

Reviews

African American English in the Diaspora. Shana Poplack and Sali Tagliamonte. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.

The English History of African American English. Shana Poplack, ed. Oxford: Blackwell. 2000.

“This book is a milestone in the development of the historical and evolutionary approach to linguistic analysis,” writes William Labov in the Foreword to *African American English in the Diaspora (AAED)*. In both books, the authors bring to bear new data and analytical methods to the long-standing polemic on the origins and development of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Are differences with other dialects of English reflexes of distinct underlying grammatical structures, remnants of an erstwhile creole (the decreolization hypothesis)? Or were early African American varieties similar to those of the British colonists and present-day differences the relatively recent product of internal evolution (the linguistic divergence hypothesis)? The comparative method of historical linguistics is combined with variationist sociolinguistics to establish geneological relationships among varieties of Early African American English (AAE), which are compared with English-based creoles as well as with regional varieties of English.

The incorporation of the variationist paradigm into the comparative method in this research is powerful and compelling. Establishing the origin of a form requires more than the attestation and comparison of cognates, since the association between forms and putative sources typically is not privative. Nor are comparisons of rates of occurrence adequate, since these fluctuate according to the data-collection circumstances. Only the “patterned organization of these forms in discourse” can provide evidence of their origin and development (*AAED*, p. 5).

A major innovation in this research is the “operationalization” of competing hypotheses about the function of forms as factors in multivariate analyses. The hierarchy of constraints constituting each factor reveals the underlying grammar: “If ... two or more varieties share, not only the variant form, but also the details of its occurrence in discourse, the chances that these could have arisen coincidentally are slim” (AAED, p. 94).

This work is a model of appropriate data as well. Quantitative comparisons are drawn from large corpora of African American varieties and British-origin varieties of English. A precious contribution is the data from the African American diaspora settlements on the Samaná peninsula of the Dominican Republic, to the south, and on the eastern coast of Nova Scotia, Canada, to the north. In these “enclaves”, the descendants of African American colonists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have largely preserved their distinctive language. Poplack and Tagliamonte are to be praised for “a splendid job in bringing people back into the study of change and variation” (Labov, AAED, p. xvii).

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of African American English in the Diaspora describe the formation of the diaspora enclave communities and the control corpora to which these Early AAE materials are compared, while chapter 5 explicates methods. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 examine the major areas of the tense/aspect system: past, present, and future.

Past-time marking has been at the epicenter of the origins debate. Do zero-marked verbs represent the retention of creole aspectual-temporal categories or are they variants of the English Past Tense? Since most comparison varieties, both creole and non, manifest zero forms, it is not their presence, but their distribution that is decisive. Once weak (regular) and strong (irregular) verbs are separated, it turns out that most of the bare forms found in past temporal

reference contexts are phonologically conditioned deletions of the English Past Tense marker (cf. Labov et al. 1968). In strong verbs, certain lexical items (e.g., want) are associated with zero; neither stativity nor verb class, or even frequency, are predictive. Beyond the lexical factor, there is an association of zero with past habitual meaning; yet vitiating decreolization accounts is verification of the same habitual effect in English varieties. An intriguing suggestion is that habitual zeros are the result of would deletion. In short, the authors do an impressive job of sorting through and operationalizing the posited creole tense-aspect distinctions; my only quibble is the occasional mixing of terms for cross-linguistic functional categories, such as habitual and perfective, with language-specific categories, such as English Past Tense (cf. Comrie 1976).

Variability in –s marking, for example, I says, he know, was viewed in early studies of AAVE as a non-systematic, hypercorrect response to external social pressures. Alternative creolist analyses are that –s marks habitual or durative aspect. What, then, is the grammatical function of verbal –s, if any? Three crucial methodological decisions are detailed: considering simultaneously all the features that have been reported to condition –s; comparing the 3rd-person singular to 3rd plural and non-3rd-person; and adopting a function-based perspective by limiting the context studied to present temporal reference.

It turns out that variation is constrained by a factor originating in British English dialects, type and adjacency of subject (Northern Subject Rule: adjacent pronouns disfavor –s) and that phonological conditioning is also operative. The discussion of aspectual reading effects is particularly illuminating. Cross-tabulations reveal that the apparent disfavoring effect of punctual aspect (= limited or momentary duration) applies overwhelmingly to narrative clauses with past meaning and, in the present, is largely restricted to non-3rd-person stative cognition and perception verbs (e.g., understand, see), suggesting an

underlying lexical effect. However, the habitual reading of –s is a true aspectual effect: beyond the general association of present tense with habituality, the –s variant is preferred in habitual contexts, while zero is favored for durative readings. It is important that the habitual use of –s is confirmed for regional British dialects, and thus need not be attributed to creole sources.

