

1

Introduction

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1.1 Preamble

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) ranks among the most widely documented varieties in the sociolinguistic literature, yet its structure and status remain most controversial. The key – and as yet unresolved – question concerns the differences between AAVE and other dialects of English. Are they the legacy of an earlier widespread creole which has since decreolized, or reflexes of the acquisition of contemporaneous regional Englishes to which its early speakers were first exposed, followed by internal differentiation and divergence? The “creole-origins” position, based on suggestive parallels between features of AAVE and certain English-based creoles, has until quite recently been the dominant view. The papers assembled in this volume support an alternative hypothesis, that the grammatical core of contemporary AAVE developed from an English base, many of whose features have since disappeared from all but a select few varieties (African American *and* British-origin), whose particular sociohistorical environments have enabled them to retain reflexes of features no longer attested in Standard English (StdE). This scenario suggests that the many grammatical distinctions between contemporary varieties of AAVE and American and British English are relatively recent developments, possibly initiated during the post-Civil War period, as suggested by Mufwene in chapter 8, in a social context highly propitious to racial segregation and divergence. This does not of course preclude cultural, lexical, onomastic and other distinctly African and/or creole contributions to the current physiognomy of AAVE. But the research in this volume shows that the details of the grammatical core were acquired from earlier English models.

The papers assembled here all represent new work, but are at the same time the fruits of almost twenty years of research into the origins of AAVE, using evidence from enclaves of African American speakers outside the United States.

Poplack and Sankoff's first reports (Poplack 1982a, 1982b; Poplack and Sankoff 1980, 1981) suggesting that earlier stages of African American English were more similar to some British-origin varieties than contemporary AAVE, and not reflective of a more creolized state, were met with disbelief, and provoked extensive replication by ourselves and others. While our approach and conclusions are still the focus of debate, many scholars, erstwhile proponents of the creole-origin hypothesis included (e.g. Winford 1998), have today come to accept our view that the grammar of AAVE originated largely from the regional and nonstandard Englishes to which the early African Americans were exposed, and not from any widely-spoken creole.

Of course this line of research is not the first to stress the English history of AAVE (see, for example, Bailey 1997; Montgomery 1997; Schneider 1989). But the methodological and analytical basis of its conclusions is quite different from that of the older "anglicist" or "dialectologist" tradition (e.g. D'Eloia 1973; Krapp 1924; Kurath 1949; McDavid and McDavid 1951). In particular the linguistic studies assembled here all analyze the same unique body of data on the language of the African American diaspora, which is argued in what follows to represent a precursor of contemporary AAVE. Each focuses on the distribution and conditioning of a linguistic variable, some of which have figured prominently in the origins debate (the copula, negation, plural), others hardly invoked in this connection at all (relativization strategies, question formation, *was/were* variation). Each employs the same rigorous variationist methodology to operationalize and scientifically test competing hypotheses about the origins of AAVE. Finally, building on techniques of historical/comparative reconstruction, they systematically confront the results with those for candidate sources, of both African and British origin. A major focus on *older* and *non-standard* varieties of English furnishes a diachronic perspective on the relevant features.

This volume also explores a number of theoretical and methodological issues pertinent to the debate about the origins of AAVE: inferring diachronic processes from synchronic evidence, the relationship between surface form and underlying function, and appropriate diagnostics for membership of forms in a linguistic system. The contributions in chapters 2–7 document grammatical variability in three varieties of English spoken in the African American diaspora, and compare them with the Ex-Slave Recordings, English-based creoles, and contemporary AAVE with respect to variability in six distinct areas of the grammar. Chapter 8 situates the findings within the sociocultural and historical contexts in the United States in which the variety we will call *Early African American English* (Early AAE) developed.

1.2 The Diachrony Problem

Although this has not been explicitly recognized in most of the relevant work, espousal of any position on the origins debate inevitably implies a comparison of AAVE with some earlier form: creolization, decreolization, convergence and divergence all involve linguistic change, and neither the existence nor the direction of change can be assessed without examining at least two discrete stages of the language. But reliable data on the precursor(s) of AAVE are notoriously elusive. The last two decades have seen an increased interest in the few historical representations available, mainly compendia of transcribed interviews conducted in the early part of the twentieth century with elderly former slaves, taken to reflect African American English as spoken in the mid-nineteenth century. Best documented among these are the “Works Progress Administration Ex-Slave Narratives” (e.g., Brewer 1974, 1979, 1986; Pitts 1981, 1986; Schneider 1979, 1982, 1989). The Hyatt Corpus, and the Hoodoo texts, collected around the same time and representative of approximately the same period, have been exploited by Viereck (1988, 1989) and Ewers (1996). Collections of personal correspondence of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century African Americans are currently being unearthed and mined for the light they can shed on earlier stages of African American English (Kautzsch 1998; Montgomery in press; Montgomery, Fuller and DeMarse 1993; Van Herk 1998, 1999).

But detractors cast doubt on the validity of such historical sources (and the analyses based upon them) for many reasons, not least of which is the difficulty of disentangling the linguistic system of the transcribers from that of the speakers (e.g. Wolfram 1990; Dillard 1993). Nor do all vernacular forms characteristic of informal African American English speech appear in writing (e.g. Montgomery in press; Van Herk 1998). This is one of the reasons why most of the evidence contributing to the origins debate continues to be based on inferences drawn from contemporary speech data, often simply assuming that the forms currently in use were also present in the past.

The ideal evidence would come from a historically authentic *and* linguistically faithful representation of Early AAE, as would be obtained from appropriately collected audio recordings from an earlier point in time. A corpus which partially satisfies these criteria in fact exists. The Ex-Slave Recordings – mechanically recorded interviews with former slaves born in five Southern states between 1844 and 1861: see Bailey, Maynor and Cukor-Avila (1991a) – constitute a bona fide variety of earlier African American English, although here as elsewhere, questions have been raised as to their stylistic, social, and geographical

representativeness (e.g. Rickford 1991; Schneider 1994). In any event, the Ex-Slave Recordings consist of only a few hours of audible speech, insufficient for the systematic quantitative study of most grammatical structures of interest, albeit invaluable for comparative purposes.

