WHAT THE AFRICAN AMERICAN DIASPORA CAN TEACH US ABOUT VERNACULAR BLACK ENGLISH[1]

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THE CONUNDRUM OF VERNACULAR BLACK ENGLISH

Few dialects have attracted as much linguistic attention as Vernacular Black English (VBE), a variety with which a wide range of salient, and often stigmatized, features have come to be identified, such as those in (1-4).

1. But I said, "but I *ain't* drink *no* coffee". (SAM/003)[2]

2. I *look<u>ed</u>* in that door and I *look*Ø back in the corner. (ANSE/NP/030)

3. I seen *them* great big *eye*Ø! (ANSE/NP/030)

4. 'Cause I *know<u>S</u>* it and I *see<u>S</u>* it now. (SAM/002)

Are these features, which do not figure in the standard repertoire, "bad" English, as most teachers and language mavens maintain? Or are they simply not English, but rather the legacy of an English-based Creole once widespread across British North America? A third alternative is that the ancestors of today's speakers in fact acquired an English which differed from the contemporary standard, but resembled that of the British who colonized the United States in the 17th century, and subsequently retained it due to relative isolation from mainstream linguistic developments. These questions are at the heart of one of the most tenacious controversies in sociolinguistics, prompting the long-term research described here. Key to our project is the recognition that no understanding of how contemporary VBE came to be can be achieved independently of the historical context of its development. This requires reference to an earlier stage of the language.

Unfortunately, very little is known about such an earlier stage, which I'll call *Early Black English* (EBE). Useful historical material is in short supply: the advent of recording technology post-dates the critical period, and written representations are both scarce and unreliable.

These problems led us to turn to the language of the *African American diaspora*. Triggered by conditions in the U.S. in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, tens of thousands of African Americans dispersed to such far-flung locations as Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Caribbean, South America and even Canada, where small enclaves of their descendants have

1 The research reported here was funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and carried out over many years in conjunction with Sali Tagliamonte, James Walker, Gerard Van Herk and other members of my uOttawa Sociolinguistics Laboratory (www.sociolinguistics.uottawa.ca/thelab.html). This project would never have come to fruition without the support of the Black Cultural Centre (Cornerbrook, NS) and its then curator Dr. Henry Bishop, as well as Ann Johnson MacDonald, Allister Johnson, Wayn Hamilton, David States and Rosie Fraser. I am especially indebted to all of the participants for generously sharing their stories and their language.

2 Codes in parentheses identify the database (SAM: Samaná English; ANSE: African Nova Scotian English; ESR: Ex-Slave recordings; DVN: Devon English) from which the example is drawn and the number of the speaker who produced it. All examples are reproduced verbatim, with permission, from original audio recordings.

maintained their own communities to this day. Because of their geographic and social isolation from the mainstream, the languages spoken in such *relic areas* tend to preserve older features. Taken as instantiations of EBE, the study of these varieties could shed light on the history of VBE.

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN DIASPORA

Our first big break was in Samaná (Dominican Republic), home to an enclave of native English speakers whose roots there date back to the 1820s. In the early 1980's, David Sankoff and I recorded the speech of 21 of the oldest members (aged 58 to 103) of what was known as the "American" community of Samaná. In our conversations with them, we learned that they had kept, as symbols of community identity, their religion, their respect for education, and most important for our purposes, their language. From these data we extracted and analyzed thousands of examples of features, such as those in (1) – (4), and with the help of multivariate analysis, uncovered subtle statistical tendencies, which in turn, revealed aspects of the underlying grammar. That grammar bore little resemblance to local Spanish or to the English-based creoles of adjacent Caribbean islands. On the contrary, it was surprisingly similar to that of mainstream English, although it displayed some of the very features that have become emblematic of contemporary VBE.

While we were working on these materials, a remarkable new source of information on EBE was discovered. The "Ex-Slave Recordings" (ESR) were made in the 1930s and 1940s for the Works Progress Administration of the U.S. government with elderly African Americans, formerly enslaved in one of five southern states: Texas, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia and Virginia. Born before the Civil War, participants had acquired their language in the mid-1800's – within three to five decades of the input settlers to Samaná. Because they had never left the U.S., their language could be construed as a benchmark against which the diaspora materials could be validated as representative of an earlier stage. So we were particularly intrigued when our analyses revealed features typical of contemporary VBE, patterning in ways quite similar to what we had found in Samaná! Such parallels bolstered our sense that Samaná English was close to the language the original input settlers had brought there in 1824. If correct, this would confirm that it had not changed substantially over the duration, but was instead a *relic* of EBE.

