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There's no tense like the present: Verbal -s inflection in early Black English

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the understanding of the origin and function of verbal -s marking in the Black English grammar by systematically examining the behaviour of this affix in two corpora on early Black English. To ascertain whether the variation observed in (early and modern Black English) -s usage has a precedent in the history of the language, or is rather an intrusion from another system, we focus particularly on the linguistic and social contexts of its occurrence, within a historical and comparative perspective. Our results show that both third person singular and nonconcord -s are subject to regular, parallel environmental conditioning. The finding that both *insertion* and *deletion* are conditioned by the same factors suggests that verbal -s marking is a unitary process, involving both concord and nonconcord contexts. Moreover, the (few) variable constraints on verbal -s usage reported throughout the history of the English language remain operative in early Black English. These results, taken in conjunction with indications that -s marking across the verbal paradigm was a prestige marker in the dialect at some earlier point in time, lead us to hypothesize that the contemporary pattern might be a synchronic reflex of the constraint ranking on -s usage in the varieties of English that provided the linguistic model for the slaves. Many of the conditioning effects we report would have been subsequently overridden by the grammaticalization of -s as the Standard English agreement marker. We conclude that present-tense marking via verbal -s formed an integral part of the early Black English grammar.

1.0. INTRODUCTION

The verbal paradigm has frequently been used in cross-linguistic comparison to explore underlying grammatical relationships between dialects. Vernacular Black English (VBE) has perhaps received the most attention in this regard, particularly as part of an ongoing program to establish whether its synchronic form has developed from a prior creole or from Standard American English (SAE).

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Thus in two of the most widely studied areas of the verb system, past-tense expression and copula usage, investigators have shown, through comparison with varieties of White English (and in some cases English-based creoles), that the underlying systems of VBE and SAE are similar in featuring the (same) copula and past-tense markers, though some of their surface manifestations are variably removed from VBE by the application of phonological and grammatical rules that can themselves be viewed as extensions of those operative in SAE (Baugh, 1980; Fasold, 1971, 1972; Labov, 1969, 1972; Labov, Cohen, Robins, & Lewis, 1968; Pfaff, 1971; Poplack & Sankoff, 1987; Tagliamonte & Poplack, 1988; Wolfram, 1969, 1974). The extent to which the results of these independent studies replicated each other was striking; they were in large part responsible for Labov's observation (1982: 178-79) that "by 1979, the field . . . had reached a consensus about the nature and origin of Black English."

In the area of verbal concord, however, very different and controversial interpretations obtain. In Standard English, the present tense is not inflected morphologically, except on verbs with third person singular subjects. These categorically receive the affix *-s*, traditionally referred to as the verbal agreement or number concord marker. Earlier studies of VBE *-s* inflection, including several of those just cited, found that in contrast to Standard English, *-s* occurred variably not only on third singular verbs, but on verbs of other persons as well. Though the category of present tense was not explicitly rejected as part of the VBE grammar, it was considered not to require overt inflectional marking in the dialect (e.g., Fasold 1972:122). Cases of third person singular (3rd p. sg.) *-s* deletion could thus be analyzed as regularization of a Standard English present-tense paradigm containing a redundant marker. However, the sporadic appearance of *-s* elsewhere raised the question of the function of this vagrant morpheme. As will be detailed later, two decades of research have not led to a consensus on the nature, let alone existence, of such a function, nor of its origin as an incompletely acquired Standard English present-tense marker or as a remnant from an earlier plantation creole.

Most speculations on the origin of the form have been based on inferences from synchronic variation, though there have been some studies of historical texts (Brewer, 1986; Pitts, 1981, 1986; Schneider, 1983). In this article, we propose to contribute to the understanding of this phenomenon by systematically examining the behaviour of verbal *-s* in two data sets on early Black English as represented by tape-recorded interviews with (a) English-speaking residents of the peninsula of Samaná (Dominican Republic) and (b) the Ex-Slave Recordings housed in the Library of Congress. In so doing, we will be led to draw comparisons where possible with other dialects of Black and White English (both British and American) that show parallel variability, as well as with known facts from the history of the language. Though our early Black English data in (1) and (2) show the same apparently irregular distribution of *-s* attested in previous studies of contemporary VBE,

featuring variable occurrence of verbal *-s* with subjects of all persons and numbers (1)¹ even in the speech of the same individual, as well as on non-finite verbs and invariant *be* (2), our analyses suggest that its conditioning is more consistent with what (little) is known about the behaviour of this marker in (early and modern) White English than with English-based creoles or contemporary VBE. This will corroborate our earlier independent findings on the grammars of Samaná English (Poplack & Sankoff, 1987; Tagliamonte & Poplack, 1988).

(1) SINGULAR:

- 1st p. When I *pray*, I *pray* for everybody who's in danger. (03/1276)²
I *prays* for the people. (03/1247)
I *says* "why?" "Oh," he says, "it makes too much noise."
I *say*, "well does the Bible say make a noise over Jesus?" (ESR/FH/449-450)
- 2nd p. You *know* her, yes. (14/175)
You *knows* one. (14/269)
- 3rd p. And sometimes she *go* in the evening and *come* up in the morning. (05/232)
She *goes* to town every morning and *comes* up in the evening. (05/231)

PLURAL:

- 1st p. We *parch* it. (21/563)
We *parches* the coffee. (21/560)
They said, "we *wants* to raise you as an intelligent nigger.
We *wants* you to have good friends like we have got." (ESR/JM/7-9)³
We *celebrate* that day. (ESR/LS/218)
- 3rd p. They *write* me still. (11/1148)
But still it's me they *writes*. (11/1149)
They treating me right now that *knows* me, they treating me nice. (ESR/AG/27-8)
And they all treating me mighty nice, all the white folks that *know* me, they treats me nice. (ESR/AG/32-4)

(2) NONFINITE:

- You'll put the rice on the fire and *cooks* it. (8/354)
I don't hardly *walks* out. I don't hardly *walks* out nowhere. (17/198)
'Cause I gotta *makes*, you know, exercise. (3/708)
The church *bes* crammed down with people. (19/215)

2.0 PREVIOUS ANALYSES OF BLACK ENGLISH *-S*

Several competing analyses have been proposed for the behaviour of verbal *-s*. In what follows, we briefly recapitulate some of the arguments.

2.1. *Hypercorrection*

Early research suggests that verbal *-s* has no grammatical function in VBE and is inserted irregularly in “odd, unpredictable and idiosyncratic positions” (Labov et al., 1968:165), that is, in persons other than third, as well as in the nonfinite contexts listed in (2). Three types of evidence have been adduced in favour of this characterization (Fasold, 1972; Labov et al., 1968; Wolfram, 1969):

1. the uninflected verb was found to be the predominant form in the third singular in VBE, undergoing deletion at far greater rates than monomorphemic or plural *-s* (Labov et al., 1968:164),⁴
2. *-s* variability was not generally affected by style shifting (Labov et al., 1968:164), especially among younger speakers,⁵ and, most important,
3. *-s* deletion was not subject to the regular phonological conditioning found in studies of deletion of other final consonants.⁶

“Hyper-*s*”⁷ usage was described by Bickerton (1975:134) in relation to English-based creoles as “tacking on a morpheme which [a speaker] knows is characteristic of the standard language but which he has not yet learnt to use correctly.” Consistent with this interpretation, nonconcord *-s* in VBE has been shown to evidence considerable variability across individuals, though apparently affected by extralinguistic factors: It is least characteristic of educated, formal, middle-class adult speech. Its “irregular and unsystematic character” (Labov et al., 1968:167) suggests that the behaviour of 3rd p. sg. *-s* does not represent an extension of the regular rules of Standard English, as is the case of the copula and the past-tense morpheme, but is the result of external norms and overt social pressures. Myhill and Harris (1986:31) propose that *-s* may have been reinterpreted as a purely stylistic or accommodative device for rendering one’s speech more suitable for interaction with speakers of Standard English.

Moreover, Fasold’s (1972) analyses of possible nonphonological constraints on 3rd p. sg. *-s* absence, such as collective versus noncollective subject, showed no significant effect. The only constraint to emerge was one promoting deletion on the second member of a conjoined verb phrase (see also Myhill & Harris, 1986:28), which Fasold attributes to the “rapid onset of a fatigue factor” (1972:130). These facts, taken together, do not support a characterization of *-s* (whether concord or nonconcord) as an integral part of the vernacular grammar.

