18 How English Became African American English

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An abiding problem in the history of any language concerns the trajectories by which it developed into its descendant varieties. The ancestral forms of English are enviably well documented, at least those deriving from the written and/or standard registers. Yet there is relatively little useful information about ordinary *spoken* vernaculars of earlier times, which would offer the most pertinent direct evidence for the structure of contemporary offshoots. The dearth of information on the development of the spoken language is no doubt responsible for the widespread belief that many salient and stigmatized features of contemporary dialects are recent innovations. *African American Vernacular English* (AAVE), a variety with which a wide range of nonstandard forms have come to be identified, is a case in point.

The origins and development of contemporary AAVE are controversial. Despite decades of study, there is still little consensus over whether its emblematic features – copula deletion, negative concord, and variable marking of the plural, present, and past, to name but a few – are "bad" English (as most language professionals maintain), or simply *not* English, as would be the case if contemporary AAVE had descended from a relexified West African language or a prior creole. Proponents of the latter scenario claim that despite inevitable convergence with mainstream North American English over the last few centuries, the ultimate source of most of these features is an underlying creole grammar, traces of which AAVE purportedly still preserves. Another possibility, which I develop in this chapter, is that the varieties of English originally acquired by the ancestors of AAVE speakers, though admittedly very different from the contemporary mainstream standards typically used as benchmarks, may well have been much like those spoken by the British who colonized the United States.

Understanding of how AAVE developed cannot be achieved independent of historical context. Each of the competing scenarios involves change, and the study of change requires reference not only to current reflexes but, crucially,

to an earlier stage of the language. Little is known about earlier stages of AAVE. Few useful textual records exist, and in any event, since the key features derive from the spoken language, the utility of most written texts in reconstructing their ancestry is unclear (but see Van Herk 2002; Van Herk and Poplack 2003). Records of older spoken varieties, though not entirely absent (e.g. Bailey et al. 1991), are even more sparse. Nor is much known about the nature and extent of differences between the English transported to the American colonies and contemporary standards, beyond the commonsense observation that the former could not possibly have consisted only of prestige forms.

In this chapter, I draw on a long-term research project, carried out in conjunction with Sali Tagliamonte and a number of our associates (e.g. Poplack 2000; Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001), aimed at providing an empirical answer to the question of how English became African American English (AAE). In the absence of sufficient pertinent diachronic data, we combine methods of historical comparative linguistics and variationist sociolinguistics to *reconstruct* an earlier stage of AAE. We then situate this stage with respect to Colonial (and on occasion, Middle) English, English-based Creoles, and contemporary AAVE (though only the first line of inquiry will be presented here). In so doing, we rely crucially on a variety of constructs outlined below.

18.1   Relic Area

A key concept in reconstructing earlier stages of a language is the *relic area*. In the diffusion of linguistic change, some areas, traditionally referred to as relic, or *peripheral*, may be missed. Because of their resistance to change and concomitant tendency to preserve older features, relic areas provide prime evidence about an earlier stage of the language. The relic areas we examined here are communities formed during the African American diaspora of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when tens of thousands of African Americans fled the United States to resettle in the Caribbean, Canada, Liberia, and elsewhere. Small enclaves of their descendants maintained their language, culture, and religion for centuries. The geographic and social isolation in which these communities developed enabled them to successfully resist contact-induced change postdating the dispersal, and maintain their vernaculars for at least two centuries. Admitting internal evolution, such circumstances should qualify their language varieties as bona fide descendants of the African American English spoken in the early nineteenth century, thereby furnishing the older stage necessary to reconstruct the ancestor of AAVE. I refer to these varieties collectively as *Early* African American English (reserving the acronym AAVE for contemporary vernaculars). A test of the hypothesis that Early AAE may in fact be taken to represent such an older stage is a key component of the research reported here (see also Poplack 2000; Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001).

18.2   Research Framework

The approach taken here is essentially variationist, comparative, and historical. By *variationist* I refer to a specific focus on the recurrent choices speakers make in expressing the same referential value. The cohort of variant expressions of a given meaning or grammatical function constitutes the *linguistic variable*, the key theoretical construct of this paradigm. The goal is to discover the constraints governing the choice among variants, which may be construed as the grammar underlying the variability. Once the contexts in which the variants of a linguistic variable may occur are established, we attempt to determine which aspects of those contexts (phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, discourse, etc.) contribute to the choice process. Innovative here is the "operationalization" of competing hypotheses about the origin and development of variant forms (derived from the relevant theoretical, descriptive, synchronic, and historical literature) as factors in a multivariate analysis. The multiple regression procedure incorporated in the variable rule program (Rand and Sankoff 1990) reveals which factors contribute significant effects to variant choice when all are considered simultaneously, as well as the relative magnitude of each.

18.3   The Comparative Method

Identification of the distinctive features of AAVE as the legacy of an earlier widespread creole or as reflexes of the contemporaneous dialects of English to which its speakers were first exposed, is a diachronic question. Accordingly, we adopt the *Comparative Method* of historical linguistics to ascertain genetic relationships, by reconstructing proto-forms from the attested evidence of the descendant (i.e. diaspora) varieties. If two or more independent languages share a non-universal feature unlikely to have developed by chance or through borrowing, it is assumed to have been transmitted from a common ancestral source. Once we establish the nature of that source, we may begin to validate claims about the origins of AAVE. But assessing the behavior of spoken-language features is complicated by the ubiquitous property of inherent variability. Variability gives rise to competing realizations of the *same* meaning or function, and these may surface in identical form (often zero) in each of the putative ancestors (here, creoles, African languages, English). This vitiates attempts to assess relations among them on the basis of form-matching alone. Thus, for example, both English and English-based creoles share a zero realization of past tense, and it is impossible to determine, from surface inspection alone, whether the stem forms of *return*, *work*, or *come*, italicized in (1), convey the specific meaning of non-punctual or habitual past, as some creolists have claimed (e.g. Bickerton 1975; Winford 1992; Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001), result from deletion of past-tense *-ed*, as frequently occurs in other varieties of English (Guy 1980; Santa Ana 1996), or was never acquired to begin with.

Likewise, a form like *ain't*, as in (2), which has become a stereotype of AAVE grammar, is widely attested in older English, most varieties of contemporary (nonstandard) English, and English-based creoles.