These discoveries were tantalizing, but the data they were based on were quite limited. By the time we got to Samaná, only the very oldest people could still speak English, and there were hardly any of those left. And although the ESR are an authentic representation of 19th-century EBE, even fewer of those were extant. What we needed was another source of EBE spoken in a community whose language was conservative enough to have retained older features, but vibrant enough to be used by many members. This is what we found in the old-line black communities in Nova Scotia.

Nova Scotia was once home to the largest population of formerly enslaved African Americans outside of the US. And although African Nova Scotians were not as cut off from other English speakers as the *americanos* of Samaná, a host of geographic, social, educational, and religious factors ensured that neither they nor their language had assimilated significantly to local norms. This encouraged us to investigate whether African Nova Scotian English might retain conservative linguistic features as well.

We targeted two settlements: a cluster of hamlets around Guysborough in the east, and North Preston, outside of Halifax. The input settlers of both locations share an origin in the deep South, and their descendants share a history of marginalization by the mainstream. In the early 1990's, Sali Tagliamonte and I undertook a community-based study in these areas, relying on local residents to record interactions with their friends and neighbors. These ranged from "standard" English to what some members referred to as "slang" or "broken English", registers among which most participants alternated skillfully. As in most diglossic situations, the most informal styles, seen as appropriate for in-group interaction only, are not normally available to non-members. Yet these are the styles that contain the key vernacular features. Thanks to community participation and support, we were able to collect a huge dataset – 3/4 million words – from 68 members of the older generation (b.1894-1938). In conjunction with our other materials, this represents the largest corpus of EBE ever assembled. It consists of spontaneous speech recorded in three diaspora communities, all settled at approximately the same time – late 18th, early 19th centuries – and a benchmark variety spoken by African Americans born a few generations later, and who had never left the U.S. In each community, the language developed independently of any contact with the others.

RECONSTRUCTING THE PAST FROM THE PRESENT

This kind of situation lends itself well to *reconstruction*, using the comparative method of historical linguistics. The basis for reconstruction, in linguistics as in evolutionary biology, is shared retention: If two or more independent language varieties share a structure that is unlikely to have developed by accident, borrowing, or as the result of linguistic universals, that structure is assumed to have been transmitted from a common ancestor. Once we know what that ancestor is, we can begin to validate claims about the origins of VBE.

If the grammar of EBE was altered by contact-induced change *postdating* the diaspora, linguistic traces should be reflected

FIGURE 1: LOCATION OF *EARLY BLACK ENGLISH*-SPEAKING COMMUNITIES



by substantive differences between the Nova Scotia and Samaná varieties. Further differences might obtain between the diaspora varieties as a group and the ESR, whose speakers had remained in situ. If, on the other hand, the varieties display systematic commonalities, we may infer that they descended from a common stock. We established the characteristics of that stock through a historical control: the prescriptive history of English, as manifested in a corpus of nearly 100 grammars and usage manuals dating from 1577-1898. We use grammarians' description, prescription and censure of standard and non-standard uses of these linguistic features as windows on their geographic, social and historical trajectory.

In the published reports of the findings presented below, my team and I systematically compared statistically-established patterns of use across a series of dialects of English – Black and White, mainstream and peripheral, modern and historical. We found that many of the features stereotypically associated with contemporary VBE have a robust precedent in the history of the English language.

A CASE STUDY: THE PRESENT TENSE

As but one example, consider a well-documented feature of VBE, the variable marking of present tense, regardless of person and number of the subject. Why does the verb sometimes fail to be inflected where it "should" be (5a), while elsewhere it receives inflection where this is unwarranted in contemporary standard English, as in (5b) and (4)?

(5) a. He *understandØ* what I say (SAM/005)

b. They always *trieS* to be obedient. (SAM/009)

One prominent linguist described it as "tacking on a morpheme which [the speaker] knows is characteristic of the standard language, but which he has not yet learnt to use correctly" (Bickerton 1975: 134). So alien was this usage considered to the grammar of English, and so closely associated with VBE, that some scholars concluded that *-s* must derive from a distinct, possibly Creole, grammar. So in tracking its trajectory over time, we were surprised to learn that the contemporary requirement that subject and verb agree in the third person singular (achieved by adding *–s: he/she/it/the boy runs*) is actually a relatively *recent* development, dating from Early Modern English. Prior to that, agreement was not obligatory, nor was *–s* restricted to third singular. Indeed, as far back as 1788, the grammarian Beattie noted that a singular verb *sometimes* followed a plural noun, exactly as we find in VBE today. Even more telling, it was already condemned at that time: used in the "*vulgar* dialect of North Britain to this day and even in England the *common* people frequently speak in this manner" (Beattie 1788:175)! Precursors of this variability, and suggestions of what might have constrained it, are amply evident in English grammars of the past four centuries. One key attestation is a pattern, first described by Murray, another grammarian, in 1873. This has come to be known as the *Northern Subject Rule* (9).