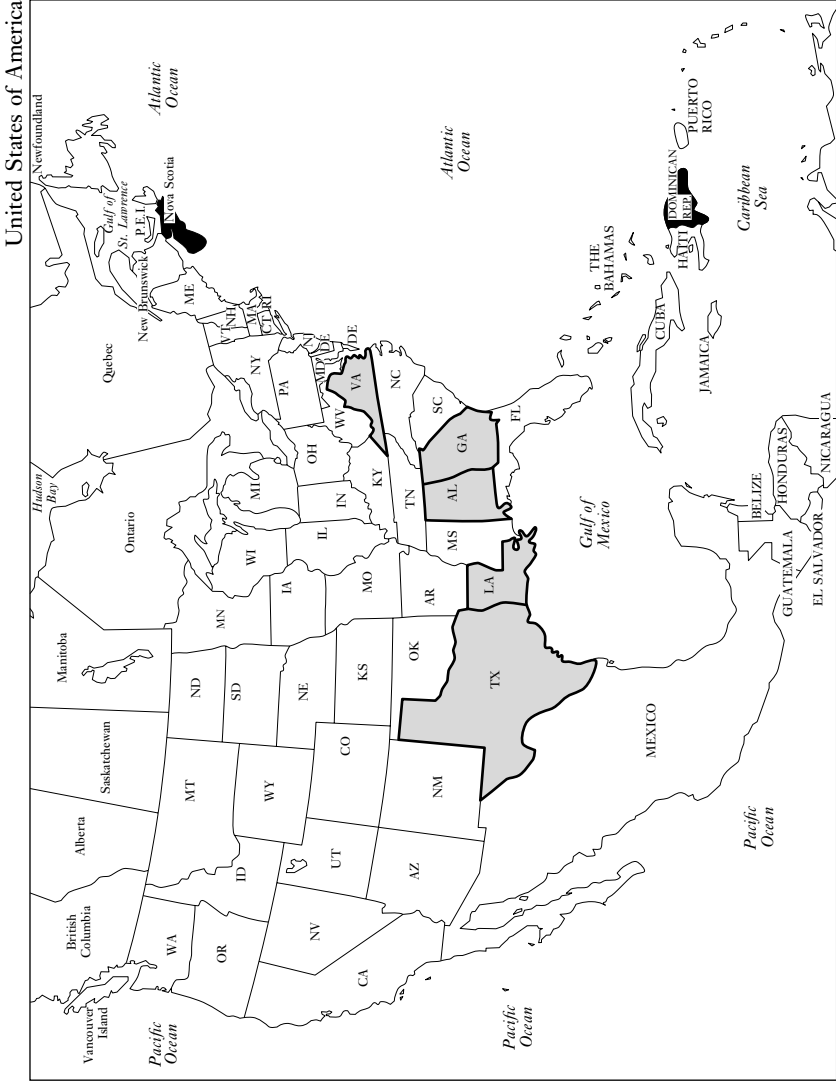
1.3 The African American Diaspora

Partially as a response to the problems characterizing earlier records of AAVE, researchers have begun focusing on the language of the “African American Diaspora” – synchronic recordings of *transplanted* varieties of African American English – as a means of reconstructing the diachronic status of AAVE. This volume presents analyses of two such varieties, spoken to this day in widely separated destinations to which escaped slaves and freedmen emigrated by the thousands in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: the Samaná peninsula of the Dominican Republic in the Hispanic Caribbean, and two communities on the Atlantic coast of Nova Scotia.¹ The speech of their descendants can furnish historical insight into the current structure of AAVE, providing we can establish its relationship to the language spoken by the original input settlers of these regions, and the relationship of that language in turn to other varieties spoken by African Americans some two centuries ago. Though language-internal evolution is of course a factor, it is the existence of *external* influences on the enclave varieties, whether from adjacent local (Spanish- or English-speaking) populations or from contacts with non-local varieties of African American English, which most threatens to invalidate them as evidence about an earlier stage of AAVE. In what follows we sketch the characteristics of these varieties that substantiate their use in the reconstruction of contemporary AAVE.

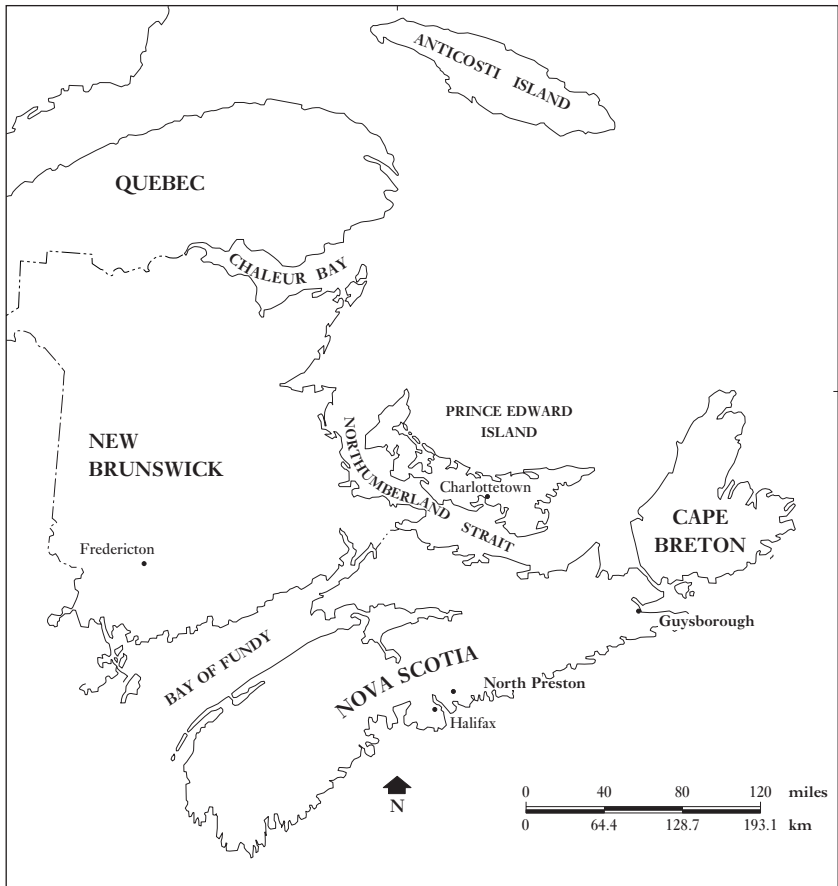
1.3.1 *Communities and varieties*

The three diaspora varieties examined in this volume have in common that the ancestors of current speakers were resident in the United States in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, before dispersing to diverse locations (map 1.1).

1. *Guysborough, Nova Scotia* (see map 1.2) was settled in 1783 by the first wave of Black Loyalists, mainly freedmen from the North and house slaves with



Map 1.1 African American diaspora communities and states represented in the Ex-Slave Recordings



Map 1.2 African American diaspora communities in Nova Scotia: Guysborough and North Preston

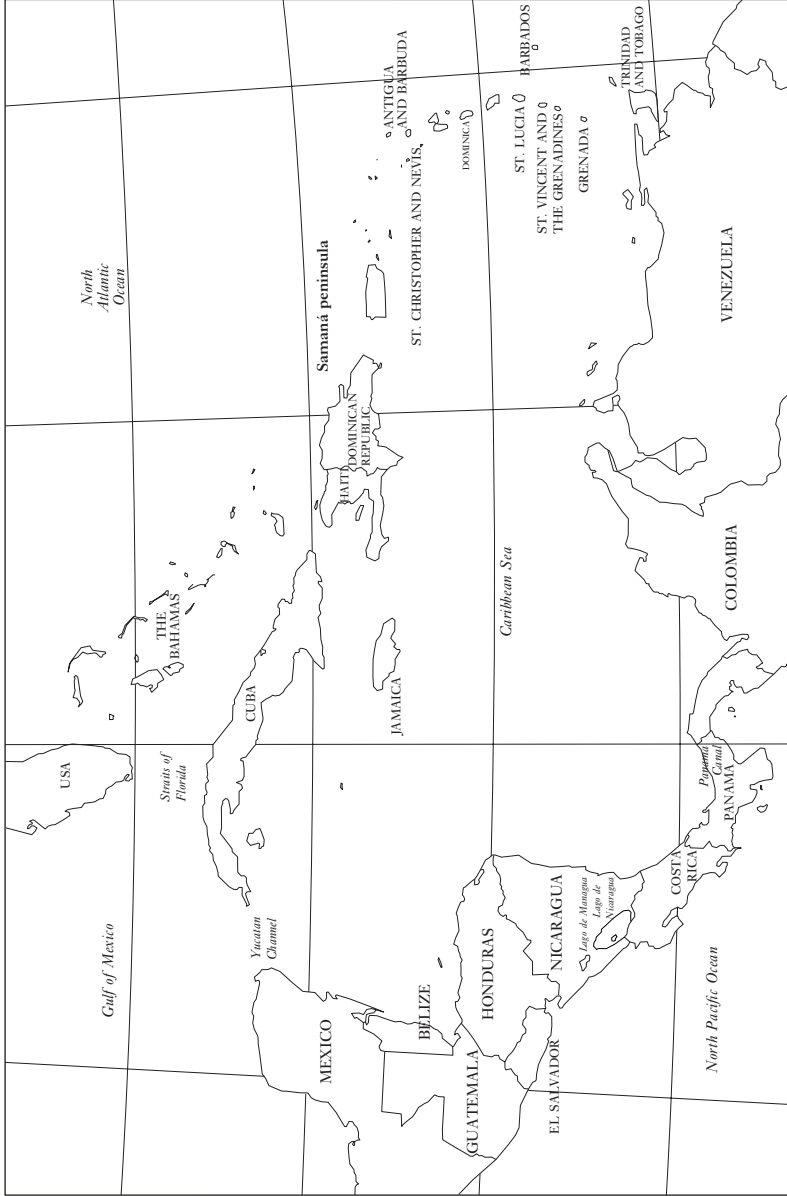
service-related skills (e.g. domestics, waiters, messengers). The settlers were located outside the districts populated by white settlers, in communities of their own. Unlike North Preston (see below), Guysborough was unaffected by the mass exodus to Sierra Leone and by the subsequent influx of refugees. Nowadays, Guysborough figures among the most socioeconomically disadvantaged counties in Nova Scotia, and the African Nova Scotians residing there have little contact with neighboring white communities (Poplack and Tagliamonte 1991a: 307–9).