So, what is the function of –s? “Rather than an agreement or tense marker in 3rd p. sg. and a hypercorrect insertion elsewhere,” the variability “represents the contemporary reflex of a single ... earlier process of ... present-tense marking across the verbal paradigm” (p. 203). Verbal –s was a systematic part of Early AAE grammar, with subject type and habitual effects brought by British colonists. Once –s grammaticized as a 3rd –person singular marker in standard and most other varieties of English, the agreement constraint became categorical and “effectively compress[ed] the erstwhile variable effects as to render them non-significant” (p. 203). The appeal to grammaticization is particularly apt here, since loss of features of meaning is well documented in the evolution of grammatical morphemes (Bybee, Perkins and Pagliuca 1994).

In the choice of expressions of future temporal reference (will variants of going to), are differences between speaker groups due to ethnic heritage or to more or less advanced degrees of grammaticization? Poplack and Tagliamonte’s discussion illustrates how the facts of synchronic variation can illuminate diachronic processes of evolution. This is accomplished by operationalizing measures of grammaticization as factors in variable rule analysis. Comparisons of constraints representing stages in the development of going to show retention of conservative features in the enclave varieties; for example, the avoidance of going to with motion verbs is consistent with persistence of its original allative lexical meaning. In contrast, the favoring of going to with non-human subjects in

the mainstream Ottawa variety indicates advanced grammaticization as a future marker.

In The English History of African American English, the same impeccable method is applied to morphophonological (Part I), morphosyntactic (Part II), and syntactic (Part III) variables by different contributors.

In “Rephrasing the copula: Contraction and zero in Early African American English”, James Walker uncovers the confounding role of prosodic structure in apparently grammatical phenomena. He concludes that the purported effects of “following grammatical category”, the cornerstone of copula studies, are epiphenomena of prosodic constraints. Zero copula, “another spectacular ... innovation of AAVE ... represents the exploitation in AAVE of an additional possibility of reducing prosodic complexity that was inherent in the English language once contraction developed” (p. 67). In “Reconstructing the source of Early African American English plural marking: A comparative study of English and Creole”, Shana Poplack, Sali Tagliamonte, and Ejike Eze provide evidence that plural marking patterns in Early AAE were acquired from English, which, it turns out, has a history of variability in marking plural –s.

In “Negation and the creole-origins hypothesis: Evidence from Early African American English”, Darin Howe and James Walker compare not only the occurrence, but the linguistic conditioning of negative construction features, including clause internal negative concord and ain’t. Parallels in the patterning of these features with nonstandard and historical varieties of English, coupled with the absence of other features in creoles, show that the variable patterns in Early AAE “can be traced directly to colonial English and, in the case of negative concord, to the very origins of the English language” (p.135). Sali Tagliamonte and Jennifer Smith, in “Old was, new ecology: Viewing English through the sociolinguistic filter”, examine settlement histories and undertake a transatlantic

cross-variety comparison of was/were variation, incorporating a British relic area. The parallels they find between Bucky, Northern Scotland, and the African Nova Scotian enclaves underscore the role of the enclave in resistance to contact-induced change and “raise doubts about the extent to which ethnicity is the basic underlying factor which best accounts for linguistic differences between AAVE and other varieties of North American English” (p. 163).

In “The question question: Auxiliary inversion in Early African American English”, Gerard Van Herk tests the effects of conditioning factors from the history of English on the non-inversion of lexical verbs in Early AAE questions. He concludes that “the variable constraints ... are the same ones that constrained subject-verb inversion in Early Modern English and ... have been extended to auxiliaries” (p. 194). Gunnel Tottie and Dawn Harvie, in “It’s all relative: Relativization strategies in Early African American English”, find distinct preferences for relative pronouns (that, what, zero) in each Early AAE variety studied. Nevertheless, these varieties show parallels with each other and other varieties of English in the effects of the type and positioning of the antecedent: an adjacent pronominal form in non-subject function favors zero relativization; subject zero relatives are favored with indefinite NP antecedents (as in existential there-constructions).

Finally, in a special contribution to the volume, “Some sociohistorical inferences about the development of African American English”, Salikoko Mufwene evaluates demographic and socioeconomic evidence “that make it unlikely that AAVE developed from a Gullah-like creole” (p. 253). The structures and their patterns of distribution were largely already present in the English acquired by the Africans, in support of the “founder effect” (Mufwene 1996). Mufwene’s contribution supports the linguistic divergence, independent innovation hypothesis: AAVE today is more different from surrounding dialects

than earlier varieties were. It was 20th-century social conditions – racial segregation and community cohesion – that enabled the “astonishing pattern of linguistic divergence” (Labov, AAED, p. xvii).

This research offers much more than understanding of the origins and evolution of modern AAVE. Readers will also learn about the history of English and synchronic variation in dialects of English. Of more general interest for language contact studies, this work elucidates the kinds of influences that languages can have on each other and the role of the enclave in the retention of conservative features. Of even broader interest is the exemplification of the variationist comparative method in the study of linguistic change: the need to move beyond establishing the existence or even rate of occurrence of forms, to uncover conditioning factors in patterns of distribution. A sharp lesson is the imperative to overcome prescriptive biases in linguistics inherent in reliance on standard varieties as the base of comparisons. This pair of books constitutes both a treasure of information and an indispensable tool for linguistic investigation.

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