In the PRESENT TENSE, aa *leyke*, wey *leyke*, yee *leyke*, thay *leyke*, are used only when the verb is accompanied by its proper pronoun; when the subject is a noun, adjective, interrogative or relative pronoun, or when the verb and subject are separated by a clause, the verb takes the termination *-s* in all persons. Thus "aa *cum* fyrst; yt's mey ăt *cums* fyrst; wey *gàng* theare; huz tweae quheyles *gàngs* theare; yt's huz ăt *says* seae; ye *sey* quhat thay *mein;* yuw eanes *seys* quhat thir *meins;* yuw ăt *thynks* ye can dui aa-thyng; thay *cum* an' *teake* them; the burds *cums* an' *pæcks* them; sum *thynks* hey was reycht, but uthers *menteins* the contrar; fuok ăt *cums* unbudden, *syts* unsær'd."

Murray explains that the verb takes no ending when the subject is a pronoun. But if the subject is comprised of another grammatical category or if it is separated from the verb, the verb takes the ending *–s* in all grammatical persons. Two of his examples, which date back to 13th- or 14th-century English, are reproduced in (6):

(6) "They *comeØ* and *takeØ* them"; "*The birds comeS* and *peckS* them"

We operationalized this Northern Subject Rule, along with other conditions that had been suggested to constrain *–s* variability, as factors in a multivariate analysis, and analyzed the contribution of each to the probability that *–s* would appear on nearly 4000 present-tense verbs extracted from the EBE data. We found operation of the Northern Subject Rule to be attested across the diaspora: verbal *–s* is avoided after adjacent pronominal subjects, and preferred when the subject is longer – exactly as described by Murray in 1873! Some modern-day examples are shown in 7).

(7) a. SAMANÁ | They *speakØ* the same English. But you see, the English people *talkS* with grammar. (SAM/007)

b. EX-SLAVE RECORDINGS | That's why, you *knowØ*, they *celebrateØ* that day. Coloured folks celebrateS that day. (ESR/013)

c. NORTH PRESTON | Oh, I *liveØ* my life. I and Emma, and Aunt Bridgie all—we all *liveS* our life. (ANSE/NP/014)

d. GUYSBOROUGH | He *knowØ* the first guys that *shootS* the deer and everything. (ANSE/GUY/062)

Tellingly, as illustrated in (8), the same pattern appears in the English spoken today in Devon, a county in Southwest England with no known African American input or ties.

(8) DEVON | You *goØ* off for the day, and *giveS* 'em fish and chips on the way home. (DVN/06)

Could members of these far-flung communities have innovated the same linguistic pattern independently? Given its detailed structural nature, that would be highly unlikely. Nor could they possibly have learned it in school. So where did it come from? It could only have been inherited from a common source: the English the first enslaved individuals learned in the U.S. colonies.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

We repeated this exercise with many other linguistic features, and for each we discovered a centuries-old tradition of attestation, throughout the history of English, of the variants now deemed non-standard. As far as we know, this history had never figured in any of the previous treatments of these variables, which instead have opted for a resolutely synchronic approach. This focus on the here-and-now, coupled with the disappearance of many of the key forms from mainstream English, can only highlight *differences* between VBE and the contemporary standard. This leads to the erroneous conclusion that VBE has *lost* grammatical distinctions in a number of areas. Systematic analysis of EBE in the diaspora instead reveals that it in fact *retained* structures which standard English, in its regularizing zeal, has now stamped out. Remarkably, traces of these older structures are still subtly discernable in EBE.

These facts converge in showing that many VBE features today considered non-standard were not *created*, as would be

expected if they were the legacy of a prior creole or limited acquisition. On the contrary, they are the legacy of an older stage of English. The results of this research rightly legitimize VBE as a conservative, and *not* an incorrect, variety of English – one whose core grammatical differences appear to reside largely in its resistance to mainstream change.

FURTHER READING

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