2.2. *Aspectual marker*

A second interpretation is that verbal *-s* is neither random in use nor the result of “unstable acquisition” of SAE present-tense marking, but an aspectual feature that marks durative (Brewer, 1986; Jeremiah, 1977, Pitts, 1981) or habitual (Pitts, 1986; Roberts, 1976) aspect. These researchers accept the

conclusion that VBE has no present-tense marker but eschew the assumption (Fasold, 1972; Labov et al., 1968; Wolfram, 1969) that *-s* is a hypercorrect intrusion from SAE. VBE *-s* is rather an “adoption of a Standard English form without the Standard English grammatical component” (Pitts, 1981: 304).

Bickerton’s brief (1975) examination of number concord in Guyanese Creole reveals the same sporadic distribution of third singular *-s* noted in the early studies of VBE. He suggests that some puzzling facts about nonconcord *-s* in that dialect might be clarified by taking into account the creole aspectual category [–punctual]. According to him, contemporary variation in *-s* usage is one manifestation of a developmental phase in the process of decreolization: As *doz* reduces to *-s* or *-z* in rapid speech, “the *-s* or *-z* remains in category but is simply transferred from pre- to postverbal position.” This *-s* would represent a hypercorrected version of *doz*, which occurs in environments that are [–punctual] (1975:136). Building on Bickerton’s suggestion, Pitts (1981:307) analyzes *-s* as a relexification of habitual *de* found in Gullah (and presumably in an American plantation creole), brought about by means of a “transformation [in which] contracted *-s* from *is* replaces the verbal suffix of progression *-ing*, and the durative aspect is maintained.”

Although these analyses differ somewhat in their derivation of the form, they generally concur that the function of *-s* is analogous to that of a creole-like preverbal aspectual marker that may have moved to postverbal position under influence from Standard English.⁸ Of course, in the process of decreolization, dialect mixture of creole and SAE categories may result. Indeed, Pitts argues for two *-s* in VBE, a tense marker and an aspect marker (1986:76), encoded as a single surface form with different meanings and functions within the same system.⁹

2.3. *Verbal agreement marker*

For at least some Black speakers, verbal *-s* marks agreement with 3rd p. sg. subjects in favourable social contexts (and presumably, preferentially in certain linguistic environments as well, though these remain unspecified). This is implicit in Wolfram’s and Fasold’s figures for Black middle-class adults (who arguably are no longer vernacular speakers), but is also discernable, though weakly, even in the “deep vernacular” speech studied by Myhill and Harris (1986:31). Exploitation of *-s* in this function would depend on a speaker’s knowledge of the (SAE) system and her desire to accommodate to it.

2.4. *Synchronic dialectal remnant*

Schneider (1983) suggests that verbal *-s* is neither a postcreole importation from Standard English in the third person, nor a case of hypercorrection in other persons, but simply a continuation of the tendency prevalent through-

out the history of English to mark (or fail to mark) *-s* across the verbal paradigm (see also Feagin, 1979:196; McDavid, 1969, 1977; McDavid & Davis, 1972; and Section 4.0).

Contra the creole-origin position, Schneider reasons (1983:104) that if the inflectional system of contemporary VBE derived from an earlier suffixless system, with occurrences of *-s* due to hypercorrection or convergence with SAE during the process of decreolization, *-s* should occur infrequently, if at all, in earlier Black speech. His examination of the use of inflected and uninflected verbs in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Ex-Slave Narratives (Federal Writers Project, 1941) reveals exactly the opposite to be the case: *-S* appears with 72% of the 3rd p. sg. subjects, leading him to reject hypercorrection as an appropriate description of the phenomenon. However, he found *-s* marking to occur more than half the time in all other persons (with the exception of 2nd p. sg.) as well. Schneider suggests that the mixture of settlers from different dialect areas (specifically, Northern Britain, where the present-tense verbal paradigm has been characterized as having *-s* throughout, and Southern Britain, where \emptyset is said to prevail) resulted in a mixed linguistic concord (or nonconcord) system characterized by variable but frequent use of *-s* (1983:104). One could thus expect regional differences in early Black English according to the origin of the majority of the settlers in a particular area, and in fact, Schneider's breakdown of the data by region shows high *-s* rates in all grammatical persons in the south Atlantic states, whereas in states situated to the west of the Mississippi (Tennessee, Missouri, Arkansas, Texas), there is a tendency to approximate SAE, with \emptyset predominating in all persons but 3rd p. sg. (1983:104–105; this tendency is not mentioned, but may also be observed, in the data presented in Brewer, 1986).

Schneider suggests two stages in the development of the VBE *-s* inflection (106–107): In the first stage, Black American slaves acquired the nonstandard inflectional system of their white linguistic models (itself a blend of two competing British English dialect systems), characterized by variable but predominant use of *-s* in all persons. At a later stage, the growing influence of standardization led to a progressive decline of *-s*, but this proceeded differentially according to region. This tendency would have affected not only persons where \emptyset inflection is grammatical in the standard language, but *also* 3rd p. sg., by means of a hypercorrective (regularizing) movement toward less *-s* usage. This might also account for contemporary patterns of VBE verbal inflection.

2.5. *Narrative present marker*

Recent quantitative work on a Philadelphia dialect of VBE (Myhill & Harris, 1986) offers yet another interpretation of the function of verbal *-s*. Observing that although VBE speakers do not have a subject–verb agreement rule,¹⁰ they note that widespread reports of the sporadic occurrence of *-s* nonetheless indicate general awareness of its existence. Thus, the dialect would

contain a morpheme that is clearly verbal, yet that lacks a transparent grammatical role. This situation allows for the possibility of *-s* being assigned some function. In a quantitative study of the distribution of verbal *-s* in narrative and other discourse of five VBE speakers, Myhill and Harris (1986:27) found it to be associated with narrative clauses, regardless of person and number of the subject, and virtually absent from present-reference contexts. They conclude that a formerly grammatically empty inflection has been reinterpreted as a marker of Historical Present in narrative and observe that although inflection on non-3rd p. sg. subjects has been reported for other English dialects, it has never been attested specifically as a marker of narrative clauses (30). Thus, they view this usage as an innovation, made possible by the existence of an inflection with no clear grammatical function. Indeed, Labov (1985) points to the reinterpretation of *-s* as a grammatical device as the “single strongest piece of evidence” that VBE is diverging from SAE.

3.0 CONFLICTING ANALYSES

The discussion in Section 2.0 gives some indication of the extent of the controversy concerning the precise status of verbal *-s* in VBE. The central question—that of its origin and function in the grammar—is given four different answers:

1. *-S* does not have a grammatical function in the dialect. Its occurrence is irregular and is not governed by internal grammatical constraints, but rather by the exterior norms and overt social pressures exerted by SAE. It is a case of hypercorrection (Fasold, 1972; Labov et al., 1968; Wolfram, 1969).
2. At an earlier stage (and possibly now), *-s* had the grammatical function of marking habitual or durative aspect. Its occurrence is governed by an underlying creole grammar that is distinct from SAE (Bickerton, 1975; Pitts, 1981, 1986; Roberts, 1976; also Brewer, 1986).
3. At an earlier stage (and possibly now), *-s* had the grammatical function of marking present tense. Its occurrence was variable but not irregular and stemmed from the mixture of contrasting marking patterns in the English dialects to which the early slaves were exposed (Schneider, 1983).
4. In contemporary VBE, *-s* has the function of marking Narrative Present regardless of person and number of the subject. Its occurrence is variable but not irregular and is a recent innovation (Myhill & Harris, 1986).

It might be supposed that with the benefit of careful examination of these analyses and of the linguistic evidence adduced in their favour (to which we have alluded only cursorily thus far; see the later discussion), it should be a simple matter to choose among them. Nothing could be farther from the case. One reason is that the approaches, data sets, and methodologies used by the authors differ considerably, often making it impossible to draw con-

TABLE 1. *-s usage by person in the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives (%)*

		Singular			Plural	
		1st	2nd	3rd	1st	3rd
South Carolina	Schneider (1983)	54.4	45.0	70.5	—	70.2
	Brewer (1986)	65.0	21.9	4.0	1.6	7.3
Texas	Schneider (1983)	47.3	25.0	75.0	—	50.0
	Brewer (1986)	50.8	∅	19.9	15.0	14.3

Source: Schneider (1983:105) and Brewer (1986:136).

clusions. Indeed, to our knowledge, no single aspect of linguistic variation has been so widely studied with so little progress toward reaching a consensus. Baugh (1986) has recently devoted an entire paper to precisely this point. By way of illustration, it will be instructive to reexamine in more detail some of the findings just cited.

