

*Finna* as a Socially Meaningful Modal in African American English  
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This paper provides both a formal and a descriptive account of the preverbal marker *finna* in African American English (AAE). The analysis fills 2 gaps in the literature: the general paucity of research on formal semantics in AAE and the under-developed integration of formal semantic meaning with social meaning for dialectal variants. Using lyrics from hip-hop and rap songs, this work examines 90 tokens of the pre-verbal marker *finna* (also seen as *fitna* and *finna*). The data suggest that *finna* behaves like a performative modal in AAE, giving rise to a proximate future interpretation (following Ninan 2005, Kaufmann 2012). This modal is distributionally and formally distinct from the future marker *gonna*. Finally, *finna* has acquired a salient social meaning in AAE, especially outside of the South. The data support an enhanced distribution for *finna* in contexts where the creation of a strong ethnic or cultural style is desirable, such as in hip hop lyrics.

*Finna* is compatible with a wide range of syntactic and semantic phenomena, including both telic and atelic complements and inanimate and animate subjects. Two semantic features distinguish *finna* from well-studied Mainstream English (ME) auxiliaries. First, unlike ME *try*, *finna* may not be explained only with reference to the speaker's intentions (see Grano 2011). Second, *finna* almost always receives a proximate future interpretation and is therefore distinguishable from futurate modals like *gonna* (see Binnick 1971, Klecha 2011). *Finna* and *gonna* are not identical in distribution or in meaning, as evidenced by occurrence with temporal adverbs (1).

1. (a) What the fuck your punk ass finna do now? (attested)
- (b) What the fuck your punk ass gonna do now?
- (c) I'm gonna see him play next year.
- (d) ??I'm finna see him play next year.
- (e) I'm finna go live. (attested)

Formal studies of tense, mood, and aspect in AAE are scarce (Green 2002), and only two works explicitly address *finna* or Southern English *fixin to* (see Ching 1987; Smith 2009). This paper provides a formal semantics of *finna* as a performative modal (see Ninan 2005). Under Ninan's proposal, the deontic modal *must* behaves as an imperative in some unembedded environments. Ninan bases his proposal in part on data like (2), which has a natural counterpart in (3).

2. You must wash the dishes. #But you're not going to.
3. I'm finna roll. ??But I ain't gonna.

Taking a cue from Ninan's analysis, this paper treats *finna* as committing its subject to acting as if the subject prefers that *finna*'s complement be true. While Ninan accomplishes this sort of operation by means of Portner 2005, 2007's To-Do Lists, this paper instead employs a slightly modified version of Kaufmann 2012's more traditional modal machinery. The semantics of *finna* appear as in (4).

4.  $\lambda G_{\text{bouletic}} \lambda F_{\text{circum}} \lambda t' \lambda P \lambda t \lambda w. \forall w' \in \text{BEST}(G(F(w,t)))[P(t',w')]$

In prose, (4) suggests that *finna* denotes those propositions that are optimal with respect to a bouletic (i.e., desire) ordering source (and a circumstantial modal base). However, an additional presupposition is necessary to cash out the performative nature of *finna*: the bouletic ordering source must be restricted to the speaker's desires. This is a slightly simplified version of Kaufmann's Ordering Source Restriction.

Combining these elements produces the correct predictions for *finna*. First, the proximate futurity of *finna* falls out of the imperative-like semantics of the performative. Once the speaker has committed herself to acting as if she (maximally) prefers X, the speaker ought to do X relatively

soon after the utterance. Thus, *finna*'s near futurity is created by pragmatic inference, which may be cancelled in some contexts (5).

5. (a) We finna make a movie (attested)

Second, *finna*'s appearance with second- and third-person subjects poses no more difficulties than *must*'s appearance with these subjects: the use of *finna* in these contexts, as with the use of *must*, imposes obligations on the hearer or on the third person (cf. Ninan 2005, though Ninan acknowledges the odd result of third-person "imperatives"). Third, the appearance of *finna* with inanimate subjects is correctly interpreted as a prediction in light of the speaker's desires. Thus, for example, a sentence like (6) is uttered felicitously where in all the optimal worlds compatible with the speaker's desires, the bay blows.

6. The bay finna blow (attested)

Fourth, this treatment accounts for a sentence like (3), above, in which denial of the preajcent plausibly creates an odd effect. Finally, the performative nature of *finna* distinguishes it from verbs like *try* and *gonna* as analyzed by other researchers.

These formal constraints, working in conjunction with extra-linguistic predictions about *finna*, may have important implications for its distribution. Though *finna* is often paraphrased as "about to" in ME, *finna* and *bouta* never co-occur here within the same song. Where *finna* is repeated in a verse, it is never restated with *bouta* or vice versa. For non-Southern U.S. dialects, one difference between *bouta* and *finna* is clear: the social meaning of *finna* is more apt to index an ethnic identity than *bouta* as *about to* or *bouta* occurs broadly in Northern Cities dialects among White and African American speakers, while *finna* occurs only among African American speakers. Extra-linguistic factors interact with grammatical, semantic constraints to produce variations in speaker usage that index to style and social meaning. As Bender (2001) shows, the perceived social meaning of a variant is, in fact, amplified by its occurrence in a more grammatically marked environment. This accounts for the fact that, while engaged in rapping, AAE-speaking artists may be more likely to use the variant that indexes cultural and ethnic identity, and that furthermore, they may achieve more bang for their buck in creating this ethnically-indexed style when they push the boundaries of grammatical acceptability by using *finna* with inanimate subjects or more temporally distant predicates as quoted above. Finally, examples in which speakers flout grammatical constraints for the sake of amplified social meaning offer insight into the actuation problem of semantic change. Diachronic semantic broadening may be rooted in these initial uses that are grammatically marked, yet more socially meaningful. Thus, both synchronically and diachronically, formal semantics accounts of *finna* are crucially augmented by incorporating social meaning.

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