

# 1

## *Introduction*

### 1.1 Preamble

The research we report in these chapters was originally prompted by one of the oldest and as yet unsolved questions in modern sociolinguistics – that of the origins of contemporary African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Is AAVE the descendant of some creole widespread across the southern colonies of British North America, converging over two or three centuries towards mainstream American English varieties, while conserving some traces of the original creole grammar? Or did the ancestors of today’s AAVE speakers in fact learn to speak in much the same way as colonists from various regions of the British Isles? In this case, modern AAVE has actually diverged from mainstream varieties under conditions of community cohesion and segregation from the dominant society. These questions are extremely important for sociolinguistics. According to the first scenario, the evolutionary history of AAVE is a prime example of the process of decreolization, well-studied throughout the Caribbean and elsewhere. But if the second scenario is more accurate, then AAVE exemplifies instead the process of divergence of related language varieties through internal evolution, but does not provide data appropriate to the study of decreolization.

Perhaps even more important are the social and cultural implications of these questions. The theme of a prior creole arose partly in response to generations of stereotyping and stigmatization of African American varieties as ungrammatical and inferior deformations of Standard English by educators and other elements of the White establishment, and partly as a component of a unifying heritage of an African American community distinct from the surrounding mainstream. It is perhaps controversial whether or not the uninformed and scientifically false characterizations of African American speech varieties propagated for more than 200 years in the United States are better answered by an uncertain historical construct, or by recognition

of the linguistically undeniable structural and functional validity of a non-standard variety. Is a *de novo* founder language a more meaningful community icon than a variety, forged over centuries of common struggle, which continues to innovate and diverge from the standard? We have no ready answers to these questions. Nevertheless, it behooves us to search for the scientific facts about Early African American English, even if it is only to assure ourselves that progressive ideologies are buttressed by those facts and not by myths.

Over the course of our research into the origins question, the focus has become considerably ramified, now embracing such issues as the use of synchronic data to reconstruct an earlier stage of a language, the tendency of an enclave to resist linguistic change, the development of *central* and *peripheral* language varieties and the elaboration of methods appropriate to the analysis of these issues. Since these questions are essentially historical, our approach is diachronic, aiming to reconstruct an earlier stage of AAVE by adapting the traditional methods of Historical Linguistics to account for synchronic variability. We triangulate the resulting constraint hierarchies in varieties of English spoken by African Americans, born between 1844 and 1938, whose ancestors – escaped slaves and freedmen – participated in the African American diaspora of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. We refer to these varieties in what follows as Early African American English (Early AAE).

## 1.2 From Synchrony to Diachrony

An understanding of how contemporary AAVE evolved as it has cannot be achieved independent of the historical context of its development. A good deal of attention has been devoted to sociodemographic movements, in an effort to assess whether these were propitious to the development of a creole (e.g., Mufwene 1996b; 2000; Rickford 1997; Winford 1997). Far less attention has been devoted to the *linguistic* history of AAVE. This is perhaps because the few chronologically appropriate records of older AAE (the WPA Slave Narratives (Brewer 1973; 1974), the Hyatt Corpus (Hyatt 1970–8) also known as the Hoodoo texts (Ewers 1996)) are not deemed sufficiently representative of the relevant spoken vernaculars (Dillard 1987; 1993; Rickford 1991; Wolfram 1990). This reliance on the synchronic is curious, because each of the competing scenarios for the origins of AAVE – creolization versus decreolization, convergence versus divergence, acquisition versus approximation – involves change, and assessment of change

requires reference to an earlier stage of the language. In much research on the origins question, this reference is limited to whatever can be extrapolated from the distributions of forms in contemporary AAVE. But such extrapolations fail to detect the many recent innovations which AAVE has undergone.