2. *North Preston, Nova Scotia* (see map 1.2) was initially settled at the same time as Guysborough (1784) by a mixture of White and Black Loyalists. By 1792, most if not all of the Black Loyalists had left the community in the exodus to Sierra Leone. A group of 500–600 Jamaican Maroons was exiled to the area in 1796 but was relocated to Sierra Leone in 1800. The current residents of North Preston descend from the immigration to the area of refugee slaves in 1815. The input settlers were predominantly field slaves, characterized as having no specific training or skills, traced to Maryland and Virginia and, to a lesser extent, Louisiana and Georgia. Today, North Preston, more densely populated than Guysborough and the largest African Nova Scotian community, is still topographically and socially isolated from nearby Dartmouth-Halifax (Poplack and Tagliamonte 1991a: 309–10).

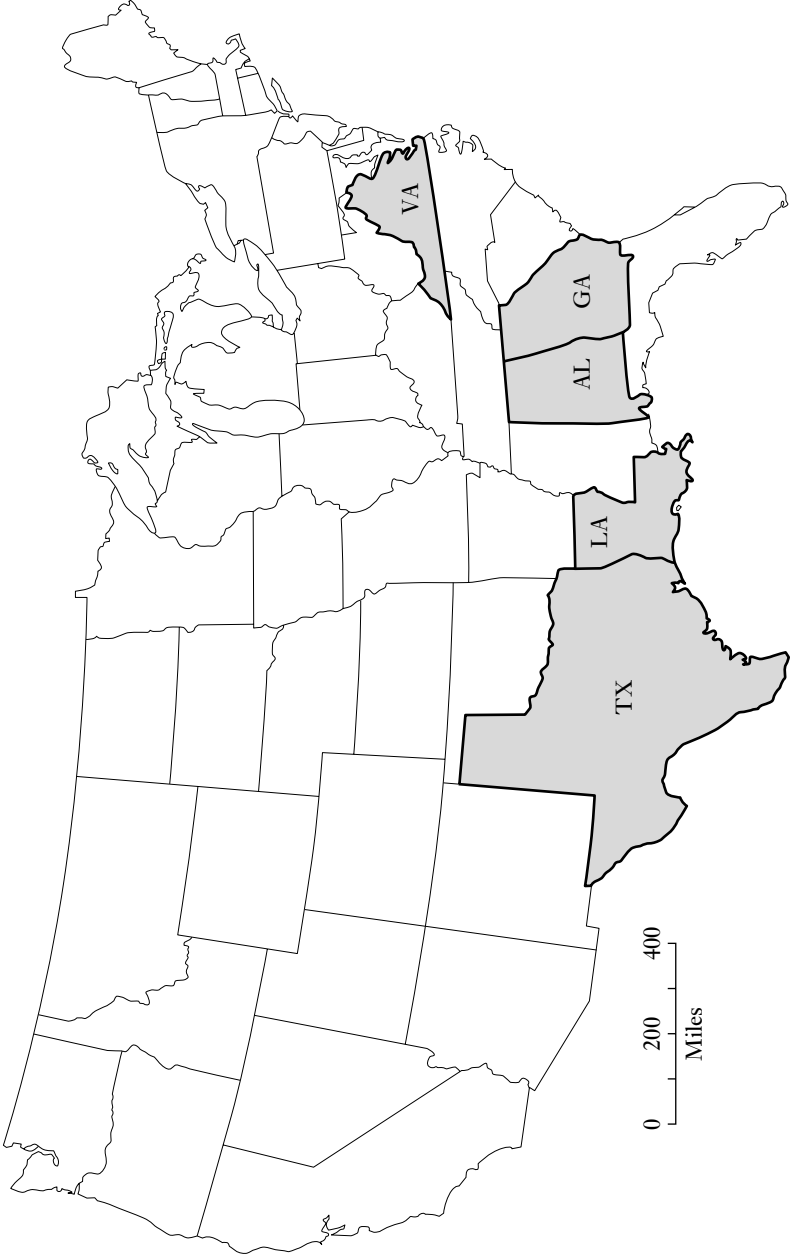
3. *Samaná*, a peninsula largely separated from the rest of the Dominican Republic (see map 1.3), was settled at approximately the same time as North Preston (1824), by ex-slaves or their descendants, who immigrated to Santo Domingo via arrangements between its Haitian rulers and church and philanthropic agencies in the US. The exact provenance of the immigrant settlers to Samaná is unclear: although nearly all those interviewed in 1981–2 cited Philadelphia, New Jersey, and New York as their ancestors' place of origin, many of the escaped slaves who boarded at these Northern US ports probably originated from the Southern states. Newspaper articles contemporary with the settlement period reported manumission of entire plantations to Haiti, suggesting that both field and house slaves were among the original settlers. Although the community has been characterized since its inception by increasing bilingualism with Spanish, especially in the younger generations, English was the primary language for all those interviewed. Contact with other varieties of English appears to have been restricted and spread out over several generations (Poplack and Sankoff 1987).²

Use of the diaspora varieties as evidence of an earlier form of AAVE is validated through comparison with the real-time data of the Ex-Slave Recordings. As detailed in Bailey et al. (1991a, 1991b), the ex-Slaves presumably acquired their language some four to five decades after the ancestors of the diaspora informants and subsequently remained in the five Southern states in which they were born (map 1.4).

The speakers whose varieties are analyzed in ensuing chapters, amply described elsewhere (e.g. Bailey et al. 1991a; Poplack and Tagliamonte 1991a, and forthcoming), all figured among the oldest and most insular members of their respective communities.



Map 1.3 African American diaspora community in the Dominican Republic: Samaná peninsula



Map 1.4 States represented in the Ex-Slave Recordings

1.4 Validating the Diaspora Data as Evidence of an Earlier Form of AAVE

A number of criticisms may be leveled against the use of the diaspora materials as evidence of an earlier form of AAVE. The first concerns the extent and direction of linguistic change each has undergone subsequent to the split between them and metropolitan varieties of African American English (e.g. Rickford 1998). The sociogeography of the diaspora communities is pertinent here, since two of the migrations resulting in their formation led African Americans to the Canadian Maritimes, where no significant creole influence is known to have existed,³ while the other led them to the Caribbean, where, in the vicinity of the Hispanic environment of the Dominican Republic, a number of English-based creoles are spoken, e.g. on the islands of Turks and Caicos, the Bahamas, the Virgin Islands and other Leeward Islands, and Jamaica.

