* constructions within fixed periods each year. This sampling method alleviates the pressure of having to account for the growth of Twitter and in the number AAE speaking Twitter users because it does not lead to claims about the change in frequency of the total usage of -PVM *knowing* but rather its usage relative to +PVM *knowing* constructions.

To account for the possibility that the users of this construction are not AAE speakers, I verified that, in each tweet, the construction was used in a context that is grammatical in AAE. Additionally, I verified that users had other AAE features, such as invariant *be* (15c), *finna*, *d* for *th* (15d), among others, either in their tweet or on their page. While this method is not perfect, it seems effective in at least limiting the tokens to users who are intending to speak AAE. For all Twitter data both the standard spellings *I'm* and *knowing* as well as the non-standard spellings *Im* and *knowin* were included in the search.

4 Results

4.1 CORAAL Data

In the entire CORAAL database, there were 121 total instances of the word *knowing*. Of these, 13 include the progressive uses. As shown below in Table 1, the constructions include seven instances of *been knowing* and four instances of *be knowing*. In addition, there is one example of *BIN knowing* and one example of –PVM *knowing*. *BIN knowing* and *been knowing* are used by older speakers while *be knowing* is used by younger and older speakers.

Construction	Tokens	Birth year of speaker (year uttered)
been knowing	7	1928 (2004), 1931 (1968), 1976 (2017, three tokens), 1976 (2017), 1979 (2015)
BIN knowing	1	1972 (2004)
be knowing	4	1951 (1966), 1990 (2016), 1990 (2017), N/A (2017)
–PVM *knowing*	1	1992 (2016)

Table 1: Types of *knowing* constructions found in CORAAL by birth year of speaker.

The speakers who use *been knowing* were all born in 1979 or earlier and the *BIN knowing* speaker was born in 1972. Two speakers who use *be knowing* were born in 1990 and one was born in 1951. The last *be knowing* speaker does not have their birth year available. The speaker who uses –PVM *knowing* was born in 1992. Due to the sample size, statistical significance of age correlation cannot be determined. Similarly, the year in which the token is uttered does not seem to show any patterns in this limited data. The example of –PVM *knowing* found in CORAAL is below.

(22) She not even knowing, like, I had a twin.
(CORAAL, DCB_se1_ag2_m_03)

4.2 Twitter Data

Over a 14-year period from 2010 to 2024, out of all 19,297 tokens collected of *knowing* constructions from Twitter, a total of 6,572 (34.1%) are *I'm knowing*, 10,454 (54.1%) are *I be knowing*, and 2,271 (11.8%) of these tokens are *I been/BIN knowing* (see Appendix A for a year-by-year breakdown).

To demonstrate the usage rates of *I'm knowing*, we can compare it to each of the other constructions individually. This will allow us to see the trendline of *I'm knowing* in comparison to the other constructions. In order to do so, we will look at the rate at which *I'm knowing* is used for every 100 tokens of *I be knowing* and *I been/BIN knowing* respectively. The first of these is pictured in Figure 1.

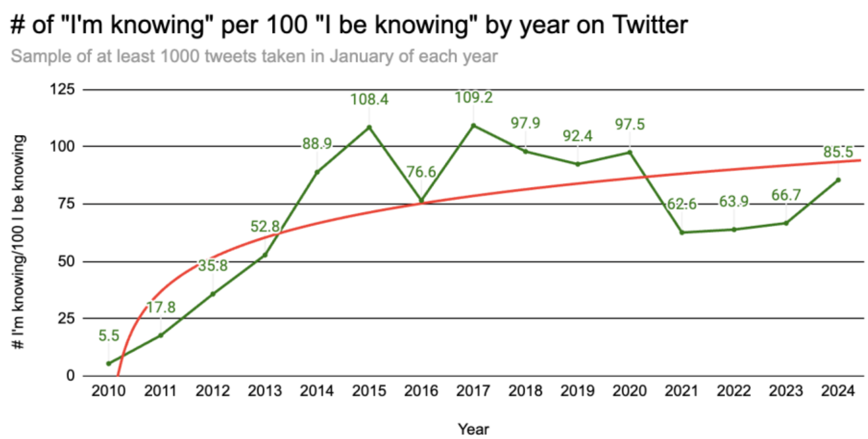

Figure 1: Number of *I'm knowing* tokens per 100 *I be knowing* tokens on Twitter by year.