### 1.3 The African American Diaspora

Partly as a response to the dearth of suitable records of an earlier stage of AAVE, some researchers (DeBose 1983; 1988; Hannah 1997; Poplack and Sankoff 1987; Poplack and Tagliamonte 1989; Singler 1989; 1991a; Tagliamonte and Poplack 1988; Vigo 1986) have focused on the language of what may be termed the *African American Diaspora*. Prompted by conditions in the United States in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, tens of thousands of African Americans dispersed, at various periods and in various waves, to such far-flung locations as Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Caribbean, South America and Canada, where small enclaves of their descendants have maintained their own communities to this day. This book focuses on three such settlements, one on the Samaná peninsula of the Dominican Republic (Poplack and Sankoff 1987) and two on the eastern coast of Nova Scotia, Canada (Poplack and Tagliamonte 1991a). Residents of these communities continue to speak a distinctive, and to all appearances archaic, variety of English. We describe in chapters 2 and 3 the circumstances of linguistic isolation which have contributed to the maintenance of their vernaculars for nearly two centuries, and which are also responsible for the resistance of their grammatical structures to contact-induced change postdating the dispersal. Allowing for independent internal evolution, such circumstances should qualify them as bona fide descendants of AAE spoken in the early nineteenth century, thereby furnishing the requisite “time-depth” (Vaughn-Cooke 1987: 15; Wolfram 1987: 44) to reconstruct the precursor(s) of AAVE. In this volume, we scientifically test the hypothesis that what we refer to as Early AAE may in fact be taken to represent such an earlier stage. This is accomplished through detailed comparison of the grammatical structure of the diaspora varieties, first amongst each other and then with a series of controls: a benchmark variety of Early AAE, and three British-origin varieties of English (peripheral and mainstream, transported and indigenous). These are described in chapter 4. The key comparison is with what is known of English-based creoles.

## 1.4 The Tense/Aspect System

The linguistic focus is on the expression of tense and aspect. The tense/aspect system is particularly relevant to the origins of AAVE for two reasons. First, this is the area in which creoles, a putative source of AAVE, are considered most distinct from their lexifiers. Tense and aspect are also located at the core of grammatical systems more generally. The deep nature of the comparison points, coupled with the very specific (and opposing) criteria established for creole and English grammars, make this the ideal area in which to search for significant similarities or disparities among them.

The primacy of tense/aspect distinctions in creoles appears to be inextricably linked to the dearth of inflectional morphology in such languages; indeed, the plethora of stem forms led to the early belief that they lacked tense altogether (Bickerton 1975: 27). Bickerton (p. 28) related the prevalence of zero to two sources: the number of distinct grammatical functions it fulfills, and the eligibility of overt markers for deletion. One of his abiding contributions was his argument – tested empirically in this volume – that a *system* underlay the alternation of marked and unmarked forms, largely governed by aspectual distinctions, and to a lesser extent, by discourse and pragmatic considerations. The aspectual constraint eventually developed into one of the “injunctions” of his Language Bioprogram Hypothesis: “Make sure that punctuals and non-punctuals are adequately differentiated” (Bickerton 1980: 177).

From this “aspect-prominence” would follow another crucial difference between creoles and lexifier languages like English, particularly relevant to the expression of past time. This is the distinction between the *absolute* tense categories associated with English, in which time is measured from a single fixed point, and the *relative* tense categories characteristic of creoles, which measure time from the discourse context. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 give a detailed analysis of the expression of tense and aspect in Early AAE past, present and future temporal reference contexts.

## 1.5 Form/Function Asymmetry

Bare verbs are prevalent in both contemporary and Early AAE, where, as in English-based creoles, they alternate with forms manifesting English affixes for past, present and future, or their cognates. This motivates our focus

in this volume on *zero forms* in contexts where overt inflections are also attested. The facts of Early AAE verb inflection illustrated in these chapters (like many other variable phenomena in AAVE) thus have the interesting property that simple inspection of surface occurrences of overt and zero forms will not reveal the nature of the underlying grammar that gave rise to them. A zero may be the creole mark for a non-stative verb with simple past reference, for example, or result from removal of an English past-tense suffix by regular phonological reduction rules. A form like *bin* may represent a creole anterior marker or result from auxiliary deletion of the English perfect construction (*have*) *been*. The polyvalence ascribed to creole zero-marked verbs with past temporal reference (e.g., Mufwene 1984a) is virtually identical to the wide range of interpretations available for the English (simple) past tense. Overt variants, even when superficially indistinguishable from an English counterpart, may nonetheless instantiate a creole marking system if they *pattern* according to creole grammar (e.g., Mufwene 1983: 209; Singler 1990b: 215; Winford 1985: 352). This is what Bickerton (1975) claimed for the distribution of *-t, d* in Guyanese Creole, as did Rickford (1977; Rickford and Théberge Rafal 1996) for *had* + verb in AAVE. This means that the mere presence of inflected or bare verbs in a given variety cannot be used as evidence for either an English-like or a creole-like system, since the same variant forms appear in both. Moreover, although the Standard English prescriptive enterprise implies that verbs are always inflected for tense, this is far from the case in spoken vernaculars. Inflections may be deleted by phonological reduction processes, while some lexical verbs frequently appear in their stem form.

