The genetic affiliation of African American language

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Samaná English (SME) – spoken in the Dominican Republic by descendants of free African Americans who migrated to Hispaniola in 1824 – is a source of valuable insights into the history of African American language (AAL). Previous studies, using different features of SME, argue for or against the creolist hypothesis. This paper takes the genetic relatedness of AAL and SME as a point of departure for assessing whether the proto-language from which the two diverged was a dialect of colonial English which African captives acquired through normal transmission, or an English-lexified mixed language. Without invoking the creolist controversy, the thesis is developed that colonial English was restructured in contact with the languages of the African captives. The persistence of African-influenced features in the Tense-mood-aspect systems of AAL and SME is cited as evidence of such restructuring. The relative isolation of SME is cited as one of several factors responsible for its slow rate of change in comparison to AAL. Other factors are shown to have affected the rapid restructuring of colonial English into proto-AAL and the degree to which diverse varieties of AAL have converged with General American English. Evidence of such varying convergence includes the use of they have or they got to introduce existential clauses, in SME and certain Southern varieties of AAL (SAAL), where other varieties use it’s; e.g., SME They have eight of us; AAL It’s eight of us ‘There are eight of us;’ and the use of I’m before been and got, e.g., SME I’m got eight children ‘I have eight children,’ I’m been Miami ‘I’ve been to Miami.’ The paper includes discussion of relevant existing research on creole genesis and African substrate languages.