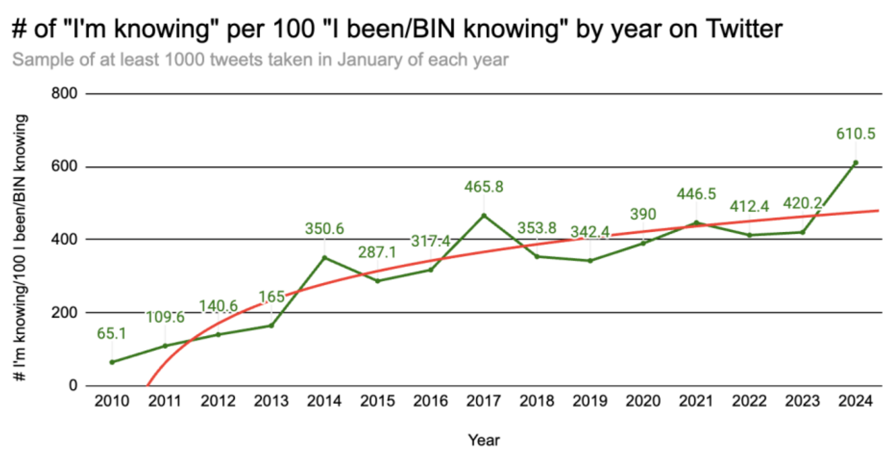

Figure 2: Number of *I'm knowing* tokens per 100 *I been/BIN knowing* tokens on Twitter by year.

Figure 1 is a visualization of usage of the innovation *I'm knowing* – relative to the older established construction *I be knowing*. In 2010, *I'm knowing* was used at a modest rate of 5.5 tokens for every 100 *I be knowing* tokens. This rate climbs rapidly until 2015 when it reaches a rate of 108.4 *I'm knowing* tokens for every 100 *I be knowing* tokens. Then, the rate plateaus and remains relatively steady for the rest of the data, never falling below 62.6 *I'm knowing* tokens per 100 *I be knowing* tokens (2021) and never going above 109.2 *I'm knowing* tokens per 100 *I be knowing* tokens (2017).

Figure 2 is a comparison of the usage rates of *I'm knowing* to *I been/BIN knowing* by year. There appears to be a similar trajectory, as seen in Figure 1, albeit at a different rate. In the first year of the data collected, *I'm knowing* is used at its lowest rate of 65.1 tokens per 100 *I been/BIN knowing* tokens.

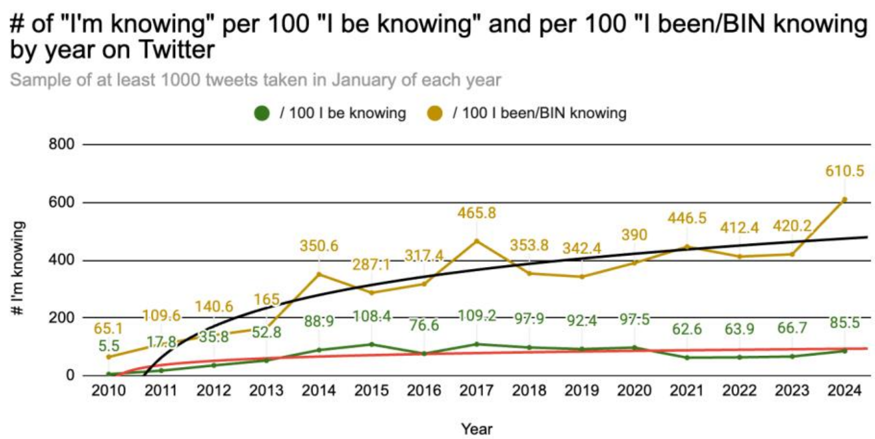

Figure 3: Number of *I'm knowing* tokens per 100 *I be knowing* tokens and number of *I'm knowing* tokens per 100 *I been/BIN knowing* tokens on Twitter by year.