Travelers, teachers and merchant sailors from these places have of course visited Samaná from the earliest times, and some may have remained there permanently. The question is how much creole influence they could have imparted to the established English-speaking enclave living in scattered hamlets and farms and proudly resisting assimilation by their Dominican neighbors. Similarly, there have been a number of church emissaries, entrepreneurs from the US as well as returning workers and students, all speaking American English or AAVE or having been influenced by these varieties.

These differences in settlement patterns may be used to assess the extent to which the varieties spoken by their descendants result from contact-induced linguistic change. If contact were a viable explanation for the current form of the diaspora varieties, its traces should be reflected in substantive differences between the Nova Scotian and Samaná varieties (the latter showing more Spanish and/or English – or even Haitian creole – features), as well as between the diaspora varieties and the Ex-Slave Recordings, whose speakers had never been transplanted. If, on the other hand, they display common features, and those features can be identified as *diagnostic* (in the sense discussed below) rather than circumstantial, we may infer that the varieties descend from a common stock. Assessment of which of these scenarios provides the best explanation of the linguistic facts has been a major goal of the long-term research project from which chapters 2–7 emerge.

1.4.1 *The role of the enclave in resisting contact-induced grammatical change*

Poplack and Sankoff (1980, 1987) and Poplack and Tagliamonte (1991a, and forthcoming) have documented the sociohistorical circumstances enabling Samaná English and African Nova Scotian English to resist contact-induced change at the core grammatical level. Key among them are the social, psychological, geographic, and in some cases, religious separation of their speakers from surrounding local populations. Linguistic confirmation comes from the dearth in Samaná of evidence of grammatical convergence. External influence was shown in Poplack and Sankoff (1987) to be limited to a small set of calques and integrated loanwords which do not alter the grammar of the recipient language (see Poplack and Meechan 1998), and the occasional case of code-switching or interference. Wide-ranging post-settlement influence of adjacent varieties on African Nova Scotian English is argued against by differences among them in constraint hierarchies conditioning variable grammatical processes (chapter 4; Poplack and Tagliamonte 1995, 1996), though they, of course, share a common stock of English features.

Indeed, the enclave conditions under which these varieties developed offer the strongest *external* evidence that in many ways they reflect a precursor of contemporary AAVE, despite the independent internal evolution each has undergone. The conservative role of the linguistic isolate in resisting external influence is corroborated by examining other English-speaking enclaves which, through like configurations of circumstances, have fortuitously retained the same variable structures as those attested in these African American varieties. Tagliamonte and Smith show in chapter 5 that non-concord *was* in African Nova Scotian English is conditioned by the same Northern British constraint currently operative in a British-origin enclave in northern Scotland, legacy of the erstwhile Northern British English model to which both were exposed.

1.4.2 *Tapping the vernacular*

A second critique – voiced most recently by Hannah (1997) and Rickford (1998) – concerns the possibility of informant accommodation to the standardizing influences of the interviewers, obscuring their (more creole- or AAVE-like) vernacular. Since the African Nova Scotian English interviews were carried out solely by community members within social networks of their peers, accommodation is not an issue here. For Samaná English, however, the possibility of such

an “interviewer effect” must be considered. None of the scholars who collected data there (DeBose 1983; Hannah 1997; Poplack and Sankoff 1981; Vigo 1986) is a community member, and to the extent that the Samaná informants accommodated at all, such accommodation could be expected to any interviewer from outside the community. Whether toward StdE, AAVE or English-based creoles, the result of accommodation would be equally artifactual.

There are several reasons why an interviewer effect, if one exists, does not affect the results presented in chapters 2–7. First, despite the unfortunate use of terminology contrasting the “standard English” characteristics of Samaná English with contemporary AAVE in Poplack and Sankoff (1987), a plethora of more recent publications (Poplack and Tagliamonte 1989, 1991b, 1994, and forthcoming; Tagliamonte 1991; Tagliamonte and Poplack 1993) has made it clear that the relevant comparison is between Samaná English and archaic, regional and nonstandard varieties of English, not the English spoken by the interviewers in 1981. Even if the interviewers had had a standardizing effect on the speakers, it leaves unexplained the provenance of the specific Samaná English patterns, which are not evinced in the decidedly standard speech of the interviewers. Indeed, accommodation towards the interviewers would only have obscured the effects clearly found, for example, in the chapters of the present volume.

More important, were there accommodation, speakers could conceivably control the overall rates of variant usage, but could not be expected to alter the deeper grammatical conditioning of linguistic forms (as recently pointed out again by Rickford and McNair-Knox (1994)). It is this conditioning which is the crucial evidence for the historical origins of Samaná English.

Finally, in each of Samaná, Nova Scotia and the Southern US states, speech data were collected under quite different circumstances: by individuals whose status in the community ranged from member (Nova Scotia) to outsider (Samaná, most of the Ex-Slave Recordings), at time periods ranging from the 1930s to the 1990s, and in exchanges including “sociolinguistic interviews” (Samaná, Nova Scotia), group interactions (Nova Scotia), and formal interviews. Such discrepancies in data collection make the many linguistic parallels across varieties, detailed in ensuing chapters, all the more unexpected and compelling.

1.4.3 Speaker representativeness

Another critique of these data sources as evidence of an earlier form of AAVE concerns the lack of representativeness of the speakers who provided them (Hannah 1997; Singler 1998). Indeed, the informants (or their forebears) hailed

from different parts of the US; one of the drawbacks associated with use of diaspora varieties in reconstructing contemporary AAVE is that in most cases their exact provenance is impossible to reconstruct.

Some of these problems have no doubt affected to some extent the results presented in this volume. However, none of them, in and of itself, could be responsible for the complex hierarchies of conditions on grammatical variability *shared* by the diaspora varieties and the Ex-Slave Recordings, documented in these chapters. The fact that pattern after pattern is reproduced across the communities is the power of the comparative method and the essence of our argument that they share a grammatical system pre-dating the split among them. Thus, whatever the methodological flaws, when the same analytical methodology is applied to data on the diaspora varieties, creoles, and British-origin varieties, the diaspora varieties are seen to pattern alike, and their patterns parallel the British-origin varieties rather than the creoles.

1.5 A Note on Nomenclature: “Early” AAE

By the criteria of historical and comparative linguistics, features shared by varieties are considered likely to have been present in the grammar of their ancestor. We stress that is the *aggregate* of these commonalities in the diaspora varieties and the Ex-Slave Recordings to which we refer, following Brewer (1973), as *Early* AAE. Clearly, none of these varieties represents, in and of itself, the earliest African American English (cf. Dillard 1993; Schneider 1989, 1993: 217f). They are descendants, arguably conservative descendants, of late eighteenth- to mid-nineteenth-century vernaculars.

The role of these vernaculars in giving rise to contemporary AAVE is detailed in chapter 8. Independent evidence of their linguistic details, some of which are described in this volume, comes from comparing the results of chapters 2–7 with studies of other types of sources representative of approximately the same period. There are many distributional parallels, particularly evident when like quantitative methodology is used, between these Early AAE varieties and sources as disparate as the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives (Schneider 1989), the Hoodoo Texts (Ewers 1996), and the early letters studied by Kautzsch (1998) and Montgomery (in press; Montgomery et al. 1993). They may differ in terms of the frequency of occurrence of particular variants, but many of the more revealing details of grammatical conditioning are in evidence. For example, the Early AAE patterning of non-inversion in questions, choice of relative markers, and the distribution of *ain’t* detailed in chapters 4, 6

and 7, all find parallels in the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives (Schneider 1989). Kautzsch's (1998) study of negation in the Virginia Narratives supports Howe's (1995, 1997) and Howe and Walker's (chapter 4) findings on *ain't* and negative postposing. The effects of pronominal subject and following *V-ing/gonna* on zero copula in the Hoodoo texts (Ewers 1996) parallel those in Early AAE (chapter 2) – and other varieties of AAVE.