(1)   As they *return*, the doctor went. And when the doctor went, she *come*, and she *work*, she *work*, she *work*. (SE/002/1176)[1]

(2)   They *ain't* like they is now. (NPR/030/76)

This type of situation has important repercussions for reconstructing the ancestor of spoken languages. It shows that the provenance of a form cannot be ascertained simply by comparing the existence of cognates, as is traditional in historical linguistics, but only by examining their patterning in discourse.

We address this problem by incorporating into the Comparative Method the variationist construct of *constraint hierarchy* and use this as a basis for our correspondence sets. The constraint hierarchy, or the order with which the components of the context contribute to variant choice, represents the detailed structure of the relationship between form and context of occurrence. Thus the results of the variable rule analyses in table 18.1, for example, reveal not only that phonological, aspectual, and priming considerations all contribute to the choice of the stem form of weak verbs, but also the specific *direction* of these effects: habitual/durative aspect favors selection of the stem more than punctual aspect; a preceding consonant or consonant cluster favors the stem form more than a preceding vowel, etc. These patterns, or constraint hierarchies, interact to yield the probability that the verb will be instantiated as a given variant in a given context. As such, they may be construed as the "grammar" giving rise to the variable surface manifestations.

Our comparison points are variant expressions (e.g *-ed* and Ø in example (1)). Our *cognates* are linguistic functions or variable contexts. *Correspondences* emerge from parallel conditioning, instantiated as constraint hierarchies, or like patterns of favoring and disfavoring effects. To assess whether a correspondence is valid, we determine whether it occurs in other sets; this is effected through comparison with cognate varieties and controls, described below. When a correspondence recurs frequently among comparison varieties, the assumption is that it is real. A striking example of a robust correspondence is the aspectual effect mentioned above. Habitual aspect will be seen (tables 18.1, 18.2, 18.7) to favor stem forms of both weak and strong past-tense verbs, and marked forms of present-tense verbs, in virtually every variety studied here.

18.4   Diagnosticity

Cross-variety comparison is revealing to the extent that the element compared entertains a unique association with a source variety. As noted above, however, with few exceptions, the relevant variants are not only attested, but also

frequent in all of the putative ancestors. For the comparison to be *diagnostic*, we require deeper correspondences than those afforded by surface similarity of form. The complex structural picture afforded by the constraint hierarchy serves as a tool in assessing the relationship and provenance of forms, as well as a check in controlling for universals. If two or more varieties share the same highly structured hierarchy of constraints on the variable occurrence of a morphosyntactic element, it is unlikely that they could have arisen independently. If, on the other hand, the pattern is not shared by one or more of the varieties, universals have effectively been ruled out.

18.5   Varieties and Controls

The data on which the analyses below are based, documented in detail in Poplack and Tagliamonte (2001), come from tape-recorded conversations with residents of three diaspora communities depicted in map 18.1. One is located on the Samaná peninsula of the Dominican Republic, settled by former slaves and their descendants in the early 1820s (Poplack and Sankoff 1987). Two others, Guysborough Enclave and North Preston, are located some 250 kilometers apart
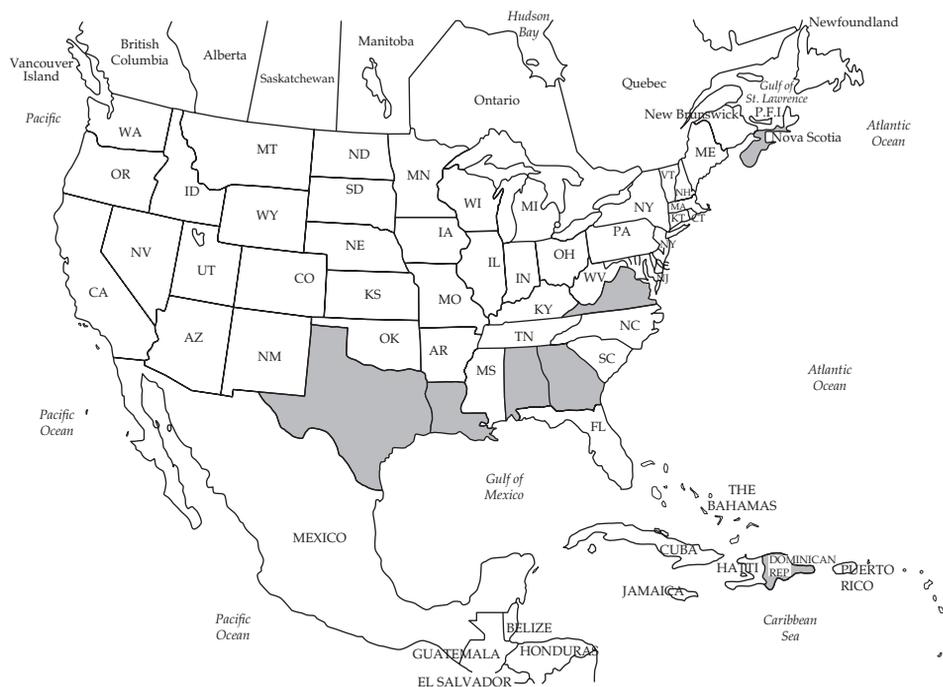
Map 18.1
The shaded areas indicate the diaspora communities examined (Nova Scotia, the five states) and the Dominican Republic).

on the eastern coast of Nova Scotia, Canada (Poplack and Tagliamonte 1991). They were settled by Black Loyalists after the American Revolutionary War (c.1783–5) and refugee slaves following the War of 1812. Community members at the time of data collection (1980s to 1990s) still spoke an apparently archaic form of English; many of the elderly individuals who participated in the original research projects are now deceased.