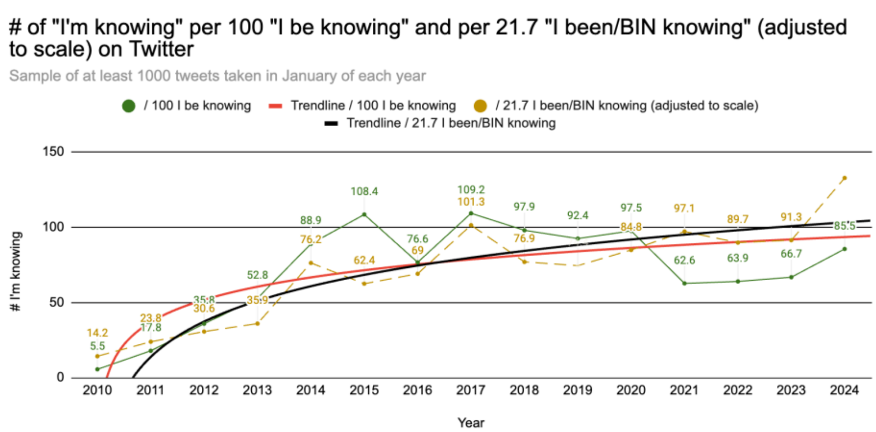

Figure 4: Number of *I'm knowing* tokens per 100 *I be knowing* tokens and number of *I'm knowing* tokens per 21.7 *I been/BIN knowing* tokens (adjusted for scale) on Twitter by year.

Figure 3 illustrates both trends side by side. Again, while the rates are different, the trend is the same. To see this better, a proportional comparison is made in Figure 4, adjusted to scale. In this case, the total number of *I be knowing* tokens has been divided by the total number of *I been/BIN knowing* tokens over the entire dataset, showing that there are about 4.6 times more *I be knowing* tokens than *I been/BIN knowing* tokens. Then, dividing 100 by the rate of 4.6 gives a proportional rate of one *I'm knowing* token per 21.7 *I been/BIN knowing* tokens.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

As it is both older and has limited data available in comparison to Twitter, there are few examples of *knowing* in the CORAAL database. Because of this, there are no true generalizations that can be made. Still, the majority of occurrences support longstanding descriptions of AAE grammar, suggesting that progressive *know* does indeed require a preverbal marker such as *be* or *BIN*. However, the near absence of –PVM *knowing* may indicate that it is an emergent phenomenon. Indeed, there is one sole example in the CORAAL database that I argue should not be disregarded. The speech in which this token is found is fluid and unremarkable and did not have an unusual context. That is to say that it is clearly a natural speech utterance rather than a speech error. The example of *knowing* produced without a preverbal marker is in 2016, and well into the shift noticed in the Twitter data. A larger and more recent sample of AAE speakers may offer more insight into the production of *knowing* in relation age.

It is clear from the data on Twitter that *knowing* is produced frequently both with and without preverbal markers. The Twitter data illustrates that *I'm knowing* is not only a possible construction, but also used with surprising frequency. It also seems to show that on Twitter, at least some portion of this change in frequency of usage can be captured. The change in frequency of usage suggests there may be a change in acceptability going along with it. This could explain the discrepancies between Green (1998:120) and Scott (2016:56). It is important to note that the earliest written AAE use of *I'm knowing* that I was able to find was in a rap song called *Let You Havit* by DJ Quik released February 21, 1995, shown in (23).