1.6 A Variationist Perspective

The studies assembled here make use of the variationist enterprise, not only in its methodological aspect – the construction, statistical analysis and linguistic interpretation of a suitable corpus – but crucially, in its *critical* role in deciding among linguistic hypotheses. The focus is on identifying and operationalizing empirical criteria capable of distinguishing competing models, and testing them to determine their goodness of fit with the data. The point is not so much to describe the variation (e.g. to observe that zero copula is favored by a following predicate adjective), although this is a *sine qua non* of all the work we report, but to explain and motivate it.

1.6.1 Rates versus conditioning

An important distinction we draw here is between rates and conditioning of the variable occurrence of variant forms. Much discussion relating to the origins of AAVE has revolved around frequencies. For example, Hannah (1997) recently adduced her finding that rates of zero copula in her Samaná English data were double what had been found in Poplack and Sankoff (1987) as evidence that she had succeeded in tapping a more creole-like variety. As pointed out in chapter 2, however, the constraints conditioning the choice of zero copula in her data are essentially identical to those attested in the earlier study. Differences in overall rate of variant occurrence may be due to any number of (non-linguistic) factors, and can only be used with caution to infer differences among data sets which are already disparate in terms of collection procedures, interviewer technique, and a host of other factors. But the conditioning of variability (i.e. the configuration of factors affecting the occurrence of the variant forms), as well as the direction of their effects, are deeper constraints, remaining constant regardless of the extralinguistic circumstances.

Nowhere is the distinction between rates and conditioning more evident than in chapter 7: Tottie and Harvie document distinct preferences for the relative

markers *that*, *what* and zero in each variety of Early AAE, but the major constraints on choice of the latter are shared by all. Likewise, though rates of non-concord *was* vary widely in the four communities studied by Tagliamonte and Smith (see chapter 5), examination of their conditioning shows which share the same set of constraints. Indeed, since most of the analyses in this volume deal with variants attested in both English and creoles, the configuration of factors conditioning their occurrence assumes primary importance in revealing their source.

1.7 Comparative Reconstruction

Work aimed at establishing the origins of AAVE has often invoked coincidental similarities with creoles and African languages, on the one hand, and differences from Standard English on the other. Inexplicably rare, with a few notable exceptions, are systematic comparisons with varieties approximating the older, regional and/or nonstandard forms of English to which the Africans were likely to have been first exposed. This lacuna is at the root of much of the controversy over the status of variables that has figured so prominently in the origins debate. For example, it is the source of early characterizations of verbal *-s* as a hypercorrect intrusion when it occurred in persons other than third singular (e.g. Fasold 1972; Labov et al. 1968; Wolfram 1969). In fact, research on older varieties of English shows that *-s* not only appeared variably throughout the verbal paradigm, but more important, its occurrence is still conditioned by the same hierarchy of constraints in Early AAE (Montgomery in press; Poplack and Tagliamonte 1989, and forthcoming; Tagliamonte and Poplack in press). Likewise, in this volume, Van Herk shows that non-inversion in questions, often characterized as a creole feature, stems from the replacement in Middle English of lexical verb inversion by *do-* support, and is variably conditioned in Early AAE by the same factors operative then, now extended to the auxiliary system. Tottie and Harvie also detail how the frequency of the zero relative in specifically subject position underscores the character of the Early AAE relativization system as deriving from an English vernacular, despite its superficial identity to the zero relatives attested in some creoles.

Chapters 2–7 share an explicit emphasis on cross-variety comparison – insofar as pre-existing claims about the behavior of variables in the relevant varieties are sufficiently explicit to permit such comparison from a variationist perspective. Chapter 3 showcases this comparative method by first operationalizing constraints on variable plural marking in both English and English-based creoles,

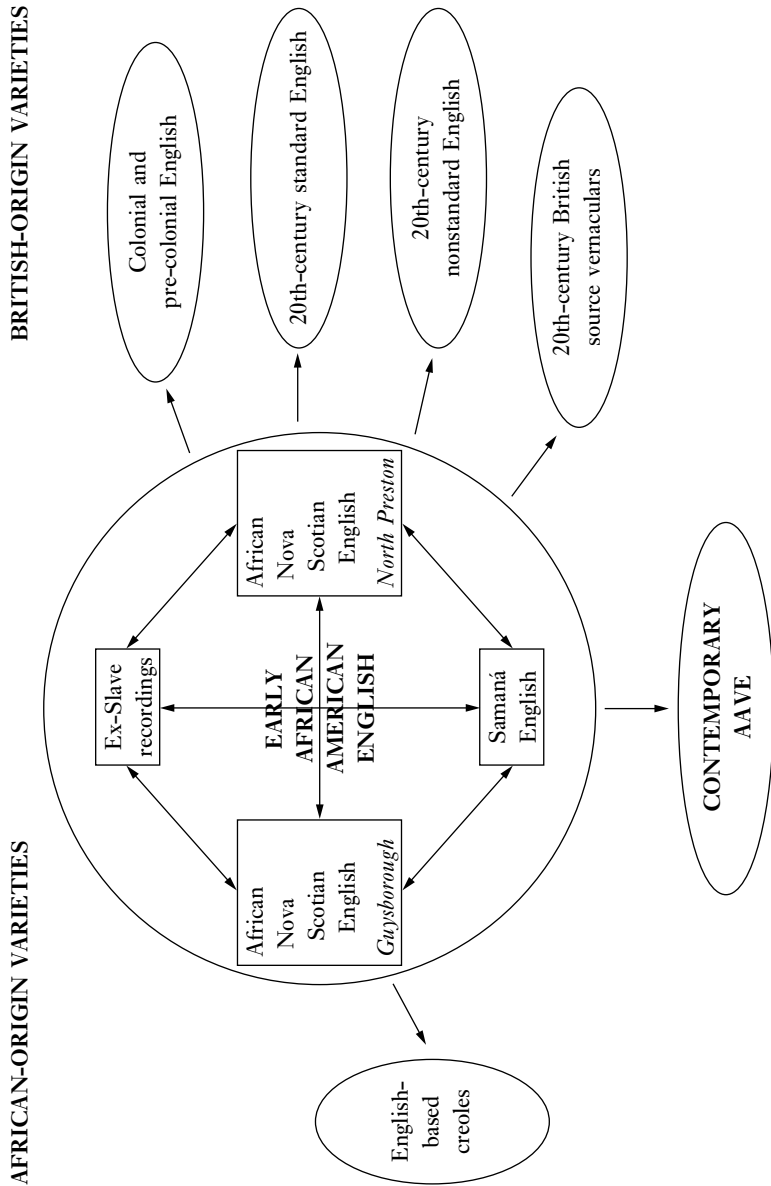


Figure 1.1 Cross-variety comparison

and testing them on Early AAE. Though the predictions associated with each may overlap to a large extent, the effect of the diagnostic explanatory factor – generic reference – is clear. Successive testing and discarding of analyses that obscure the relevant distinctions among putative source varieties pinpoints the differences between the constraints conditioning this phenomenon in Early AAE and in creoles.