Consistent with the comparative method, we validate the diaspora varieties as evidence of Early AAE through detailed comparison of their grammatical structure, first among each other, and then with a number of controls. The *Ex-slave Recordings* is a benchmark variety of AAE which, in contrast to Samaná English and African Nova Scotian English, remained *in situ* in the southern United States. These are mechanically recorded interviews with former slaves born between 1844 and 1861, who would have acquired their language within three to five decades of the input settlers to Samaná. To control for the possibility of areal diffusion and convergence posterior to the dispersal, we supplement the African Nova Scotian materials with a small corpus of Nova Scotian Vernacular English (NSVE) spoken in a rural British-origin settlement adjacent to Guysborough Enclave. We refer to this community in what follows as Guysborough Village. Another check is provided by the dialect of English spoken in an insular rural community in the county of Devon, in southwest England. (For comparison with what is known of the structure of English-based creoles and contemporary AAVE, I refer the reader to Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001). Many older vernacular features which have since disappeared from mainstream standards are still robust in these dialects, making them particularly well suited for comparative reconstruction. The African-origin enclaves have evolved independently from each other for approximately two centuries. Taken together, they differ vastly from the British-origin communities along racial, cultural, and geographic lines. Yet despite these differences, they all share the defining features of peripheral communities (Anderson 1988: 60): spatial isolation, low density of inter-group communication, and language loyalty to vernacular norms. Such communities are known to retain conservative features. As we shall see, this fact will prove to be an invaluable adjunct to the reconstructive endeavor.

A final control is diachronic, tracing the variables identified as AAVE throughout the prescriptive history of English, as instantiated in the *Ottawa Grammar Resource on Early Variability in English, 1577–1898* (Poplack et al. 2001). We mined this collection of nearly 100 English grammars and usage manuals for description, prescription, and censure of the uses of interest, shedding light on the historical, social, and geographical trajectory of the variants. More revealing, hints as to the conditioning of their occurrence over time can be *operationalized* as factors in our analyses, enabling us to ascertain the extent, if any, to which older constraints remain operative. As illustrated in ensuing sections, this exercise reveals that many of the features stereotypically associated with AAVE (and English-based creoles) in fact have a robust precedent in the history of English.

In the remainder of this chapter I illustrate the variationist contribution to the Comparative Method with analyses of two well-documented features of the AAVE tense/aspect system: the variable expression of (simple) past and present temporal reference. The tense/aspect system is particularly amenable to comparative reconstruction, since this is the area in which creoles are considered most distinct from English. The plethora of aspectual distinctions in creoles seems to be associated with the dearth of inflectional morphology. Stem forms are routinely associated with a variety of aspectual readings in such languages, whereas in English they are more often analyzed as resulting from deletion of an underlying morpheme. This fundamental grammatical difference between the two putative ancestral sources of AAVE becomes the basis of the comparative endeavor.

The analyses of the next section are based on more than 11,000 uses of the past and present tenses in Early AAE, and compared with nearly 2,000 in the peripheral British-origin control varieties. These were extracted from informal conversations with over 100 elderly speakers of Early AAE, and 18 speakers of British-origin vernaculars, matched in age and other sociodemographic characteristics.

18.6   Marking the Simple Past

The first illustration involves marking of past time, a variable which has figured prominently in the origins debate. The main research focus has been on the alternation of the "regular" -*ed* affix and the verb stem, as in example (3). Far less attention has been paid to the parallel alternation of stem forms with strong or "irregular" verb morphology, as in (4).

(3)   And I *looked* in that door and I *look* back in the corner, I seen them great big eye! (NPR/030/820)

(4)   I *run* away from home and *went* to work in the lumber woods. (GYE/066/19)

As noted above, unmarked pasts have long been associated with creole or African origins, particularly when strong verbs like *run*, which could not have resulted from phonologically motivated deletion, are involved. In fact, stem forms (of both strong and weak verbs) are reportedly so common in English-based creoles that some researchers have suggested that their overtly marked counterparts are insertions from, or code-switches to, another system. Interestingly, although this seems to have been a little-known fact prior to the research I report here, variation between overtly marked preterites with stem forms has also been amply attested in the English grammatical tradition for nearly 500 years. We first encounter the *enallage*, or alternation, of marked and unmarked forms with past temporal reference in Peacham's *Garden of Elegance*, published in 1577, reproduced in (5).

(5) Enallage of tyme, when we put one tyme for another, thus. *Terence*. I *come*
to the maydens, I *aske* who she *is*, they *say*, the sister of *Chrisis*, for, I *came*
to the maydens, I *asked* who she *was*, they *sayd* the sister of *Chrisis*, the
Presentence for the Preterperfectence . . . (Peacham 1577 [1971]: no page
numbers)

Over a century later Miège (1688: 70) observed that the unmarked (or
present) tense was "sometimes [i.e. variably] used for the Preter Imperfect.
As, *having met with him*, *he brings him to his House*, *and gives him very good
Intertainment*. There we say *brings* for *brought*, and *gives* for *gave*." Indeed, the
English grammatical tradition shows a long, if not particularly harmonious,
history of reporting such variation in past-tense marking. Most attempts to
account for it involved efforts to classify the irregular verbs remaining from
the several hundred extant in Old English according to perceived correspon-
dences between present, preterite, and participle forms. Actually, the number,
membership, and very existence of such verb classes have been contested since
at least the early seventeenth century. Some grammarians (e.g. Fenning 1771
[1967]: 65) considered that the rules were "so numerous and intricate, that they
rather perplex the judgement than assist the memory of the learner"; whence
his long taxonomies of verb conjugations. Some of Fenning's contemporaries
(e.g. Bayly 1772 [1969]; Fogg 1792 [1970]) arrived at twelve irregular verb class
distinctions; still others posited four. Not only could grammarians not agree
on how many kinds or classes of verb conjugation to posit, they also disputed
which verbs belonged in which class. Witness Gill's characterization of his own
third "conjugation," or class, in (6):

(6) The third conjugation comprises verbs which change the stem-vowel
of the present both in the imperfect and the perfect, as spë̈k <loquor>, J
spä̈k <loquebar>, J hä̈v spö̈n <loquutus sum>; . . . In this conjugation
also belong almost all the common verbs of the second conjugation
(not because of any peculiarity in our language, but because common
usage attempts anything) . . . (Gill 1619 [1972]: 121)