(23) But I ain't trippin' 'cause I'm knowin' you ain't nothin but a silly ho.
(Quik 1995)

The current usage of –PVM *knowing* on Twitter and in my personal experience is not restricted regionally. While I didn't collect regional data consistently, I noted the user location of *I'm knowing* in California, New York, Illinois, Missouri, Louisiana, Washington, Mississippi, Texas, Florida, Pennsylvania, Nevada, and Arkansas. Amongst my peers, I have heard –PVM *knowing* used in AAE speech in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Chicago, Illinois, and East Palo Alto, California. The lack of regionally definable distribution leads me to ask if Twitter, or social media in general, has aided in the spread of this construction (cf., Blake and Shousterman 2010). While it is undoubtedly used in regular speech, perhaps it has been popularized through Twitter first and this is why it is not restricted to one region. Alternatively, this construction may have been regionally restricted early on, but Twitter helped it spread more universally. While both of these possibilities are likely unprovable, the possibility of this social media driven language change appears plausible.

The results of this study support my initial hypothesis. Not only is *knowing* only seen once without preverbal markers in CORAAL but it is by a young speaker. The data on Twitter leads me to argue that –PVM *knowing* and +PVM *knowing* are commonly used today. This shift from Green (1998, 2000) in which –PVM *knowing* is ungrammatical in AAE to it being used on Twitter today is remarkable and points to language change taking place.

Although much of the data in this paper is from the internet, this construction is used regularly in speech among some AAE speakers. Outside of the CORAAL data, I recently came across an interview of a young rapper, YTB Fatt, in which he uses –PVM *knowing* several times (24). He is from West Memphis, Arkansas.

(24) a. I aint gon lie though if I book a show in the ci-where I'm from though that shit a be over capacity like I'm knowing
(Fatt 2024, 2min 30s)

(25) b. If the man don't show no flaw I'm knowin like really I'm just gon get the stamp from BD
(Fatt 2024, 8min 30s)

Alim, who has done extensive research on Hip Hop Nation Language (HHNL), argues that when considering language change, one must always consider "speaker agency, the consciousness and strategic use of language" (2006:112). Twitter, a place where AAE lives and flourishes, I argue is the main platform for the –PVM *knowing* construction to be amplified. This is similar to the argument put forth by Blake and Shousterman (2010:240) for rappers in St. Louis making creative linguistic choices (in this case pre-rhotic vowel centering) in order to link themselves to their constructed local identity. They argue that the increased use of a feature or construction by rappers led to increased usage in the general population as a marker of identity. Although –PVM *knowing* is not linked to any specific locale, perhaps this is another case of rappers and HHNL speakers making creative linguistic choices to link themselves to an identity and in turn influencing a bigger portion of AAE speakers, today through online platforms. Clearly, more research is needed to determine if in fact there are any sociolinguistic variables or identity constructs which are associated with use of –PVM *knowing*. I offer a place to begin.

Appendix A

Table A1: Raw numbers of the distribution of *knowing* constructions by year on Twitter.

Time Period	**Tokens**		
	I'm knowing	***I been/BIN knowing***	***I be knowing***
2010 (January 15-24)	54	83	975
2011 (January 15-20)	172	157	964
2012 (January 16-18)	481	342	1342
2013 (January 18-20)	439	266	832
2014 (January 16-18)	582	166	655
2015 (January 14-18)	646	225	596
2016 (January 14-18)	400	126	522
2017 (January 18-25)	545	117	499
2018 (January 11-18)	467	132	477
2019 (January 14-19)	476	139	515
2020 (January 14-18)	585	150	600
2021 (January 14-18)	384	86	613
2022 (January 14-18)	400	97	626
2023 (January 13-18)	416	99	624
2024 (January 13-18)	525	86	614

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