The most striking example of lack of comparability appears in two quantitative analyses of the same data base, the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives (Brewer, 1986; Schneider, 1983). Schneider reports that the *-s* suffix is not only the quantitatively dominant form in these data, but that of all persons, it is used most frequently with 3rd p. sg. at a rate of 72% (p. 103). Brewer, on the other hand, finds that the occurrence of *-s* with 1st p. subjects is the rule, whereas 3rd p. receives only 12% marking.¹¹ Table 1 reproduces the quantitative data on which these conclusions are based.

How can this discrepancy be explained? Schneider calculated the proportion of *-s* out of all inflected *and* uninflected verbs in each person, whereas Brewer analyzed only what percentage of the inflected verbs (i.e., *-s* presence) was associated with each person. The figures are thus not comparable: Only the former provide us with information on the *propensity* of a grammatical person to receive marking.¹²

Brewer further reports that *-s* functions in the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives as a durative marker. This emerges from examining the cooccurrence of *-s* with temporal adverbs: Of 153 instances of *-s* in the immediate environment of a temporal adverb, 67% of those adverbs were continuous or durative. As this analysis again neglects to take account of the distribution of uninflected verbs, the results are difficult to interpret. That more instances of *-s* appeared in durative contexts may simply reflect the fact that such contexts themselves occur more frequently than others. Indeed, consideration of 200 Standard English present-tense sentences¹³ (which evidence no variation in verbal concord) reveals that durative/continuous contexts make up nearly half the environments in which present tense is found (Table 2). Similarly, when we reanalyze our own data on early Black English according to Brewer's method (i.e., by charting the distribution of *-s* across aspectual contexts),

TABLE 2. *Distribution of aspectual contexts in which Standard English present tense is used*

Aspect	%	<i>N</i>
Durative/Continuous	46.5	93
Habitual/Iterative	28.0	56
Punctual	20.5	41

TABLE 3. *Distribution of -s (proportion of -s out of all -s) in various aspectual contexts in early Black English*

Aspect	Samaná		Ex-Slave Recordings	
	% [-s]	<i>N</i>	% [-s]	<i>N</i>
Durative/Continuous	43.5	324	61.9	26
Habitual/Iterative	40.8	304	16.7	7
Punctual	15.6	116	21.4	9

we also find the misleading result that more *-s* occur in durative environments (Table 3). However, as we show in Section 7.3.4, when both *-s and* \emptyset usage are treated, we find no particular propensity in either data set for *-s* to mark durative aspect.

Problems arising from selective analysis of the data may be illustrated graphically by yet another proposal for the aspectual function of *-s* (Pitts, 1986). Though he offers no quantitative data in support, Pitts contends that *-s* is a habitual marker, not only in the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives, but also in contemporary VBE. The latter conclusion emerges from his reexamination of a segment of Labov et al.'s (1968) data, reproduced here for convenience.

- Vernon: But those police don't really wanta break it up; they just *wants* their share. That cop *hang* out in our hall cause it's warm, but that's how he in on the numbers.
- Reggie: When things *gets* bad, the lieutenant *get* wind of something: he *get* mad and *say*, "There's gonna be no more numbers." Then they *starts* bringin' peoples in. They don't really wanta bring you in; they *throws* you out by nine in the morning.
- Richard: My mother says [sic] you'd think colored cops [would] be nicer than the white cops, but they just about the same. But we *needs* police. They *protects* you from the big kids that *throw* the rocks, *make* your eye go out.
- Vernon: No one person owns [sic] the numbers. And when you win, they *comes* on your street and *tells* you. (from Pitts, 1986:79)

Pitts claims that *-s* usage in these data illustrates an association between the marker and verbs denoting habitual action (italicized in Pitts, 1986). This is in fact basically true (two of the *-s* marked contexts are actually durative: *wants*, *needs*), but a review of the *uninflected* verbs in the same passage (which we indicate in boldface) reveals that these too denote habitual (or iterative) aspect!¹⁴

Pitts (1986:76) further suggests that *-s* incorporates a dual function—that of tense marker and that of aspect marker, labelled “tense-*z*” and “aspectual-*z*,” respectively (see also Roberts, 1976). Since, as already mentioned, these two functions are encoded in the same surface form, the question arises as to how they can be distinguished. Pitts suggests that *-s* is a tense marker when it (a) occurs in a series with other past-tense verbs or (b) is immediately preceded by a past-tense adverbial construction, and when its temporal reference is not anterior to that of a preceding verb. *-s* is an aspect marker when it occurs with (a) stative verbs not collocated with a punctual adverb, and (b) event or process verbs used in habitual contexts.

Without addressing the circularity of this definition, note that the “tense-*z*” alluded to by Pitts appears to encompass past temporal reference only; 3rd p. sg. *-s* is, of course, also used in Standard English to mark present temporal reference, of which no mention is made.¹⁵ Moreover, “since the present tense is essentially used to describe, rather than to narrate, it is essentially imperfective, either continuous or habitual” (Comrie, 1976:66). Indeed, in many languages, including English, habitual aspectual meaning is *encoded* in the present tense. It therefore seems unlikely that the figures given by Pitts for “aspectual-*z*” and “tense-*z*” in the Ex-Slave Narratives (1986:77) in fact correspond to mutually exclusive usages, as they probably reflect the distinction between Historical Present and other present contexts.

Thus, previous contentions to the effect that the function of *-s* is that of an aspectual marker cannot be assessed from the available data.

4.0. HISTORICAL PRECURSORS OF *-s* VARIABILITY

Though contemporary prescriptive usage requires strict subject–verb agreement in the present indicative, the historical record shows that concord was not always categorical.

Modern English *-s* is generally considered a descendant of Old English *-þ* which marked present indicative in 3rd p. sg. and all persons in the plural (e.g., Jespersen, 1909/1949:15).¹⁶ One of the chief characteristics of the transition between Old English and Middle English verbal forms is the gradual loss of many of the older verbal endings. By the Middle English period, inflection in the present indicative was basically uniform across the paradigm, though the choice of marker varied across dialects. This can be observed in the verbal paradigm for Middle English *hēre(n)* ‘to hear’, reproduced in Table 4.

TABLE 4. *Regional distribution of verbal inflections in Middle English*

	North	Midlands	South
<i>Singular</i>			
1st p.	hēr(e)(s) ^a	hēre	hēre
2nd p.	hēres	hēres(t)	hēr(e)st
3rd p.	hēres	hēres, hērep	hērep
<i>Plural</i>	hēres	hēres, hēre(n)	hērep

^aThe (s) has been added to the table by us to reflect Mossé’s observation in a footnote to his table that “in the Northern dialect the *-s* ending is gradually extended to the 1st p. sg. of the present indicative” (79); see also Curme (1977:53), Wakelin (1977:119), and Wright (1905:175–76).

Source: Mossé (1952:78).

Use of verbal *-s* for all persons and numbers was apparently a dialectal feature of Northern English (e.g., Jespersen, 1909/1949:16; Strang, 1970:146; Wright, 1905:175–76). It was here, according to Curme (1977:52), that the original 2nd p. sg. verbal ending *-s* spread first to 2nd p. pl., then to other persons of the plural, and finally to 3rd p. sg., so that in the Old English period, *-s* was (variably) used in the North for all persons and numbers but 1st sg. By Middle English, it appeared throughout the paradigm. At this time it spread geographically to the Midlands, where it coexisted with *-þ* in 3rd p. sg. and occurred variably in the plural. Later, the *-s* inflection became established in London and in the South more generally, first affecting only the spoken language, and subsequently penetrating written styles. Literary use of *-s* to represent popular or informal speech is amply attested. Shakespeare employed it in colloquial prose, while *-þ* was used categorically in the more serious style required for Bible translations (Curme, 1977:53). By the early 17th century, *-s* gradually became established in all styles of literary language, but only in the 3rd p. sg.,¹⁷ rather than throughout the paradigm, as in Northern English. This development, undoubtedly responsible for the contemporary form of the Standard English indicative present-tense paradigm, was nonetheless preceded by considerable variation in written texts (cf. Curme, 1977; Holmqvist, 1922), generally agreed to have derived from parallel variation in the spoken language.