Clearly, variability between *-ed* and zero (as well as a variety of other forms)
in the marking of past time has had a long history in the development of English.
This is a first suggestion that the variable marking in examples (3) and (4)
above was not an innovation of Early AAE. But what determines which mark
will be selected? We first examine the class of regular or weak verbs (3).
Multivariate analysis of the factors contributing to the selection of the stem form
in past-tense weak verbs (table 18.1) shows that the same four are operative
in each of the four Early AAE varieties. Even more striking, the hierarchy of
constraints, which captures the underlying grammar of past-time marking, is
virtually identical. This means that they share a grammar of past-tense formation.
One component of this grammar is aspectual: habitual aspect favors the stem
form, as in (7). We also observe a priming effect. Contrary to any functionalist
view of marker variability, speakers are more likely to select a stem form if

Table 18.1 Five independent variable rule analyses of the contribution of factors to the probability that *weak* verbs will surface as *stems* in Early AAE and Nova Scotian Vernacular English

	Early AAE				British-origin adstrate
	Diaspora varieties			Benchmark	
Variety	SE	NPR	GYE	ESR	NSVE
Corrected mean	.45	.31	.59	.29	.14
Total *N*	1,236	360	503	281	282
	Prob	*Prob*	*Prob*	*Prob*	*Prob*
Verbal aspect					
Habitual/durative	.63	.63	.56	.51	.53
Punctual	.47	.47	.39	.49	.47
Range	*16*	*16*	*17*	*2*	*6*
Priming					
Preceding verb unmarked	.68	.74	.75	.50	.84
Preceding verb marked	.45	.45	.44	.50	.47
Range	*23*	*29*	*31*		*37*
Preceding phonological segment					
Consonant cluster	.81	.73	.62	.73	.76
Single consonant	.60	.55	.55	.51	.70
Vowel	.26	.35	.35	.32	.11
Range	*55*	*38*	*27*	*41*	*65*
Following phonological segment					
Pause	.74	.91	.60	.81	.44
Consonant	.58	.68	.72	.65	.81
Vowel	.38	.31	.29	.32	.30
Range	*20*	*37*	*43*	*33*	*51*

Note: Results obtained from Goldvarb 2.0 (Rand and Sankoff 1990). Factor weights vary between zero and 1. The higher the figure, the greater the contribution of the factor in question to the probability that the (weak) verb will surface in stem form. The higher the range, the greater the relative magnitude of the factor group.

   Not all factor effects presented in tables 18.1, 18.2, and 18.7 are statistically significant, largely due to sparse data in some contexts. However, statistical significance does not affect constraint hierarchies, on which we focus here. Ranges provided only for factors selected as statistically significant.

Source: Adapted from Poplack and Tagliamonte (2001: 124 (table 6.2)).

they have already uttered a stem form (8a), and a marked form following another marked one (8b).

(7) a. No. I got a few spankings when I shouldn't have- supposed to do. And they *spankø* me for that, but, nothing serious. (GYE/077/71)
     b. Sometime you *meltø* snow to wash with. (NPR/015/341)

(8) a. Now, I was around the fifteenth- fifteen or sixteen, all my people *workø* out- Mama *workø* all her day. (NPR/030/299)
     b. And I went to the door, and I *opened* the door and they *jumped* in there. (SE/003/543)

But the most important predictor of bare past temporal verbs is phonological. The stem form is favored in the context of a consonant, while a marked form tends to be retained in prevocalic position (9). The magnitude of the phonological effect (as assessed by the *range*) means that the bare form of regular past temporal reference verbs in Early AAE is first and foremost a result of consonant cluster simplification.

(9) I look*ed a*t it. It *look j*ust like Corney. (NPR/039/148)

Now although cluster simplification is widespread enough across languages and linguistic contexts to qualify as universal, there happens to be a specific precursor for it in the history of past-tense formation in English. This is the tendency, in both speech and poetry, to reduce the formerly syllabic *-ed.* By 1688, Miège had already observed "'tis usual to pronounce and write, for example, *esteem'd* for *esteemed*, *bang'd* for *banged,...*" (1688: 70). This was reiterated by Fenning a century later (10).

(10) When a soft letter, liquid, or vowel comes before *-ed*, the *e* is generally omitted in the pronunciation. Thus *robbed, rubbed, raged, begged, breathed, ruled, pulled, aimed, crammed, rained, stunned, pitied, cried, destroyed*, are all read as if they had been wrote *robb'd, rubb'd, rag'd, begg'd, breath'd, rul'd, pull'd, aim'd, cramm'd, rain'd,...* (Fenning 1771 [1967]: 65)

The anonymous author of *The English Accidence* complained that the tendency "has very much disfigured the tongue, and turned a tenth part of our smoothest words into so many clusters of consonants." From there it was but a short step to "losing in one syllable the terminations or ending of the preter or past time of our verbs" (Anonymous 1733 [1967]: 76–7).

The robust precedent for consonant cluster simplification in English past-tense weak verbs is no doubt responsible, if only in part, for the appearance of the same phonological effect in the NSVE spoken in the British-origin community adjacent to Guysborough Enclave (as well as in many other varieties of English studied elsewhere). Indeed, all of the variable patterning characteristic

of Early AAE is mirrored in NSVE, as can be seen by comparing constraint hierarchies across the varieties in table 18.1. Overall rates of *-ed* deletion (as inferred from the *corrected means* in tables 18.1, 18.2, and 18.7) appear reduced in comparison to those of the Early AAE varieties but, crucially, the hierarchy of constraints conditioning its occurrence is the same. This suggests that there is essentially no grammatical difference between black and white vernacular English in the inflection for past tense in weak verbs.

18.7   Strong Verbs

We next examine the propensity of *strong verbs* to appear bare in Early AAE. With the exception of phonological conditioning, which is of course not relevant here, the factors examined are the same as those considered for the weak verbs. In addition, given its importance in the development of English, we consider the factor of verb class as well, though here we distinguish only the three commonly invoked for contemporary English: I: verb stem = participle (e.g. **come**/*came*/**come**); II: preterite = participle (e.g. *say*/**said**/**said**); III: verb stem ≠ preterite ≠ participle (e.g. *take*/*took*/*taken*).

Table 18.2 displays the results of five independent variable rule analyses of the contributions of these factors to the probability that strong verbs will surface as stems. As with weak verbs, we note first that sentential aspect also contributes to the choice process here: past habituals favor the stem form, as in (11), an effect which is evident in all varieties.