This research, then, does not focus on the *existence* of overt and zero forms in Early AAE, since it turns out that all are typically attested in each of the comparison varieties. This observation, a consequence of the accountable comparative methodology employed, is a recurrent theme in this volume. Nor will we rely on their overall rates of occurrence, in contrast to much current work in the field (e.g., Hannah 1997; Patrick 1999; Winford 1992b; Wolfram 2000) since these change according to situation and circumstance. The type of evidence we appeal to here emerges from the *patterned organization* of these forms in discourse, making use of established diagnostics in each of the comparison varieties. We take these quantitative patterns to be evidence of the underlying grammar. In the (idealized) creole prototype, for example, the frequency of overt marking of past and present temporal reference depends on criteria like propositional aspect and temporal relationship (Bickerton 1975; 1981; Winford 2000), and by some accounts, local disambiguation (Dijkhoff 1983; Dillard 1971a; Mufwene 1984a; Stewart

1966). None of them has an effect on verb marking in Standard English, which is quantitatively conditioned instead by such factors as verb class and grammatical person, as we detail in chapters 6, 7 and 8.

## 1.6 Underlying Structure from Synchronic Variability: A Working Hypothesis

Extending Bickerton's original insight to the facts of linguistic variability, the hypothesis informing this project is that underlying grammatical structure can be discerned from examination of the distribution and conditioning of competing variants. The quantitative patterning of these variants may be consistent with English grammar (standard or dialectal, early or modern), creole grammar (basilectal or mesolectal) or both, and each of these possibilities is incorporated into the analyses in ensuing chapters. Invocation of one explanation or another rests not on casual correspondences between varieties, but on statistically validated results emerging from corpus-based research using the accountable methodology described in chapter 5.

We assume that the variable appearance of marked and unmarked verbs is systematically conditioned. Extrapolating from observations made by Bickerton (1975; 1979; 1981), Mufwene (1983; 1984a), Rickford (1977; 1987a) and Winford (1992b) about creole grammar, we hypothesize that if marking in Early AAE is conditioned by, e.g., aspectual distinctions in the direction posited for creoles, and these are *incompatible* with the behavior of English varieties, the underlying system may be inferred to derive from a prior creole. If, on the other hand, marking can be shown to be conditioned by factors associated with English, and these conflict with expectations for creole varieties, English is likely the ultimate source.

What of features attested in both English and creoles (e.g., zero)? These cannot in and of themselves be used as evidence for either parent form, i.e., they are not *diagnostic*, in the sense discussed in chapter 5. In such cases we appeal to the notion of *constraint hierarchy* to determine the relative contribution of factors. Early AAE is not a basilectal creole; thus we cannot expect its structure to replicate exactly that of a creole (assuming consensus on the nature of such a structure). But this should not diminish the possibility of inferring the underlying system from the surface distribution of variant forms. If it is true that grammatical constraints typical of the creole grammar continue to exercise powerful effects even late in the process of decreolization (Bickerton 1975), it is reasonable to expect that vestiges of that grammar

should remain visible in Early AAE. This is the sense of Bickerton's caveat that contemporary AAVE past-marking patterns were masking the primordial grammatical factors conditioning English (past-tense) acquisition in the course of decreolization. Mufwene (1984a: 199) also observed that all levels of the creole continuum typically share the same underlying system. Even if early AAE had undergone decreolization, this could be evidenced, for example, by the *relative* importance of aspectual distinctions vis-à-vis other considerations as predictors of overt morphological marking.