Though historians are not in total agreement either on the exact origin of verbal *-s* (whether it arose through sound change from *-þ* [v. Holmqvist, 1922:2] or through analogical extension [ibid., 3; Wakelin, 1977:119; Wardale, 1937:101]), or on the reasons for its replacement of *-þ* (because it increased the number of rhymes available for poetry [Jespersen, 1909/1949:16], or because it was more easily articulated [ibid., 17]), there is general consensus on a number of points.

1. Alternation among inflections (including *-s*, *-p*, and \emptyset) of the present indicative has been a long-standing, well-documented feature of the language since the Old English period (Brunner, 1963:70; Curme, 1977:53; Holmqvist, 1922:15; Jespersen, 1909/1949:16; Wakelin, 1977:119).
2. The variation originated in colloquial speech and subsequently passed into the written language (Curme, 1977:53; Holmqvist, 1922:159; Jespersen, 1909/1949:17–18; Wyld, 1927:256).
3. Competing marking patterns in the indicative present-tense paradigm were regional variants. In fact, the verbal *-s* inflection has been considered one of the safest criteria in determining the dialectal origin of a Middle English text (Barber, 1976:242; Curme, 1977:53; Holmqvist, 1922:72; Jespersen, 1909/1949:76–79; Wakelin, 1977:119; Wardale, 1937:102).
4. Until at least the early 17th century, *-s* was apparently a marker of popular, colloquial, or dialectal speech (Barber, 1976:239; Curme, 1977:53; Holmqvist, 1922:185; Jespersen, 1909/1949:19; Strang, 1970:146).

In view of such pervasive variability, apparent even from the historical record, it is most likely that at least some aspects of the linguistic and/or social environments exerted a regular influence on *-s* occurrence. Unambiguous reconstruction of these factors and their respective weights is far beyond the scope of this article; fortunately, there do exist reports of at least two syntactic conditioning factors.

One widely attested constraint involves the type of subject of the verb. From the Middle English period on, there has been a tendency throughout England for verbs to retain inflection when accompanied by a full NP subject, whereas verbs with pronominal subjects, especially when postposed, have tended to remain uninflected (e.g., Brunner 1963:70–71). This pattern has spread to all persons in many modern British dialects (Jespersen, 1909/1949:15; Wakelin, 1977:119; Wright, 1905:176).

Another involves the definiteness of the subject. In Modern Standard English, the inflected form of the verb is prescribed after indefinite pronominal subjects (e.g., *everybody*, *nobody*, *anyone*, etc.); in older English, the uninflected form was common in these contexts, as they were often interpreted as plurals (Curme, 1977:51–52; Visser, 1970:74); this tendency has also persisted in popular modern speech (Kennedy, 1970:497).

5.0. *-s* VARIABILITY IN MODERN ENGLISH

The vigorous variation in *-s* usage throughout the history of English coupled with the dearth of reports of parallel phenomena in modern White usage would suggest that the variability has by now resolved itself in contemporary White English in favour of the standard prescriptive variant: *-s* in 3rd p. sg. only. However, Hughes and Trudgill (1979:16–17) observe that in a number of nonstandard British (particularly East Anglian) dialects, the present-tense verbal paradigm is completely regular as a result of the absence of 3rd p. sg.

TABLE 5. % of 3rd p. sg. *-s* agreement in Norwich

Social Class	%
Upper-middle class	100
Lower-middle class	71
Upper-working class	25
Middle-working class	19
Lower-working class	3

Source: Hughes & Trudgill (1979:204).

-s. In the north of Britain, as well as in the southwest and South Wales, the regularization is of the opposite kind, with *-s* occurring in all verbal persons. Indeed, Trudgill (1974:61) describes 3rd p. sg. *-s* agreement as a linguistic variable involved in very marked social as well as stylistic variation. Table 5 reproduces his proportions of 3rd p. sg. *-s* agreement in Norwich.

The lower-working-class informants in his study show almost categorical lack of subject–verb concord, with very little style-shifting. In fact, the overall norm for the working class is less than 30% concord. It is interesting to note, however, that even middle-class speakers fail to observe concord in casual speech nearly a third of the time.¹⁸ In Reading, on the other hand, as in many other southwestern varieties of British English, Cheshire (1982) found categorical use of *-s* in 3rd p. sg., but it also occurred more than half of the time in other verbal persons in the speech of the young peer groups she studied (32). Strikingly enough, even the formal speech of the elderly speakers in her sample showed nonconcord *-s* usage 30% of the time.

There have been several anecdotal reports of both lack of subject–verb concord and nonconcord *-s* in White American dialects (McDavid, 1969; McDavid & Davis, 1972) as well as some quantitative studies (Feagin, 1979; Sommer, 1986; Wolfram, 1971). The phenomenon has thus far only been reported in the southern United States, which has been considered to be least prone, until recently, to standardizing influences (McDavid, 1969; Schneider, 1983). Not surprisingly, those studies that have investigated linguistic conditioning of *-s* usage find remnants of the effects cited in the historical record. For example, though Feagin (1979:190) finds that 3rd p. pl. pronominal subjects in Anniston (Alabama) English always receive the standard \emptyset mark, nonagreement (i.e., nonstandard *-s* usage) reaches 58.4% among rural informants when the subject is a full noun phrase. Hackenberg (1972, cited in Feagin, 1979) found up to 69% nonagreement in this context in West Virginia.

It is thus apparent that the accumulated body of research has not furnished a consensus on the origins, status, or function(s) of verbal *-s* in Vernacular Black English. In the remainder of this article, we explore empirically the behaviour of this variable, paying particular attention to the linguistic

and social contexts of its occurrence, within a historical and comparative perspective. This will enable us to determine whether the variation observed in early and modern Black English -s usage has a precedent in the history of the language or is rather an intrusion from another system.

6.0 DATA AND METHODS

The data on which this report is based were extracted from two data sets. The first is a corpus of tape-recorded interviews with 21 native English-speaking descendants of American ex-slaves residing in Samaná. We consider the dialect of these informants, aged 71–103 in 1982, to derive from a variety of English spoken by American Blacks in the early 1820s.¹⁹ The second data set consists of eleven recordings of former slaves born between 1844 and 1861 (see Bailey, Maynor, & Cukor-Avila, in press), who presumably acquired their language some four or five decades after the ancestors of the Samaná informants.

From the tape-recorded interviews we extracted each verbal construction with the potential for variable -s or -∅ marking, totalling 2,485 cases from the Samaná data base and 374 from the Ex-Slave Recordings.²⁰ Though we attempt to provide explicit comparisons between the data sets where possible, it should be borne in mind that these may be vitiated by the paucity of data in the Ex-Slave Recordings.²¹

6.1. Circumscribing the variable context

In order to examine the behaviour of verbal -s, it was first necessary to delimit its context of occurrence. Observing that verbal -s alternates with zero among all speakers in all persons²² (see (1)), we thus extracted from both corpora every construction containing what we determined to be a present-tense verb with the potential for inflection.

6.1.1. Neutralization contexts. Although this has not been explicitly addressed in the literature on this subject, the task of circumscribing the variable context for -s presents special difficulties. In particular, an independent process of consonant cluster simplification renders the surface forms of regular (weak) present- and past-tense verbs indistinguishable, as in (3):

- (3) She *live*∅ (<[z] or [d]?) right up yonder. (05/224)
 So she *gain*∅ (<[z] or [d]?) half and I *gain*∅ (<[z] or [d]?) half. (07/866)

Inclusion of past-tense verbs with phonologically deleted markers as instances of uninflected present-tense forms will obviously skew the proportions of -s presence (cf. Myhill & Harris, 1986). We thus excluded from our data base all forms for which past reference could be inferred, whether from adverbial or other temporal disambiguating constructions, as in (4) and (5);

from a sequential overt past-tense inflection, as in (6); or from the larger context of discourse.²³

- (4) He remain∅ here *three years*. (10/940)
 He live∅ with mama thirty, thirty-two years. . . . (ESR/LS/339-40)
 (5) I *used to live* down there, and where I live∅ I had all that coffee planted. (3/407)
 (6) He *brought* me one and he remain∅ with one. (3/1076)

6.1.2. Exceptional distributions. In contrast to earlier studies of VBE that reported extensive use of verbal -s with nonfinite constructions (e.g., questions, imperatives, modal + verb, negatives, nonfinite and invariant *be*, etc.), we find these to be extremely rare or nonexistent in both the Samaná and Ex-Slave materials.²⁴ There have also been suggestions that lexical factors might exert an influence on -s usage (e.g., Fasold, 1972; Labov et al., 1968). In the Samaná data, all verbs seem to behave comparably with the exception of *got* and *say*, both of which received very little marking in concord and nonconcord positions.²⁵ As exclusion of the former from our calculations did not materially affect the results, it was retained in the analysis; *say*, on the other hand, was excluded (cf. note 37).