Thus, in substantiating claims for the origins of an AAVE feature in a particular source variety, the research assembled here seeks to establish that the feature functions in a non-trivial way as it does in that source, while simultaneously differing from its behavior in the other putative source(s). Where neither of these proofs is possible, the conclusion is that the feature is consistent with both, i.e. not *diagnostic*, as detailed below. Figure 1.1 highlights the appeal to nonstandard, historical or regional varieties of English appropriate to the period and the locale, since these tend to be relatively well-documented.

Factoring contemporary AAVE into the equation provides evidence not only of whether change has taken place, but also of its direction. Thus Howe and Walker (chapter 4) show that current frequent or categorical uses of both negative concord and the use of *ain't* for *didn't* are recent and spectacular developments. In contrast, chapter 3 reveals that the current near-categorical preference for inflecting plural nouns with *-s* was far more variable in Early AAE (as indeed it was in colonial English). Such results provide valuable evidence for the *divergence* hypothesis (Bailey 1985; Bailey and Maynor 1989; Butters 1989; Labov 1985; Rickford 1992): they suggest that contemporary varieties of AAVE and English are evolving away from each other at a rate sufficient to explain by itself the current degree of difference between them.

On the other hand, cross-variety comparison is often hindered by the dearth of quantitative studies of variability in English-based creoles and especially African languages. More such studies would provide a better basis for comparison than the impressionistic claims about these varieties which are often used as metrics for creole origin, without scientific proof as to whether the claims obtain.

A recurrent result of the comparative effort undertaken here is that the same variant forms tend to be attested in each of the putative source varieties: colonial English, contemporary nonstandard English, and English-based creoles. Thus neither the existence of a form, nor even its overall rates of occurrence, can suffice to determine its provenance. This lack of privative association between variants and source varieties has important repercussions for reconstructing the origins of AAVE. It graphically illustrates that the prior and current status of a form can only be ascertained by examining its distribution in the language, as evidenced by the hierarchy of variable constraints conditioning its occurrence. The variationist approach to language use is uniquely suited to resolving such questions.

1.8 The Principle of “Diagnosticity”

Cross-variety comparison is only as revealing as the *diagnosticity* of the item compared, i.e. the extent to which it entertains a unique association with a source variety, and surprisingly few linguistic features turn out to be strongly diagnostic in the sense of distinguishing among the varieties of interest to us. On the contrary, these chapters reveal that most variant forms are shared by all the putative sources. Much controversy in the field results from invocation of coincidental or superficial similarities, as opposed to systematic conditioning of variable occurrences. For example, absence of suffix markers, consonant cluster simplification, “*r*-dropping” and lack of subject–verb agreement were all cited by Dillard (1971) as pidgin or decreolized features of African Nova Scotian English, though these are widely attested in all of the source varieties. Indeed, chapters 2, 4 and 6 reveal that even some of the enshrined frontrunners for creole status, e.g. negative concord, non-inversion in questions, and zero copula are not, in and of themselves, diagnostic of creole origin.

The studies assembled in this volume each make an explicit effort to establish diagnosticity through reliance on deeper similarities, as may be inferred from comparison across varieties of the *conditioning* of their variable occurrence in discourse. The examination in chapter 6 of the “creole” feature of non-inversion in questions graphically demonstrates the pitfalls of failure to assess the diagnosticity of a linguistic feature. After systematic weeding out from an initial dataset of over 3,300 questions those ineligible for inversion (because they contained a non-operator auxiliary or no overt auxiliary at all), Van Herk’s pertinent data are reduced by two-thirds. Among the remaining theoretically eligible tokens, the class of yes/no questions, said not to invert in creoles, is found to admit non-inversion in (early and contemporary) English as well. This renders the yes/no context equally non-diagnostic as a metric for assessing creole origins, further reducing the relevant data to under 18 percent of the original corpus. Only the *Wh*- context, in which non-inversion is excluded in contemporary Standard (though not Early Middle) English, is truly diagnostic in this sense. And when rates of non-inversion are examined, they are now found to occur in only a minority of such contexts, rather than categorically, as studies which fail to make these distinctions have assumed (DeBose 1996).

1.9 Non-Independence of Explanatory Factors

A problem related to diagnosticity is the lack of independence among explanatory factors. Variable rule analysis starts with the working hypothesis that the effects of linguistic factors are orthogonal, but close inspection reveals that, as often as not, this is not the case. Recoding and further analysis may be in order. If the interaction is not factored out, one apparent effect may actually be an epiphenomenon of another. As detailed in chapter 2, this appears to be the case for the type of grammatical category following the copula and its prosodic structure. Thus even the occurrence of zero copula before a predicate adjective, widely considered African or creole in origin, may in fact be inextricable from the prosodic structure of sentences containing predicate adjectives. Similarly, in attempting to disentangle the effects of some of the factors said to be responsible for variability in plural marking, variously attributed to creoles and non-standard English, chapter 3 reveals that they overlap: nouns delimited by [+numeric, +individuating] or [-numeric, +individuating] quantifiers fall into the category of indefinites, while those with no determiner tend to be generics; in turn, nouns delimited with [+numeric, +individuating] quantifiers are by definition disambiguated as to number. This means that the presumed polar predictions made by the creole-origins and English-origins hypotheses are much the same. It also entails that the factors of nominal reference, individuation and number disambiguation cannot be incorporated into a single multivariate analysis without causing erratic results, possibly explaining why factors relevant to a creole origin were not revealed to be significant predictors of plural marking in Gullah (Rickford 1990). Interaction is also hidden in explanatory hypotheses for the choice of relative markers, as described in chapter 7: subjects tend to be human, objects do not. Humanness of the antecedent thus cannot be distinguished from the syntactic function of the relative marker in its clause as explanatory factors for relative choice.

This volume is divided into four parts. The first three, all associated with University of Ottawa research projects, deal respectively with Early AAE morphophonological, morphosyntactic and syntactic variables. The goal of these chapters is twofold: to provide linguistically sound descriptions of features of the diaspora varieties (many for the first time) and to assess the usefulness of the materials in shedding light on an earlier stage of AAVE. All are unified by a common theme – assessment of the evidence for origins in creole or English structure – and a common method – the variationist framework of sociolinguistic analysis. Each explicitly enunciates the hypotheses relevant to the diverse scenarios, operationalizing specific predictions as factors in a

quantitative (where practicable, variable rule) analysis, and testing them against a large, often exhaustive, body of Early AAE data.

The linguistic developments detailed in chapters 2–7, however compelling, would remain ultimately unconvincing without some understanding of the broader sociohistorical context in which they were enabled. Salikoko Mufwene, though not associated with the Ottawa projects, graciously accepted my invitation to help situate the questions and empirical findings of our research group in such a context. His meticulously researched contribution details how the historical, demographic, social and economic conditions in which African Americans evolved conspired, over time, first to result in a variety like Early AAE, and subsequently to give rise to contemporary AAVE.

1.10 Morphophonological Variables

Chapter 2, by **James Walker**, focuses, appropriately enough, on what Rickford and associates (Rickford et al. 1991) have termed the “showcase” variable, and what Walker calls one of the “most studied but least understood variables in sociolinguistics” – contracted and zero copula.

Zero copula has been attested in older forms of English, but was apparently a restricted literary phenomenon, occurring largely in appositional contexts (Visser 1970). It remains minor in the nonstandard varieties of English in which it is attested (e.g. Feagin 1979; Wolfram 1974), in contrast with its robustness in contemporary AAVE. Indeed, zero copula is perhaps the only variant studied in this volume which cannot be identified as a legacy of English, except perhaps as an additional strategy, complementary to contraction, for reducing prosodic complexity. Nevertheless, Walker’s results argue against a creole origin for this variant. For one thing, it was fairly infrequent in Early AAE; for another, there are substantial parallels between contraction and zero. Most relevant for the diagnosticity of zero copula as a creole inheritance, however, is his discovery that the copula is not solely a grammatical variable, as has been assumed until now.