## 1.7 Variation Theory

By virtue of its preoccupation with accounting for grammatical structure in connected discourse and explaining the apparent instability therein of form-function relations, this research is most naturally integrated into the framework of empirical linguistics known as *Variation theory*, inspired by Labov (1966/1982; 1969; 1971; 1982; 1984; etc.; see also Chambers 1995; Sankoff 1988a; Sankoff 1974, among others). In scientifically accounting for the production data contained in a speech sample, variation theorists seek to discover usage patterns in the relative frequency of occurrence or co-occurrence of structures, rather than simply in the existence or grammaticality of those structures. Variation theory assumes that the same linguistic *function* may at times be realized in different *forms*. To account for the variant (e.g., zero) actually selected to fulfill a given function (e.g., past temporal reference), we first exhaustively extract each instance of that function in the discourse. We then apply quantitative techniques (Sankoff 1988a; Sankoff and Labov 1979; chapter 5 of this volume) to determine the influences of specific configurations of linguistic factors on choice of form. In the chapters devoted to the Early AAE tense/aspect sectors, corpora are systematically searched for reference to each of the present, past and future. Every eligible context is extracted and coded for phonological, morphological, syntactic, aspectual, lexical and other factors, identified from the relevant literature and operationalized. Explanatory factors are selected to test specific hypotheses about linguistic constraints on the choice of forms. Their significance, relative contribution and hierarchy of effect are then analyzed by means of the multiple regression procedure incorporated in variable rule analysis (Rand and Sankoff 1990). In each temporal reference sector, we examine the variants selected to express it, their contexts of occurrence, and the ways in which elements of the linguistic environment promote or disfavor their

selection. The resulting variable structure becomes a basis for comparison with that of its cohorts in contemporary varieties of Black and White English, English-based creoles, and regional and/or historical varieties. The focus is on *usage*. The conclusions we present are based on the systematic examination and empirical analyses of the language of 100 speakers of Early AAE, and 35 speakers of control varieties.

## 1.8 Comparative Reconstruction

The analyses presented in these chapters combine the methods of historical linguistics and variationist sociolinguistics to assess genetic relationships among varieties of Early AAE, using as a basis the *comparative method* of historical reconstruction (e.g., Baldi 1990a; Hoenigswald 1960; Lass 1993; Meillet 1967; among many others). To the extent that English and English-based creoles differ in the expression of some linguistic category, we can make use of these differences to situate Early AAE with regard to them. Innovative here is an additional focus on the state of the *target* variety (rather than Standard English) at the time it was being acquired by the ancestors of the diaspora speakers, and its relationship to contemporary mainstream varieties of English. We also trace the variability throughout the English prescriptive tradition, which has the advantage of being particularly well-documented. An unexpected finding of this documentary research is that many of the features considered characteristic of AAVE, and by extension, English-based creoles, were attested by prescriptive grammarians of the English language well before the advent of Early AAE. Their subsequent association with these varieties seems to have gone hand in hand with a number of social, economic and demographic changes during the colonization period, leading to their gradual restriction to peripheral dialects and eventual disappearance from the mainstream.

The remainder of this volume is organized as follows: Chapter 2 describes the settlement in 1824 and subsequent evolution of the African American community in the Samaná peninsula of the Dominican Republic. Chapter 3 details the formation and development of two diaspora communities in Nova Scotia, Canada. Chapter 4 describes the four control corpora against which we validate the Early AAE materials. One is the Ex-Slave Recordings, which is an immediate descendant of Early AAE. Three British-origin varieties enable us to contrast a mainstream standard with two peripheral rural dialects, one spoken in the community contiguous to the African Nova



Scotian settlement, the other a British source vernacular. In chapter 5 we detail the analytical and comparative methods adopted in this research. We then present three large-scale quantitative analyses of the major areas of the tense/aspect system – past (chapter 6), present (chapter 7) and future (chapter 8). Analysis of the contribution of factors synchronically and diachronically implicated in the variability helps situate Early AAE with respect to its putative sources, adstrates and descendants. Chapter 9 offers our conclusions about the structure of Early AAE.