A number of constructions show no variability in -s usage (remaining categorically inflected or uninflected) and thus were excluded from further analysis. These include various frozen expressions (e.g., *you believe*, *I tell you*²⁶); verbs occurring in songs or sayings, which may have been learned by rote, as in (7); phonologically neutralized sequences, as in (8); and constructions with potential *have* or *would* deletion, as in (9) and (10).

- (7) Practice *makes* perfect. (ESR/163/34)
 (8) All these children *speak* Spanish. (07/2038)
 (9) Since that, the sugar had went up even to thirty cents . . . and it ∅ *come* back now to twenty. (02/891)
 (10) Any boat we met, if it was there, we ∅ *sail* it. (01/633)

We also excluded constructions containing verbs that are “inherently” ambiguous as to past or present reference (e.g., *put*, *set*, *beat*), as well as examples in which an unambiguous interpretation of temporal reference was in doubt. Although it is possible that there still remain some verbs that were not appropriately disambiguated by us, these would be few in number. Thus, the analyses that follow provide a clear picture of the use of -s in contexts that (at least in Standard English) permit or require the present tense.

6.2. Coding and analysis

Each present-tense verb retained in the data base was coded for a series of phonological, morphological, and syntactic factors that could have an effect on verbal -s expression. These included the underlying phonetic form of -s

([s, z, or əz]), the surrounding phonological environment, features of the noun phrase, features of the verb, and syntactic and discourse features. These factors were first analyzed individually and then simultaneously by means of GoldVarb (Rand & Sankoff, 1988), a logistic regression package for the Macintosh computer.

For the statistical analyses we adopt here, it is necessary to posit a relationship between variants that specifies the set of tokens assumed to have been eligible for rule application and the set of tokens assumed to have been transformed by the rule. The resulting configuration is often formalized in terms of certain underlying forms giving rise to weaker (or deleted) variants. This additional formalization is not necessary to estimate the effects of the different factors on variant usage, however. As there is no consensus for determining which variant of verbal *-s* is underlying—whether [∅] (which would imply that all occurrences of [s] are insertions) or [s] (implying that instances of [∅] are deletions)—we simply adopted the Standard English configuration as an operational tool. We distinguish 3rd p. sg. from all other contexts and consider, for the purposes of the analysis, -∅ marked instances of the former to be cases of deletion and *-s*-marked verbs in all other persons to be insertions. Note, however, that the analyses we present do not depend on the particular derivational sequence we have postulated²⁷ (see also Poplack, 1979:53ff.) and should not at this stage be interpreted as a theoretical claim for the underlying form of verbal *-s*.

7.0 RESULTS

7.1. Distribution of *-s* across the verbal paradigm

Table 6 depicts the distribution of verbal *-s* presence by grammatical person in early Black English. Whereas in the Detroit and Washington studies, verbal *-s* was generally absent from all forms (Fasold, 1972:133; Wolfram, 1969:138), sometimes occurring on 3rd p. sg. and sometimes on other persons,²⁸ the Samaná materials show *-s* to be *present* much of the time, particularly on 3rd p. sg., but also nonnegligibly on 3rd p. pl. and 1st p. sg. and pl. Note that although these rates appear high in relation to the VBE materials studied in urban American contexts, they are substantially lower (in all persons) than those reported by Schneider (1983:103, 105) for the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives. On the other hand, we observe considerably more *-s* usage in Samaná than in the Ex-Slave Recordings, where, despite rather sparse data, *-s* is nonetheless virtually confined to 3rd p. sg. subjects.²⁹ Though the association of *-s* with 3rd p. sg. in the Ex-Slave Recordings is consistent with the onset of “standardization” described by Schneider, the differences in rate are more likely due to other factors that we are not in a position to assess (such as interviewer or transcriber effect; see Baugh, 1986). At this point, we note only that in each of the data sets *-s* is most likely to occur with 3rd p. sg., where it is present over half the time.³⁰ Because of the problems in-

TABLE 6. *Distribution of verbal -s by grammatical person in the Samaná and Ex-Slave Recordings*

	Samaná		Ex-Slave Recordings	
	% [-s]	N	% [-s]	N
<i>Singular</i>				
1st	20	609	3	173
2nd	7	414	0	59
3rd	56	604	71	42
<i>Plural</i>				
1st	22	176	(29	7) ^a
2nd	(0	7)	(0	1)
3rd	31	675	5	92
Totals		2,485		374

^aParentheses indicate sparse data.

involved in assessing the relationship of different corpora to the vernacular, in ensuing sections we focus on the *conditioning* of *-s* usage according to a number of factors, rather than overall rates, in order to address the question of its function in the two data sets.

7.2. Phonological effects on *-s* usage

One of the most widely accepted views concerning verbal *-s* inflection in dialects of Black English is that its occurrence is not phonologically conditioned. This finding constitutes the crux of the argument that verbal *-s* is not part of the underlying grammar of VBE. The conclusion is based on a view of language in which a set of syntactic rules generates forms on which phonological rules may subsequently operate. Thus, if random hypercorrection were entirely responsible for the non-3rd p. sg. *-s* forms and 3rd p. sg. -∅ forms, there should be no way of differentiating the phonological environments containing the two. If, on the other hand, the deleted variants result from the application of phonological rules to syntactically generated *-s* and -∅, the distribution of these alternate forms may be expected to be influenced by the surrounding phonological environment.

7.2.1. Underlying phonetic form. Each token of verbal *-s* was coded for one of three phonetic manifestations whose occurrence is conditioned by the phonological features of the final segment of the base word: [s] occurs following nonstrident voiceless segments, [z] following nonstrident voiced segments and vowels, and [əz] following stridents. In studies of the past-tense morpheme, the phonetic shape of the suffix, with parallel variants [t, d, rd], was found to have a significant effect on the frequency of its deletion, the morpheme being deleted less when it was bisegmental. In the case of verbal

TABLE 7. *Relationship of underlying phonetic form to -s usage*

	/s/		/z/		[əz]	
	% ∅	N	% ∅	N	% ∅	N
<i>3rd p. sg. deletion (-s → -∅)</i>						
Samaná	50	212	44	365	7	27
Ex-Slave Recordings	33	15	23	26	(0	1) ^a
<i>Non-3rd insertion (-∅ → -s)</i>	% [-s]	N	% [-s]	N	% [-s]	N
Samaná	21	830	21	974	31	77
Ex-Slave Recordings	4	117	3	207	(0	8)

^a Parentheses indicate sparse data.

-s, however, it has been claimed that phonetic shape has little or no effect on retention of -s (e.g., Fasold 1971:361). Table 7 displays the distribution of -s and -∅ across different base forms in early Black English. The table shows that when the phonetic form of -s is complex (i.e., [əz]), it is retained more often on both 3rd and non-3rd persons in Samaná English,³¹ as has also been found for the -t, d suffix. The bisegmental form of -s is most salient phonologically, and thus it is reasonable that it should be retained more often.

7.2.2. Environmental factors. No previous study of verbal -s has recognized the existence of environmental phonological conditioning of its occurrence. Labov et al. (1968:164) report a surprising tendency for a following vocalic segment to *increase* deletion rates, contrary to widely replicated patterns for deletion of other final consonants. Wolfram (1969:137) finds virtually identical deletion rates in intervocalic and interconsonantal environments. Fasold (1972:125) reports no significant effect of either preceding or following phonological segment. Table 8 examines the effect of phonological environment on verbal -s presence in early Black English.