This is most evident in the role of what has come to be known as the “following grammatical category.” This context has been accorded pride of place in copula studies, probably due to Holm’s widely cited (1984) argument that the association of zero copula with a following predicate adjective was evidence of African language ancestry. Yet Walker points out that the effects of the following grammatical category that have emerged from the many replications of Labov’s seminal study (1969) are notoriously inconsistent, while the

more consistent effect of subject type tends to be neither highlighted nor explained. Making use of recent models of prosodic structure, he demonstrates that both preceding and following grammatical categories correspond to – and are inextricable from – different prosodic configurations. This results in two types of interaction: the first is between subject type and preceding prosodic constituent (personal pronoun subjects are always proclitics, nominal subjects are virtually always prosodic “words” or phrases, other pronominal subjects are never prosodic phrases). The following grammatical category likewise overlaps almost completely with the following prosodic constituent (e.g. *gonna* occurs in complex prosodic phrases while phrase-final function words are almost exclusively locatives). Crucially, the ordering of the contentious categories, adjective and locative, is sometimes reversed, depending on whether they occur in a complex or a simple prosodic phrase. Walker concludes that the “following grammatical category” is not a well-defined factor: its constituents represent an amalgam of syntactic, semantic and prosodic structure, and its apparent effects are likely epiphenomena of constraints dictated by prosody. This reduces its diagnosticity in assessing the origins of AAVE.

While the proliferation of zero copula and its stereotypical association with contemporary AAVE seems to be a recent and endogenous development, zero plural, reportedly quite rare in AAVE, was once a good deal more frequent. Is the current preference for marking the plural with *-s* a case of approximation, decreolization, or convergence of AAVE to StdE? In chapter 3, **Shana Poplack**, **Sali Tagliamonte** and **Ejike Eze** try to clarify the direction of the change by pinpointing the source of Early AAE variability. Exploiting the comparative method, they identify and test constraints operating on plural marking in each of the source varieties. The varieties share a plural-marking system which appears to owe its main lines to contemporaneous English models. Further comparison reveals detailed similarities amongst West African creoles, particularly on the diagnostic creole characteristic of generic reference, patterns that differ profoundly from those operative in Early AAE. The authors relate the NPE generic effect to West African substrate influence, and the Early AAE effects to lack thereof.

Chapter 3 shows how the existence of prior variability in both English and Early AAE plural marking has been obscured by the (parallel?) development in both Standard English *and* AAVE of a plural marking system in which *-s* is the norm. This points up the problems involved in exclusive reliance on contemporary StdE as a comparison point, without also considering the details of its development. Once these are factored in, Early AAE plural-marking patterns can be understood as retentions of an earlier variable system, rather than imperfect acquisition of a categorical English system.

1.11 Morphosyntactic Variables

In chapter 4, prompted by observations of Winford (1991) and DeBose (1994) that the creole origins of AAVE were evident in its negation system, **Darin Howe** and **James Walker** systematically examine four Early AAE negation types: *ain't*, negative concord, negative inversion, and negative postposing, three of which have been associated with a creole origin for AAVE. As in the case of the zero plural marker examined by Poplack et al. and the zero copula studied by Walker, evidence from contemporary AAVE for at least some of these constructions appears consistent with a creole-origins scenario. However, the negative constructions are not equally “diagnostic” in the sense discussed above, again requiring recourse to the conditioning of their occurrence in discourse. Typifying the approach of chapter 4 is the analysis of *ain't*, whose robustness in each of Early and contemporary African American English, colonial and contemporary nonstandard English, as well as English-based creoles, makes it particularly suitable for comparative reconstruction. The authors test DeBose’s (1994) and DeBose and Faraclas’s (1994) hypothesis that AAVE *ain't* functions as a creole universal negator, occurring indifferently regardless of verb type or tense. The virtual restriction of Early AAE *ain't* specifically to the present tense and to the auxiliaries *be* and *have* reveals this usage to have originated in (nonstandard) English. The frequent or near-categorical use in contemporary AAVE of *ain't* for *didn't*, and negative concord, result from relatively recent, and what the authors term “spectacular,” innovations made by African Americans to the system they originally acquired. Even patterning revealed by comparison to be consistent with what is reported for creoles (as for negative concord), can be seen, by the same method, to be likewise consistent with (nonstandard) English. They conclude that the negation system of Early AAE displays no *distinct* creole behavior, only the details of the colonial English negation system African Americans were exposed to.

Chapter 5, by **Sali Tagliamonte** and **Jennifer Smith**, highlights the role of the enclave in retaining older features by unveiling vigorous and unexpected parallels between the conditioning of *was/were* variation in African Nova Scotian English and a likely Northern British source dialect. Focusing on contexts in which StdE prescribes *were*, they examine the variable usage of *was* in four speech communities, distinguished according to the African or British ancestry of their residents, the status of their variety as source or transplanted, and the degree of general isolation from mainstream developments.

Variable-rule analysis of constraints on *was/were* variation – some attested in the English language since the Middle English period – reveals that the promi-

ent “Type of Subject” constraint associated with British dialects in general is operative in all varieties in the expected direction (full noun phrase subjects favor *was*). Two other constraints, including one (favoring *was* in second person singular) specifically associated with Northern British dialects only, are shared in the Northern Scottish and African Nova Scotian enclaves. They are surprisingly absent from the British-origin Guysborough Village neighboring the African Guysborough Enclave. The authors invoke settlement histories to explain this finding. The input settlers to the African Nova Scotian enclaves hailed mainly from US colonies which had largely been settled by emigrants from the northern areas of Scotland, Ireland and England; the English models presented to them should therefore have contained features of Northern British dialects. The founders of Guysborough Village, on the other hand, originated from locations settled by migrants from the southern regions of Britain, explaining the absence, in their variety, of the Northern feature.

This distinction between the neighboring African- and British-origin communities in Nova Scotia militates against the possibility of wholesale post-migration contact-induced change in the language of the former, and supports the suggestion that early African Americans adopted not only features, but also their variable conditioning, from the models available to them.

1.12 Syntactic Variables

A well-known though less well-documented syntactic feature of AAVE said to evince its creole origins (DeBose 1996) is the non-inversion of auxiliaries in question formation. Although traditional descriptions of both StdE and creoles describe inversion (or lack thereof) as categorical, **Gerard Van Herk**’s contribution in chapter 6 notes pervasive variability in both. Here again the history of English provides a variable model, in the adoption in Early Middle English of *do* support, a form of non-inversion of lexical verb + subject. Van Herk tests the applicability of five Middle English constraints on non-inversion of lexical verbs to Early AAE questions. The detailed hierarchy of constraints that emerges bears close parallels to the complex system of Early Middle English question formation. Van Herk concludes that it was acquired from English and subsequently extended by Early AAE speakers to auxiliaries, as part of a unitary process of regularization of word order in questions. The extension of lexical verb inversion to auxiliaries qualifies as another innovation of AAVE, based not on creole heritage, but on its own internal evolution.

Relativization is another area of the grammar that has received little attention in the origins debate, despite characterizations of its zero variant as typical of

AAVE (Dillard 1972) and creoles (Bickerton 1981; Dillard 1972), particularly in subject position, which Martin and Wolfram (1998) consider to distinguish such languages from other varieties of English. Observing, however, that each of the three major variants, *that*, *what* and zero, are again well established in the relative paradigms of British and American English, **Gunnel Tottie** and **Dawn Harvie** investigate whether their use in Early AAE is the legacy of a creole or an English relative system.