(11)   *Interviewer*: Well uh, didn't you say you used to sing that in the field too?
       Informant: Yeah I *sing* that in the field too. Yes, sir. (ESR/001/49)

There is also a priming effect, again reminiscent of what was observed for weak verbs: stem forms tend to cluster with stem forms, as in (12a), and marked forms with marks (12b). This is as would be expected of a general processing effect (and shows how little the actual morphological form is relied on to convey the temporal information of past).

(12)   a.   Aunt Hattie and the people used to work in town. We *come* out and *meet* them, *carry* the clothes home for them. (GYE/074/155)
       b.   And Dad *took* the twenty dollars and *bought* two young pigs. And Mother *took* her twenty dollars and *went* and *bought- bought* a young cow. (GYE/066/53)

By far the greatest effect on the selection of the stem in strong verbs is contributed by the factor we have labeled *verb class*. In all Early AAE varieties, class I verbs (i.e. in which verb stem = participle) highly favor zero marking. And as previously, all of these effects are paralleled in the NSVE spoken in adjacent Guysborough Village, regardless of the much lower overall rates

Table 18.2 Five independent variable rule analyses of the contribution of factors to the probability that *strong* verbs will surface as *stems* in Early AAE and Nova Scotian Vernacular English

	Early AAE				British-origin adstrate
	Diaspora varieties			*Benchmark*	
Variety	SE	NPR	GYE	ESR	NSVE
Corrected mean	.21	.15	.22	.29	.02
Total *N*	2,488	535	574	537	367
	Prob	*Prob*	*Prob*	*Prob*	*Prob*
Verbal aspect					
Habitual/durative	.66	.76	.73	.67	.73
Punctual	.18	.40	.23	.41	.25
Range	48	36	50	26	48
Priming					
Preceding verb unmarked	.72	.87	.81	.75	.90
Preceding verb marked	.44	.38	.45	.45	.47
Range	28	49	36	30	43
Verb class					
I Verb stem = participle	.72	.96	.91	.97	.98
II Preterite = participle	.59	.50	.39	.35	.32
III Verb stem ≠ preterite ≠ participle	.27	.33	.40	.42	.40
Range	45	63	52	62	73

Source: Adapted from Poplack and Tagliamonte (2001: 133 (table 6.3)).

(evidenced by the *corrected mean*) of stem forms in the latter. However, the effect of the other two classes is not so consistent. Strong verbs by definition have irregular past tense forms (e.g. *spoke*, *took*, *came*, *ran*, etc.); all presumably present some difficulty in acquisition, production, etc. Why then are some verbs so resistant to standard marking while others are not? It is reasonable to assume that the number of different morphological forms in a class might be inversely correlated with a speaker's ability to access them all, resulting in the type of variation we have observed. But comparison of the behavior of class I and II verbs (table 18.2), which both feature the same number of forms, reveals that this cannot be the source of the variation. Clearly, the tradition of confusion over the existence, number, and constitution of verb "classes" detailed above has not abated noticeably. In this context we examine the makeup of these classes more closely.

Table 18.3 Constitution of class I lexical verbs

| | Early AAE | | | | British-origin adstrate |
| | Diaspora varieties | | | Benchmark | |
	SE	NPR	GYE	ESR	NSVE
Proportion class I represented by *come*	96%	88%	90%	88%	94%
% stem forms of come	37	76	50	95	38
% stem forms of other strong verbs	22	17	23	21	3

Table 18.3 reveals that a disproportionate number of "class I" verbs consists of the verb *come*, as in (13), and *come* has a greater propensity to surface bare than almost any other verb in the language. The disproportionate behavior of *come* is equally evident in NSVE (14). This is what explains the apparent propensity of class I verbs to surface as stems.

(13)   Their turn *come* to clean the- the board. (GYE/040/319)

(14)   And then when we were all through, before I *come* home, he *come* over to the [inc] – the infirmary to see me. (NSVE/107/939)

An important proportion of "class II" verbs is similarly made up of *say*. *Say* also tends to surface bare in most of the Early AAE varieties, giving rise to utterances such as that in (15). Indeed, closer inspection reveals that all the classes are made up of verbs with associated marking preferences, regardless of the structural definition of the class (preterite = participle, etc.) This explains the fluctuation of class II and III factor weights across communities. What is the source of these lexically determined preferences?

(15)   And she took and she threwed me that baby there and she *say*, "I'm going." (SE/002/309)

Table 18.4 displays the prescriptive treatment over four centuries of English grammatical tradition of a number of preterite forms currently regarded as nonstandard. Note that the Early AAE tendency to select preterite *come* and *say* (as well as *give* and *run*),[2] has a robust precedent in English. Other verbs, however, notably *have*, *go*, and *be*, are never attested bare in the past tense.

Most compelling here is the *relative* treatment of these verbs (illustrated graphically in figure 18.1): some (*come*, *run*, *give*, and *say*) have a long history

Table 18.4 Attestation of selected bare preterite forms in the *Ottawa Grammar Resource on Early Variability in English*.

Date of publication	eat	run	come	say(s)	give	have	go	be
1577			√	√				
1619		√	√					
1640	√	√						
1653	√	√	√					
1654		√						
1671	√		√					
1674		√						
1685					√			
1688	√				√			
1700		√	√					
1711	√	√	√					
1723	√	√	√					
1733	√							
1746	√							
1750	√							
1762	√							
1765	√							
1771		X						
1772		√						
1785		X						
1786	√							
1788	√	X		√				
1797	√							
1802	√							
1803	X	X	X					
1803	√							
1830				X				
1834	√	X						
1846	√							
1851	√	√						
1855		X		X				
1855	X							
1863	X	X	X					
1866	√	X						
1870	X							
1874	X	X						
1880	√	√						
1893	X							

Note: Vertical axis = date of publication of the grammar; horizontal axis = verb form cited. X indicates that the form was censured in the grammar in question; a check mark represents an uncritical attestation.
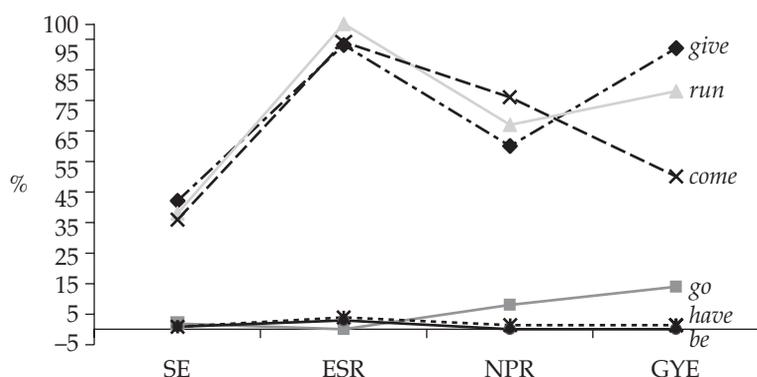*Source*: Reproduced from Poplack et al. (2001: 97 (table 5.1)).