In contrast to the already mentioned studies of VBE, we observe a small but consistent phonological effect, in the expected direction.³² A preceding vocalic segment promotes retention of -s, regardless of grammatical person, as has been found in studies of deletion of other final consonants (e.g., Labov et al., 1968:130). In the following context, a pause is least conducive to retention, as is also typical of -t, d deletion patterns among contemporary VBE speakers (Guy, 1980:28). Moreover, the effect of phonological context is consistent across the majority of individual Samaná speakers for whom there is sufficient data in each environment. (Parallels to this patterning are clear in the Ex-Slave Recordings only for the preceding segment.) In fact, the ranking of following consonant versus vowel in the Samaná data is also mirrored in Fasold's (1972:127) analysis of 3rd p. sg. -s deletion among a subsample of preadolescent and adolescent males in Washington, and corroborated in his analysis of the effect of phonological sequence for all speakers.³³

TABLE 8. *Effect of preceding and following phonological environment on verbal -s presence*

	Preceding Segment					
	Vowel		Consonant			
	% ∅	N	% ∅	N		
<i>3rd p. sg. deletion (-s → -∅)</i>						
Samaná	37	94	45	510		
Ex-Slave Recordings	11	9	33	33		
<i>Non-3rd insertion (-∅ → -s)</i>	% [-s]	N	% [-s]	N		
Samaná	27	315	20	1,566		
Ex-Slave Recordings	7	86	2	246		
	Following Segment					
	Vowel		Consonant		Pause	
	% ∅	N	% ∅	N	% ∅	N
<i>3rd p. sg. deletion (-s → -∅)</i>						
Samaná	39	231	47	344	55	29
Ex-Slave Recordings	30	27	29	14	(0	1) ^a
<i>Non-3rd insertion (-∅ → -s)</i>	% [-s]	N	% [-s]	N	% [-s]	N
Samaná	24	632	20	1,184	31	65
Ex-Slave Recordings	4	235	4	77	∅	20

^a Parentheses indicate sparse data.

In summary, looking at the phonological influences one by one, and without taking into account nonphonological factors, there appears to be a phonological effect on both concord and nonconcord -s usage in early Black English. On the one hand, this is manifested as a tendency to preserve -s when it is bisegmental, and on the other, when it appears in nonconsonantal environments. Though the latter effect is not unattested in earlier studies of this phenomenon in VBE, despite claims to the contrary, the consistency of this effect in concord *and* nonconcord contexts has not to our knowledge been observed. We will have occasion to return to this result.

7.3. *Syntactic effects on -s usage*

Although previous studies have either reported no phonological conditioning of -s or have not treated the issue at all, syntactic factors have been widely cited, even at earlier stages of the language (Section 4.0). In this section, we examine whether a number of constraints proposed in the literature may also account for -s variability in our data on early Black English.

7.3.1. Features of the subject: Type of subject. A widely cited syntactic condition on the occurrence of verbal -s is the propensity for -∅ marking following pronominal, as opposed to full NP, subjects (e.g., Brunner, 1963:70; Mossé, 1952:79; Sweet, 1891:379; Wright, 1905:176). Jespersen (1909/1949:15) traces the origins of this constraint back to Old English,

TABLE 9. Rates of verbal -s usage as a function of type of subject

	Pronoun		Full NP		Full NP + Relative	
	% \emptyset	N	% \emptyset	N	% \emptyset	N
3rd p. sg. deletion (-s → - \emptyset)						
Samaná	45	441	45	114	29	49
Ex-Slave Recordings	27	26	27	26	31	16
Non-3rd insertion (- \emptyset → -s)	% [-s]	N	% [-s]	N	% [-s]	N
Samaná	20	1,766	38	92	70	23
Ex-Slave Recordings	3	312	15	20	—	0

which subsequently gave rise to the Modern Scottish configuration. In this dialect, -s is added in all persons so long as the subject is not pronominal: *they cum an' teake them* versus *the burds cums an' pæcks them* (ibid.). This pattern has also been noted for other present-day British (e.g., Midlands) dialects (Wakelin, 1977:119). Thus, the trend toward more -s inflection with heavy NP subjects has been present from the inception of the verbal marking system to the present (Feagin, 1979; Hackenberg, 1972).³⁴

We thus divided the subjects of the verbs under investigation according to whether they were pronominal, full, or full noun phrase + relative, as in (11). Table 9 displays the effect of type of subject on verb inflection.

- (11) *He* lives on the shore. (01/181)
 And *my brother* lives in Limón. (06/1048)
The one what he follows has uh- sixty-three years. (04/318)

Although there is no difference in marking rates ascribable to pronominal versus full NP subject in 3rd p. sg. in either data set, we observe a marked tendency for verbs preceded by heavy noun phrases to receive inflection in other persons. Moreover, the heaviest NP context, that is, NP + relative, most favours -s marking, an effect that has also been reported for nonstandard Southern White English (Feagin, 1979:193).³⁵ Although the rates of nonconcord in 3rd p. sg. contexts are actually lower in early Black English than those reported for contemporary White dialects (Feagin, 1979; Hackenberg, 1972), the patterning is identical and replicates the historical attestations (see Section 4.0).

7.3.2. Definiteness of the subject. Another constraint noted in the literature, primarily by researchers attributing -s variability to an underlying grammatical system distinct from Standard English, is the differential treatment of indefinite versus definite subjects. Bickerton (1975:137) suggests that the acquisition of 3rd p. sg. -s inflection on verbs with indefinite subjects would be inhibited in decreolizing Guyanese English, because these subjects are never marked in the underlying creole grammar. It has also been the case

TABLE 10. Rates of verbal -s usage as a function of definiteness of the subject

	Definite Subject		Indefinite Subject	
	% \emptyset	N	% \emptyset	N
3rd p. sg. deletion (-s → - \emptyset)				
Samaná	43	478	48	126
Ex-Slave Recordings	29	35	(29	7) ^a
Non-3rd insertion (- \emptyset → -s)	% [-s]	N	% [-s]	N
Samaná	26	1,211	14	670
Ex-Slave Recordings	4	246	1	86

^aParentheses indicate sparse data.

throughout the history of English that the verbs associated with some of these subjects have tended to lack inflection. Since the 18th century, grammarians have frowned upon the prevalent misuse of verbal concord with grammatically singular indefinite pronominals (Visser, 1970); see also the OED: “everyone: often incorrectly with plural verb,” and “everybody: sometimes incorrectly with plural verb or pronoun.” We thus distinguished indefinite subjects (including indefinite pronouns, e.g., *everything*, *it*, indefinite *you*; and noun phrases, e.g., *a boy*, *boys*, *people*, etc.), as in (12a), from definite subjects, as in (12b).

- (12) a. *Nothing* worries me. (ESR/31/37)
People here now sing about “Roll, Jordan, Roll.” (ESR/31/400)
Everybody knows. (ESR/40/30)
 b. *The old people* likes to quarrel. (3/174)
 I don't care whether *you* sing it or not. (ESR/31/426)
M knows them all. (ESR/38/311)

Table 10 in fact shows a slight tendency in both data sets (where data are sufficient) towards lesser use of -s with indefinite subjects, particularly in non-3rd p. sg. contexts. Note, however, that the constraint cited in the historical record appears to refer to indefinite *pronominals*, rather than to the feature of definiteness more generally. And, in fact, when we examine the subclass of 3rd p. sg. indefinite pronominal subjects in the Samaná data in (13), the effects suggested by Table 10 are magnified, with 58% ($N = 26$) deletion in this context.

- (13) *Everybody* goes out. . . . (18/934)
Everybody want \emptyset to be walking up and down. (18/933)
Everything change \emptyset . (05/651)
Everything changes. (09/320)

Thus, although it is clear that indefinites tend not to receive inflection, it seems likely that this stems from the historical tendency for indefinite pronouns to remain unmarked, rather than from an underlying creole influence.

7.3.3. Collective versus noncollective subject. Collective subjects have been observed to agree variably with the verb according to whether they are interpreted as singular or plural (Traugott, 1977:133; Visser, 1970:62). As there were no collective subjects in either of the data sets under examination, we were unable to investigate this effect.

7.3.4. Features of the verb: Verbal aspect. The essence of the debate over the semantic interpretation of verbal *-s* concerns its aspectual reading. In modern Standard English, 3rd p. sg. *-s* marks present tense simultaneously with a range of aspectual meanings: punctual, durative/iterative, habitual, and so on. In creole languages, where the underlying system is generally characterized as aspect-prominent rather than tense-prominent, verbal marking is conditioned by the aspect of the verb. We have reviewed earlier suggestions (Bickerton, 1975; Brewer, 1986; Pitts, 1981, 1986; Roberts, 1977) that Black English *-s* is an aspectual marker, but the questions of (a) which aspect it marks and (b) the relationship of such behaviour to a prior creole grammar (over and above marking aspect at all) remain unresolved, largely because of the questionable way some of these conclusions were derived from the data. In this section, we examine the tendency for *-s* marking according to the aspectual reading of the verb. Verbs were coded as punctual when they referred to an event (hypothetical or otherwise) that is understood to have occurred once, as in (14); as habitual/iterative when they referred to an event that takes place repeatedly, as in (15); and as durative/continuous when they referred to events or processes that are extended in time or states that exist continuously, as in (16). Note that this aspectual coding was based on contextual information (e.g., adverbials) and not solely on the verb itself.