In contrast to the other variables studied in this volume, whose variants tend to show parallel distributions across the Early AAE varieties, preferences for relative pronouns are quite distinct. African Nova Scotian English, though arguably the most vernacular, favors standard *that*, Samaná English prefers *what*, and zero predominates in the Ex-Slave Recordings. Though their comparative endeavor is hampered by the rarity of relative contexts, the lack of accountable studies of relativization in creoles and AAVE, and pervasive interaction between explanatory factors proposed in the literature, the authors show that both in terms of the variant pool among which they alternate as well as in their distribution, the Early AAE varieties parallel each other and other varieties of standard and nonstandard English, especially with regard to the effects of type of antecedent and adjacency of antecedent and relative marker. Category membership is a determining factor in two out of the three varieties. These results highlight the distinction between overall rates of occurrence, which differ substantially from variety to variety, and conditioning of that occurrence, which is substantially the same. Much like the situation for *was/were* variation, in which regional distinctions in the original British models were seen to be translated into different preferences in the offshoot varieties studied by Tagliamonte and Smith, here too the different variant preferences evidenced by the Early AAE varieties are explained by Tottie and Harvie as relating to a more general lack of vernacular “norm” for relative markers in either British or American English. In this area of the grammar as well, then, variant preferences in the contemporaneous local dialects which served as models are the likely source of the Early AAE patterns.

1.13 Sociohistorical Considerations

The final contribution to this volume deals with the sociohistorical context in which the linguistic features described in the preceding six chapters could have arisen. Tracing the historical, demographic, and socioeconomic circumstances surrounding the development of African American English, **Salikoko Mufwene**

argues that the socioeconomic history of the United States does not support the existence of an erstwhile creole out of which AAVE would have developed. As he rightly observes, a common mistake has been to compare the emergent varieties with *Standard* English rather than with the nonstandard Englishes, both present-day and colonial, that developed concurrently with African American English. While not ruling out either Caribbean or African-language influence, Mufwene stresses the central role of colonial English as target language during the development of African American English.

Mufwene adduces crucial demographic evidence that distinct socioeconomic situations in the colonies resulted in different linguistic outcomes. Thus the socioeconomic ecology of the coastal rice fields of South Carolina and Georgia, which was similar to that of the Caribbean, led to the development of Gullah. In other colonies, such as Virginia and North Carolina, the emergence of a Gullah-like basilect was less likely, since tobacco plantations were small and Africans were rarely in the majority, leading in turn to increasing contact between Africans and Europeans. The low proportion and sparse distribution of Africans deterred the development of a distinct African American variety of English. Indeed, Mufwene provides evidence for the existence of a “founder population” of locally born and seasoned slaves, in place by the end of the seventeenth century, who “presumably spoke the same kind of English as the Europeans with whom they regularly interacted.” It was their English which served as the linguistic model for newly arriving slaves in the eighteenth century. Mufwene notes that the colonial varieties were themselves highly heterogeneous and variable. I would add that insufficient understanding of their nature, now being addressed (e.g. Kytö 1991), no doubt underlies the misidentification of specific nonstandard English features of AAVE as distinctly African or creole.

By the early nineteenth century, much of the foundation of today’s AAVE had stabilized, following two centuries of parallel development of African and European vernaculars, which ended with the Civil War (1861–5). This provided the first socioeconomic ecology favorable to linguistic divergence between the two varieties. The subsequent migrations of African Americans to the North and West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and their segregation in urban ghettos, enabled them to consolidate the distinctive features of the speech variety they had developed in the South. Thus chapter 8, along with Bailey (1993) and Labov (1998), characterizes urban varieties of AAVE as a twentieth-century phenomenon. Many of the features stereotypically associated with them – probably including some of the recent and spectacular developments referred to in the following chapters – would have emerged and/or spread since the last quarter of the nineteenth century. If Mufwene is

correct, the diaspora materials analyzed in this volume figure among the last extant speech evidence representing Early AAE pre-dating the onset of rapid divergence. The similarities between AAVE and nonstandard British-origin varieties detailed in chapters 2–7 are thus explicable in terms of the shared history Mufwene describes; the differences between contemporary AAVE and other varieties of American English can be attributed in large measure to more recent independent (and in some cases divergent) development.

In sum, the studies assembled here confirm the usefulness of Samaná English and African Nova Scotian English in reconstructing an earlier stage of AAVE. The parallels between them and the Ex-Slave Recordings are remarkable in view of the sociolinguistic and geographic disparities among the diaspora settlements, the conditions and time periods under which the data were collected, and nearly two centuries of independent development. They militate against the idea that the diaspora varieties feature substantial contact-induced structural change postdating the dispersal, and locate the similarities in a grammar shared by the ancestors of these speakers. These chapters marshal findings that dispute a creole origin for this grammar, bolstered by both sociohistorical and structural evidence.

Early studies of AAVE focused (perhaps understandably, given the climate of the time) on linguistic features which were most distinct from StdE. Indeed, their absence from StdE was what came to define AAVE (negatively), so that the features eventually assumed an “AAVE” identity. As a result, African American varieties of English appeared far more distinct from English than was warranted by the extent of actual differences. By the time AAVE began to receive serious scientific attention, the English origins of these features were obscured by their virtual elimination from mainstream varieties (cf. zero plural). This, in conjunction with the fact that African Americans were so instrumental in exporting the features to the North, surely bolstered their subsequent identification with AAVE, and compounded the tendency (already decried by Rickford 1998 and Winford 1998) to compare inappropriately these nonstandard structures with counterparts in Standard or literary English.

By identifying constraints on variable realizations and situating them in historical context, these chapters reveal just how far off the mark that association has been. It misses the parallels between Early AAE and the varieties of English early African Americans were likely to have been exposed to and apparently acquired. These parallels are equally evident in non-stigmatized and less noticeable features, such as negative postposing, expression of future time, and relativization strategies.

This research suggests that many of the features that have come to be associated with AAVE – e.g. *was* for *were*, *what* for *that*, zero plural, negative

concord, non-inversion in questions – are not simply incorrect forms that have subsequently become fossilized, as would be expected from the scenario attributing them to imperfect acquisition (e.g. Winford 1998). On the contrary, they are regular, rule-governed parts of the grammar. In almost every case, quantitative variationist methodology has shown the system governing their use to be that attested in older forms of English. It has also shown them to differ systematically from creoles and, in one case, African languages. This lends strong confirmation to the idea that the structures, along with their variable conditioning, were already present in the English that the Africans first acquired, supporting the founder effect posited by Mufwene (1996).

These facts suggest that AAVE originated as English, but as the African American community solidified, it innovated specific features. Among them were the spread of *ain't* to past-tense contexts, the proliferation of zero copula, and the extension of lexical verb inversion to auxiliaries, as well, no doubt, as many others not treated here. While the impetus for the selection of some of these features may conceivably have come from English-based creoles or African languages, this must have postdated the period we deal with, since wherever this could be explicitly tested, no evidence emerged that such influences played a role at an earlier time. Contemporary AAVE is the result of evolution, by its own unique internal logic, from a system like the one described here.

Notes

- 1 Liberia, another diaspora locale, has been extensively documented by Singler (1986, 1988, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 1993).
- 2 The fact that the vast majority of original input settlers was decimated by typhus shortly after their arrival in the Dominican Republic makes the task of determining the geographic provenance of the few survivors sisyphian. This lacuna is unfortunate, but does not detract from the linguistic evidence in ensuing chapters showing numerous and non-trivial parallels between Samaná English and the other two varieties whose original speakers are better documented (*pace* Singler 1998).
- 3 The passage of the Jamaican Maroons through North Preston (1796–1800) was too early and too brief in duration to have had a lasting effect on the language of the input settlers.

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