Figure 18.1   Relative marking of strong verbs according to lexical identity, Early AAE

of attestation in stem form; others (*had*, *was/were*, and *went*) in contrast, are virtually always marked. This inflectional profile mirrors exactly the patterns of Early AAE (*and* NSVE), arguing that the different forms do not represent distinct tense/aspect markers, as many creolists have claimed. Rather, the alternation between stem and marked forms of past-tense strong verbs is the lexically determined residue of patterns extant at an earlier stage of the English language, but which have since disappeared from mainstream standards. The trajectory leading to their disappearance can be inferred from table 18.4, which illustrates the widening gap between prescription and praxis with regard to the stem form of past-reference verbs. Acceptance of the (currently) non-standard variant decreases over time, as evidenced by fewer checks toward the bottom of the table. With the entrenchment of the standard (post-1800), the tendency to stigmatize bare preterites as vulgar, provincial, or dialectal increases. This is no doubt a harbinger of their eventual expulsion from the inventory of Standard English, though not from the vernaculars of many speakers, including those studied here. Their disappearance from contemporary mainstream speech, coupled with the synchronic perspective prevalent in the field, explains why these variants are so often characterized as innovations, rather than the retentions our analysis has shown them to be.

To summarize, the results of this section show that despite the variable absence of an overt past-tense mark (at rates approximating 50 percent in some of the varieties studied), the morphological expression of simple past in Early AAE was inherited from English. Its surface manifestation continues to be regularly conditioned by the same type and hierarchy of constraints as in vernacular varieties of English, early and contemporary, and may be expressed as the output of the variable operation of phonological constraints in weak verbs, and the residue of (historically determined) alternation of morphologically strong forms with their bare stem counterparts in strong verbs. The aspectual effect on the morphological expression of past in both strong and weak verbs has

not been attested in the English grammatical tradition, though it has been cited as a creole legacy. Its presence in NSVE, however, requires an alternative explanation. Further analysis (not shown here) reveals that stem forms in past habitual contexts prevail specifically where *would* and its contracted variant *'d* are admitted. This, coupled with the strong phonological effects detailed above, suggests that these bare preterites result from phonological deletion of contracted *would* in habitual contexts rather than any privative association with habitual aspect.

18.8   Marking the Simple Present

The legacy of English to Early AAE is also evidenced by the variable marking with *-s* of (simple) present tense, regardless of person and number of the subject, as in (16).

(16)   a.   Because when I drink the coffee it *keepø* me, you see. (SE/003/538)
       b.   And they all treating me mighty nice, all the white folks that *knowø* me, they *treats* me nice. (ESR/003/26)

Though this is a well-documented feature of contemporary AAVE, linguists have long been at odds over how best to characterize it. At first it was simply considered a hypercorrection, (somewhat arbitrarily) described as "tacking on a morpheme which [the speaker] knows is not characteristic of the standard language, but which he has not yet learned to use correctly" (Bickerton 1975), or "adoption of a Standard English form without the Standard English grammatical component" (Pitts 1981: 304). So closely was this usage associated with AAVE, and so alien was it considered to the grammar of Standard English, that many scholars concluded that *-s* must be a creole aspect marker. Other theories were also advanced, without, however, leading to consensus on its origins or current function(*s*). In tracking the trajectory of *-s* throughout the English grammatical tradition, we discovered that variable inflection across the present-tense paradigm had a long and venerable history. Indeed, the contemporary Standard English requirement that subject and verb must agree in 3rd person sing. (achieved via inflection with *-s*) is actually a fairly recent development, dating only from the Early Modern English period. Prior to that time, agreement was not categorical, nor was *-s* restricted to 3rd person sing., as can be seen from table 18.5, which displays the distribution of *-s* across grammatical persons in Middle English.

There is ample attestation of this phenomenon in English grammars. The citation from Beattie (1788 [1968]: 175) reproduced in (17) invokes not only the variability (a singular verb *sometimes* follows a plural noun), but also its social and geographic context. Given current associations of nonconcord *-s* with nonstandard and/or regional varieties of English, the fact that it was already attributed to "vulgar dialect" and "the common people" in the eighteenth

Table 18.5   Regional distribution of verbal inflections in Middle English

Grammatical person	North	Midlands	South
Singular			
1st	*hēr(e) (s)*	*hēr(e) (s)*	*hēre*
2nd	*hēres*	*hēres(t)*	*hēr(e) st*
3rd	*hēres*	*hēres, hēreþ*	*hēreþ*
Plural	*hēres*	*hēres, hēreþ, hēre (n)*	*hēreþ*

Source: Adapted from Mossé (1952: 78).

century comes as no surprise. Beattie also remarked on the (still) rather opaque nature of the standard agreement rule (18):

(17)   in old [i.e. Early Modern] English, a verb singular *sometimes* follows a plural nominative; as in the following couplet from Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis, She lifts the *coffer-lids* that *close* his eyes, Where lo, *two lamps* burnt out in darkness *lies*. The same idiom prevails in the Scotch acts of parliament, in the vernacular writings of Scotch men prior to the last century *and in the vulgar dialect of North Britain to this day: and*, *even in England*, *the common people frequently speak in this manner*, without being misunderstood. (Beattie 1788 [1968]: 192–3, emphasis added)

(18)   Custom has made this third person plural necessary, by determining, that the verb shall agree in number with its nominative. But if custom had determined otherwise, we might have done without it . . . if custom had not subjoined a plural verb to a plural nominative, or to two or more singular nominatives, there would have been no fault in the syntax. (Beattie 1788 [1968]: 192–3)

Indeed, grammarians of the past had little more success in explaining variable *-s* inflection than contemporary linguists. Most invoked doubts over the properties of the subject noun – whether it should be considered singular or plural, whether, when conjoined, it counts as one or two, and whether agreement applies to the grammatical subject or the noun closest to the verb. But few among the wealth of explanations we uncovered are relevant to contemporary behavior, since the elements of interest to grammarians turn out to be extremely rare in speech. The one important exception is a pattern, first described by Murray in 1873 for Northern (Scots and Northumbrian) dialects of English, which has come to be known as the *Northern Subject Rule*. This "rule," reproduced in (19), relates the alternation of *-s* and zero to type of subject and adjacency to the verb.