- (14) If she *comes* six o'clock in the morning, well, you have to be here eight o'clock to go. (10/770)
All at once, it- the rain *come*. (01/1250)
- (15) Every year she *comes* here. (19/225)
People *comes* very often. (10/763)
Sometimes they *comes*. (03/1252)
- (16) I think it *comes* by the teachers. (17/268)
The wire *come* from way out there. (11/961)
The Rodneys *come* from here in this Dominican Republic. (21/96)

Table 11 shows that, contrary to Brewer's (1986) contention, verbs tend to receive most *-s* marking when the aspect denoted by the verb is habitual, an effect that emerges most clearly in the Samaná data. Note, however, that this effect is most robust in 3rd p. sg. in both data sets (in the Ex-Slave Record-

TABLE 11. *Rates of verbal -s usage as a function of verbal aspect*

	Habitual/Iterative		Durative/Continuous		Punctual	
	% \emptyset	<i>N</i>	% \emptyset	<i>N</i>	% \emptyset	<i>N</i>
<i>3rd p. sg. deletion (-s → -\emptyset)</i>						
Samaná	27	150	50	347	50	107
Ex-Slave Recordings	14	7	30	27	38	8
<i>Non-3rd insertion (-\emptyset → -s)</i>	% [-s]	<i>N</i>	% [-s]	<i>N</i>	% [-s]	<i>N</i>
Samaná	36	542	17	864	13	475
Ex-Slave Recordings	1	74	4	189	6	69

TABLE 12. *Rates of verbal -s usage with strong versus weak verbs*

	Strong Verb		Weak Verb	
	% \emptyset	<i>N</i>	% \emptyset	<i>N</i>
<i>3rd p. sg. deletion (-s → -\emptyset)</i>				
Samaná	52	361	37	271
Ex-Slave Recordings	32	31	33	15
<i>Non-3rd insertion (-\emptyset → -s)</i>	% [-s]	<i>N</i>	% [-s]	<i>N</i>
Samaná	18	1,296	23	664
Ex-Slave Recordings	4	176	3	150

ings, there are few data on 3rd p. sg., and the effect disappears altogether in persons other than third). Can verbal *-s* then be characterized as an aspect marker? We return to this question in Section 8.0.

7.3.5. Verb type. Although this has not to our knowledge been specifically addressed in the literature, we wanted to ascertain whether there was any difference in marking rates between strong (irregular) and weak (regular) verbs. The Samaná data (but not the Ex-Slave Recordings) in Table 12 show a clear-cut tendency to retain *-s* on weak verbs, particularly in the 3rd p. This, of course, is precisely the context where it would seem most crucial to disambiguate present-tense verbs from those with deleted past-tense clusters: Weak verbs also showed most *-t*, *d* retention in these same materials (Tagliamonte & Poplack, 1988).

7.4. Discourse factors

7.4.1. The sequence constraint. The operation of a "sequence" constraint on the occurrence of verbal *-s* has been attested by several researchers. This is the tendency for *-s* to occur only on the first conjunct of a conjoined pair or series of verbs (Fasold, 1972:129, Myhill & Harris, 1986:28). Butters (in press) also finds a tendency towards loss of the second *-s* on a conjunct in both Belizean English and Black English in Wilmington, South Carolina.

TABLE 13. *Distribution of -s in conjoined verb phrases (with same or deleted subject) in Samaná English*

Sequence	%	Sequence	%	N
-s + -∅	35.3	-s + -s	64.7	34
-∅ + -∅	91.8	-∅ + -s	8.2	86

The explanation for this type of sequencing is based on the assumption that -s use derives from an imported Standard English rule, whereas -∅ reflects the use of the "proper Black English rule." Fasold (1972:130) notes that "while several speakers reverted to the Black English rule after having begun with the Standard English rule, . . . none moved to the Standard English rule after having begun with Black English grammar."

Table 13 summarizes the distribution of -s in conjoined verb phrases in the Samaná data base. Samaná English shows no propensity for the type of sequencing cited for VBE. In fact, the occurrence of -s on the first conjunct (regardless of whether it is concord or nonconcord) promotes, rather than inhibits, the occurrence of -s on the second. On the other hand, once a zero is used, again regardless of person and number, another zero is most likely. A similar "local concord" effect was noted by Poplack (1981) for plural -s marking in Puerto Rican Spanish.

7.4.2. Narrative -s. As already mentioned, Myhill and Harris (1986) have found verbal -s to be concentrated almost exclusively in narrative clauses in contemporary VBE, regardless of person and number of the subject. Of course, the use of present-tense forms in narrative discourse (the Historical Present) has been widely attested (Schiffrin, 1981; Silva-Corvalán, 1983; Tagliamonte & Poplack, 1988; Wolfson, 1979); but as Labov (1987:8) points out, this innovative use of -s should not be confused with it (cf. Butters, in press). VBE -s is *not* used for general present reference, but rather, is almost entirely confined to the past. Thus, verbal -s usage has become specialized for the narrative past function.

Use of -s in this context was also noted by Roberts (1976), who observed that "the function of hyper -s is a feature of narrative style in almost all data on Black English. It seems to have been more common before than it is now, for if one examines the ex-slave narratives in Botkin's [1945] *Lay My Burden Down* it is seen to be almost universal" (8). Though he concedes that the tales in the collection were not transcribed from recorded speech, he finds it "inconceivable" that interviewers could have conspired to "flavour" their transcriptions with hyper -s so consistently precisely for narrative style.

We now compare the distribution of -s in narrative and nonnarrative clauses in Samaná English with that reported by Myhill and Harris.³⁶ Adopting the stricter definition of narrative provided in Labov and Waletzky (1967) rather than the looser characterization of events that may be con-

TABLE 14. *Distribution of verbal -s by grammatical person in narrative and nonnarrative clauses in Samaná English and VBE*

	Singular						Plural				Totals	
	1st		3rd		Full NP (3rd)		1st		3rd		% [-s]	N
	% [-s]	N	% [-s]	N	% [-s]	N	% [-s]	N	% [-s]	N		
<i>VBE</i>												
Narrative	32	50	59	54	55	31	61	18	—	0	50	153
Nonnarrative	1	458	7	241	9	96	2	45	—	0	4	840
<i>Samaná</i>												
Narrative	0.5	188	0.3	215	3	35	6	18	0	41	2	497
Nonnarrative	16	669	50	418	57	203	21	180	30	721	27	2,633 ^a

^aThese figures are taken from a gross data tabulation of all potential present-tense examples from the entire body of narrative and nonnarrative discourse. In subsequent analyses, many of these contexts were eliminated in accordance with the criteria outlined in Section 6.1.

Sources: Myhill and Harris (1986) for the VBE data, and Tagliamonte and Poplack (1988) for the Samaná English data.

strued to have taken place at some point in the past (cf. Butters, in press; Roberts, 1976), we replicate Myhill and Harris' (1986) analysis on a data base of narratives of personal experience recounted by the Samaná informants (Tagliamonte & Poplack, 1988). Table 14 shows no sign of association of -s with narrative clauses in early Black English; on the contrary, the Samaná materials show exactly the opposite effect to that described by Myhill and Harris, with a tendency towards -s *absence* in such clauses.

This appears most dramatically when compared with inflection rates for the same grammatical persons in nonnarrative discourse. In persons other than third, -∅ inflection is, of course, consistent with a present-tense interpretation (Historical Present), and in fact, independent distributional analyses provided clear evidence of the existence in Samaná English of a Historical or Narrative Present tense (Tagliamonte & Poplack, 1988), identical both in form and in function to its Standard English counterpart. The low rates of concord with 3rd p. sg. verbs in narrative clauses shown in Table 14 are likely due to the preponderance in this context, of *verba dicendi* (*say, tell*), which are particularly resistant to inflection (see also Schneider, 1983). As mentioned earlier, these were excluded from the other calculations reported here.³⁷

7.4.3. Summary of individual effects. In sum, the factor-by-factor analyses just presented suggest that a number of factors condition the occurrence of verbal -s, only some of which have been attested previously, whereas other reported effects appear not to be operative at all in early Black English. First, contrary to any previous reports, we observe a small but consistent

phonological conditioning on *-s* variability, manifested as a tendency towards preservation when *-s* is bisegmental and when it appears in nonconsonantal environments. This effect has been widely attested in other studies of consonant deletion and cluster simplification and appears to be operative in both concord and nonconcord contexts.