(19)　In the PRESENT TENSE *aa leyke*, *wey leyke*, *you 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 first*; *yt's mey at cums first . . . thay cum and teake them*; *the burds cums an' paecks them*." (Murray 1873: 212)

We operationalized the Northern Subject Rule, along with phonological and aspectual factors suggested to constrain *-s* variability, as factors in a multivariate analysis, and analyzed the contribution of each to the probability that *-s* would be selected in present temporal reference contexts. As previously, we compare results, first among the Early AAE varieties, and then with a British-origin control. Because NSVE features too little nonconcord *-s* to permit quantitative analysis, for purposes of comparison we investigate *-s* usage in Devon, England. As may be seen in table 18.6, rates of verbal *-s* across the present-tense paradigm are in fact higher in this insular British community than in Early AAE, not only in 3rd person sing., but across the board.

It is also apparent from table 18.7 that verbal *-s* is far too frequent, in both concord and nonconcord contexts, and distributed too systematically across grammatical persons, to sustain an explanation of hypercorrect insertion.

Table 18.6　Distribution of verbal *-s* by grammatical person in Early AAE and Devon English

	Early AAE								*British-origin*	
	Diaspora varieties						*Benchmark*			
	SE		NPR		GYE		ESR		DVN	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Grammatical person										
Singular										
1st	14	683	5	434	2	639	3	149	22	326
2nd	6	396	1	307	0	345	0	69	17	175
3rd	**42**	585	**41**	195	**55**	251	**50**	34	**85**	295
Plural										
1st	18	157	5	22	3	34	44	9	26	84
2nd	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	20	5
3rd	**28**	674	**14**	174	**9**	249	**8**	72	**37**	288
Total *N*		2,495		1,132		1,518		333		1,173

Table 18.7   Five independent variable rule analyses of the contribution of factors to the presence of verbal -s in 3rd person plural in Early AAE and Devon English

	Early AAE				British-origin
	Diaspora varieties			Benchmark	
Variety	SE	NPR	GYE	ESR	Devon
Corrected mean	.260	.114	.068	.064	.358
Total *N*	699	173	244	72	288
	Prob	Prob	Prob	Prob	Prob
Preceding phonological segment					
Vowel	.61	.37	.45	.75	.45
Consonant	.48	.56	.52	.39	.53
Range	*13*				
Following phonological segment					
Vowel	.56	.62	.57	.78	.49
Consonant	.47	.44	.47	.38	.51
Range	*9*			*40*	
Aspect					
Habitual	.57	.64	.50	.51	.53
Continuous	.37	.23	.50	.47	.46
Punctual	—	—	—	—	.38
Range	*20*	*41*			
Subject type/adjacency					
Non-adjacent pro or NP	.59	.41	.78	.70	.60
Adjacent personal pro	.47	.56	.35	.39	.48
Range	*11*		*43*		

Source: Adapted from Poplack and Tagliamonte (2001: 189 (table 7.6)).

Almost without exception, -s occurs most often in 3rd person sing., followed by 3rd person pl., then 1st person. Which factors underlie the selection of -s in these contexts? Table 18.6 displays the results for 3rd person pl., which in most particulars parallel those for the other grammatical persons (Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001).

The regular phonological effect on the occurrence of -s displayed in table 18.7 provides further evidence against a hypercorrection analysis. It is not entirely consistent across grammatical persons, nor is it of the same magnitude in each

variety; nonetheless, in most varieties, vowels favor inflection with -*s*, as in (20), while consonants tend to disfavor it (21).

(20)   'Cause I *knows i*t and I *sees i*t now. (SE/002/211)

(21)   Well, my niece and, uh, granddaughter here, she *takeø c*are of baby. (ESR/013/156)

As with past-tense marking, we again observe a moderate aspectual effect in the present, which recurs regularly in all grammatical persons. Here, -*s* is preferred when the aspectual reading of the verb is habitual (22), in contrast to past habituals, which favored the stem form.

(22)   But you never *gets* none now hardly for Natal day. You never *gets* none 'til after Natal day. (NPR/003/79)

I noted earlier that such aspectual uses of morphological elements by speakers of African origin are typically construed as the legacy of a prior creole grammar. But as with past-marking, the parallel contribution of habitual aspect to -*s* inflection in the British-origin control variety suggests that an English source is equally plausible. In fact, although English grammarians are silent with respect to aspectual distinctions until late in the eighteenth century, the link between the simple present tense and habitual aspect is clear. Pickbourn (1789 [1968]) recommends the simple present to denote *habit*s, or repeated actions; Bullions (1869: 39) prescribes it "to express what is habitual or always true." Indeed, habituality is the default reading of the simple present tense when it has present temporal reference. In -*s*-conserving varieties like Early AAE, the simple present tense has two exponents, and as shown by Walker (2000), the aspectual readings of the present tense have been divided among them: -*s* is preferred in habitual contexts, and zero tends to be associated with durative readings. This same association between verbal -*s* and habitual aspect has also been reported in a number of British dialects, and has been confirmed quantitatively in such distant -*s*-preserving varieties as Newfoundland Vernacular English (Clarke 1997) and Devon English (Godfrey and Tagliamonte 1999), though it has of course disappeared from contemporary standards.

But perhaps the clearest effect is the one we have referred to as the Northern Subject Rule, instantiated in table 18.7 as the factor of Subject Type/Adjacency. With only one exception, all the varieties, whether of African or British origin, tend to avoid verbal -*s* after adjacent personal pronominal subjects, and to favor it with longer subjects, exactly as described by Murray in 1873. This gives rise to utterances like those in (23).

(23)   a.   Oh, *I liveø* my life. I and Emma, and Aunt Bridgie all- *we all lives* our life. (NRP/014/323)
       b.   That's why *you knowø*, *they celebrateø* that day. Colored folks *celebrates* that day. (ESR/013/201)

   c.   *You goø* off for the day, and *gives* 'em fish and chips on the way home.
        (DVN/6/386)

   To summarize, despite the difficulty in reconstructing the conditioning of a
variable process which has since gone to completion in most varieties of
English, these results suggest that the variant forms of the simple present tense,
as well as the constraints on their occurrence, are the reflexes of an older English
model. This is evidenced by the trajectory of verbal -*s* throughout the English
grammatical tradition, as well as the behavior of a peripheral British variety
in which -*s* remains productive. Detailed cross-variety comparison showed that
on the core grammatical measures, the constraint hierarchy underlying the
selection of -*s* in Devon paralleled that of Early AAE. These facts suggest that
verbal -*s* marking in Early AAE reflects the variability characteristic of the English
language transported to the American colonies.

18.9   Discussion

The research reported here has combined the variationist approach to language
variation and change with the reconstructive power of the Comparative
Method, and used them to triangulate from several peripheral sister varieties.
This provides an ideal opportunity to reconstruct the parent. We first compared
the diaspora varieties among themselves and found striking parallels, bolster-
ing the inference of a shared common ancestor. To ascertain the identity of that
ancestor, we had recourse to a series of external controls. We compared the
diaspora varieties with a benchmark variety of African American English,
acquired some two to three generations later. In view of the sociolinguistic and
geographic disparities between residents of the diaspora settlements on the one
hand, and the southern blacks represented in the *Ex-slave Recordings* corpus
on the other, the parallels we uncovered in both rate and conditioning of
variability are little short of remarkable. But because innovations are often
motivated through adstratal features in areal diffusion, we also examined the
respective adstrates. In the Samaná context we established that the majority
language, Spanish, had contributed little to local English. We also compared
African- and British-origin vernaculars wherever shared variant forms permitted.
NSVE was in fact found to display many parallels with the African Nova Scotian
variety spoken in the adjacent Guysborough Village, but these are also present
in the geographically remote settlements of North Preston, Samaná, and
the southern United States. Further comparison shows that Devon English,
a peripheral British variety, shares with Early AAE virtually all details of
nonstandard present-tense usage. Such findings are inexplicable under the
explanation of areal diffusion; they are best understood as common retentions
typical of peripheral dialect areas.
   The specific comparisons effected in this research also comply with core notions
in the reconstruction of ancestral forms. Since morphosyntactic criteria are

particularly relevant to the establishment of continuity between an ancestor and a later stage (Meillet 1921: 39), as is the focus on "irregular" (here, non-standard) forms, we examined features related to the expression of tense and aspect, a core area of the grammar. Retentions of irregular morphosyntactic forms are more likely to represent historical residue than innovations introduced in the process of language change (Baldi 1990; Campbell-Kibler 1998). The correspondences we have established rest not on coincidental likenesses of form but on highly structured similarities in constraint hierarchies. Thus the conclusion that the diaspora varieties represent lineal descendants of a shared earlier stage is based on detailed and systematic cross-variety comparison of their variable linguistic behavior, coupled with the principle that a systematic pattern of correspondences between two or more independently evolving varieties is unlikely to have resulted from coincidental innovations. Again, the most credible explanation is that these are shared retentions from a common ancestor.

The conclusion that that ancestor was Colonial English, and conjectures about its likely constitution, were drawn from triangulating Early AAE structures with those of British-origin varieties which developed in similar circumstances of sociolinguistic peripherality. These were bolstered by the discovery of a centuries-old tradition of attestation, throughout the history of English, of the variants now deemed nonstandard. Results show that it is the peripherality of the speech community that best explains the variable patterns, since they recur in all of them regardless of speaker race or ethnicity. This, coupled with the many independent findings linking specific constraint hierarchies with patterns extant throughout the development of English, is proof that the differences between the peripheral varieties and contemporary Standard English are related more to the lack of participation of the former in current mainstream developments than to descent from an underlying creole grammar.

That the British-origin varieties are just as distinct from contemporary Standard English as Early AAE can be attributed to the retention, by *all* the sociolinguistically peripheral varieties (African- and British-origin), of reflexes which have since disappeared. Verbal *-s* is now localized to 3rd person sing. contexts, *-ed* has become the only productive affix for past-tense regular verbs, and the number of prescriptively accepted strong pasts has decreased markedly. The question of how and why contemporary *Standard* English was selected as a benchmark against which to compare African American English merits a research program of its own. But once older, regional, and nonstandard varieties of English are factored into the comparison, the similarities among them are revealed to be numerous and non-trivial. The English history of these variables has not figured in previous treatments, which have tended to opt for a resolutely synchronic approach. The synchronic focus has served to highlight the differences between AAVE and mainstream English. These, coupled with the disappearance of many of the key forms, have led linguists down the garden path of seeking and elaborating complicated external explanations for their development, in an (otherwise laudable) attempt to legitimate features

they had previously claimed were incompletely or incorrectly acquired. The evidence presented here suggests that many of the features today considered nonstandard were not *created*, as would be expected if they had resulted from prior creolization or incomplete acquisition. On the contrary, they were retained from an older stage of English. The results of this research rightly legitimate Early AAE as a conservative rather than an incorrect variety of English – one whose core grammatical differences appear to reside largely in its resistance to ongoing mainstream change.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES

1   Codes in parentheses identify (1) the corpus: Samaná English (SE), Ex-slave Recordings (ESR), North Preston, Nova Scotia (NPR), Guysborough Enclave, NS (GYE), Guysborough Village, NS (GYV), and Devon, UK (DVN); (2) the speaker; and (3) the location of the example on recording, transcript or data file. All corpora are housed at the University of Ottawa Sociolinguistics Laboratory. Examples are reproduced verbatim from speaker utterances. Hyphens represent false starts, [inc] refers to incomprehensible material.
2   The verb *eat*, whose stem form predominated in past temporal reference contexts until the late nineteenth century, rarely occurred in our Early AAE data.

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