As far as the contribution of type of subject noun phrase is concerned, we observe on the one hand a tendency towards verbal inflection with heavy noun phrase (as opposed to pronominal) subjects, and on the other, a tendency towards \emptyset marking when the latter are indefinite. Both effects, attested in nonstandard White dialects and throughout the history of English, although never to our knowledge in VBE, are most robust in nonconcord contexts. Features of the verb also play a role. In contrast with earlier suggestions, we observe a tendency towards inflection in weak verbs denoting habitual (and not durative) aspect, which is strongest in 3rd p. sg. contexts. Finally, the two discourse factors reported to be operative in VBE – the sequence constraint and the association of *-s* with the narrative present – also have strong effects on *-s* usage in early Black English, but in the direction *opposite* to previous reports.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of these results is the finding that *both* 3rd p. sg. and nonconcord *-s* are subject to regular, parallel environmental conditioning, although certain effects seems to be stronger in one or the other of the contexts. Now, although tabulations of effects taken one at a time, such as those reported earlier, are informative, they do not reveal the *relative* importance of factor effects to each other, nor whether all are in fact significant when considered simultaneously. We thus reanalyze the data using the logistic regression procedures implemented in the variable rule program (Rand & Sankoff, 1988) to estimate the true effects of phonological and syntactic factors on both concord and nonconcord *-s* usage and to remove artifacts of poor data distribution, correlated factors, or statistical fluctuations. This enables us to determine which environmental factors have a significant effect on *-s* insertion and deletion when all are considered together, as well as to estimate the magnitude of individual factor effects.

7.5. Multivariate analysis of the contribution of factors to verbal *-s* usage

Table 15 displays the results of a variable rule analysis of the factors contributing to the probability that verbal *-s* will be present in the Samaná data base.³⁸ Higher numbers can be interpreted as favouring *-s* inflection, whereas lower ones disfavour it. The higher the figure, the greater the contribution of that factor to *-s* marking. The factors are displayed with the most significant ones first, as determined by the regression procedure.

The table shows that the greatest and most significant contribution to the presence of inflection is made by person and number of the subject: 3rd p. sg. subjects may be seen to favour *-s* marking more than any other factor

TABLE 15. *Contribution of factors selected as significant to the presence of verbal -s in all grammatical persons (-∅ → -s) in Samaná English^a*

Overall tendency: .30

Person/Number	Verbal Aspect	Definiteness of Subject
3rd p. sg. .77	Habitual/Iterative .66	Definite .54
3rd p. pl. .54	Durative/Continuous .44	Nondefinite .41
1st p. sg. .39	Punctual/Instantaneous .42	
2nd p. sg. .25		
Type of Subject	Underlying Phonetic Form	
Noun phrase + relative .77	[əz] .74	
Noun phrase .54	[s] .51	
Pronoun .49	[z] .47	
Preceding Phonological Segment	Following Phonological Segment	
Vowel .62	Vowel .55	
Consonant .48	Pause .53	
	Consonant .47	

^aFactors not selected: none.

examined, with a probability of .77. 3rd p. pl. subjects also show some tendency to favour marking. The fact that a preference (albeit weak) for nonconcordial marking persists in 3rd p. pl. as compared to other person numbers is not surprising in view of the fact that, historically, marking in this context is older, antedating concord in 3rd p. sg. (e.g., Curme, 1977, and Section 4.0). Verbal aspect is another important factor: Inflection is favoured (at .66) only when the aspectual reading is habitual/iterative. Definite subjects, particularly when comprised of heavy NPs, also contribute to the probability of marking; the effect observed in Table 9 with regard to full versus pronominal subjects appears quite reduced in this analysis (.54 vs. .49, respectively). Finally, the phonological effects cited earlier, though less significant than those of the other factors, persist.

We observed in Section 7.4.3 that although the ranking of factor effects was generally parallel in concord and nonconcord contexts, certain factors assumed particular importance in specific grammatical persons. Amalgamating the data for all persons, as in the analysis depicted in Table 15, could have the result of averaging out the effect of a factor with, say, a heavy contribution in concord contexts and only a slight one elsewhere. We thus reanalyze the data according to whether or not they occurred in 3rd p. sg. contexts, adopting the methodology detailed in Section 6.2.

Table 16 displays the factor weights associated with verbal *-s* presence in persons other than 3rd p. sg. The factor effects are essentially identical, although we observe the factor of type of subject to assume additional im-

TABLE 16. *Contribution of factors selected as significant to the presence of verbal -s in other than 3rd p. sg. contexts (-∅ → -s) in Samaná English^a*

Overall tendency: .22

Verbal Aspect		Definiteness of Subject	
Habitual/Iterative	.68	Definite	.56
Durative/Continuous	.44	Indefinite	.39
Punctual/Instantaneous	.39		
Type of Subject		Preceding Phonological Segment	
Noun phrase + relative	.91	Vowel	.62
Noun phrase	.67	Consonant	.48
Pronoun	.48		
Underlying Phonetic Form		Following Phonological Segment	
[əz]	.67	Pause	.60
[s]	.53	Vowel	.55
[z]	.46	Consonant	.47

^aFactors not selected: none.

TABLE 17. *Contribution of factors selected as significant to the deletion of 3rd p. sg. -s (-s → -∅) in Samaná English*

Overall tendency: .43

Verbal Aspect		Definiteness of Subject ^a	
Habitual/Iterative	.33	Definite	.49
Durative/Continuous	.56	Indefinite	.54
Punctual/Instantaneous	.57		
Type of Subject ^a		Preceding Phonological Segment ^a	
Noun phrase + relative	.32	Vowel	.43
Noun phrase	.51	Consonant	.51
Pronoun	.52		
Underlying Phonetic Form		Following Phonological Segment ^a	
[əz]	.08	Pause	.57
[s]	.56	Vowel	.45
[z]	.51	Consonant	.53

^aFactors not selected by the multiple regression procedure.

portance, with a clear difference between pronominal and full noun phrases, in the expected direction. The contribution of underlying phonetic form, on the other hand, is somewhat reduced. In Table 17, we compare the probabilities with which these same factors influence the deletion of 3rd p. sg. -s.

The table shows that two of the factors found to affect the presence of non-concord -s (verbal aspect and underlying phonetic form) contribute a significant effect to the probability that 3rd p. sg. will be marked as well. That the other factors were not retained by the stepwise regression analysis is at least partly due to the relatively small sample of 3rd p. sg. tokens—only 604 versus 1,881 for the nonconcord contexts. Thus, the table displays an analysis where all factors are forced into the regression.³⁹

It is remarkable that the constraint ranking, or the order in which the factors constituting each group affect the process under consideration, is basically identical for the two analyses, that is, for all grammatical persons.⁴⁰ The result that both “insertion” and “deletion” are conditioned by the same factors indicates that verbal -s marking is a unitary process, involving both concord and nonconcord contexts. We do note, however, that the magnitude of some of the effects is sharply reduced (e.g., preceding phonological segment, definiteness of the subject) or disappears altogether (NP vs. pronominal subject) in 3rd p. sg., and the lack of statistical significance is no doubt also due to the weaker differential conditioning of contrasting features.

8.0 DISCUSSION

How can these results be explained? We have described in some detail why the literature on the conditioning of verbal -s variability in English—whether early or modern, Black or White, British or American—does not permit an easy solution based on either historical or comparative grounds. However, the findings we have presented do allow the following plausible hypothesis.

In Section 4.0, we detailed the pervasive variability of -s throughout the verbal paradigm, which persisted in English at least until the early 17th century. Because an affix that occurred variably on all grammatical persons was unlikely to have functioned (only, if at all) as an agreement marker, it is most probable that other linguistic factors (in addition to social and stylistic factors) conditioned its occurrence. The exact nature of such factors can no longer be unambiguously reconstructed, although the two that were mentioned in the historical texts have been shown to maintain an effect in early Black English. It would not be unreasonable to assume that the factors depicted in Table 16 reflect the remnants of earlier constraints—at least before the resolution of -s variability into a 3rd p. sg. agreement marker. The person/number constraint displayed in Table 15 would have been incorporated thereafter, so effectively compressing the variable effects as to render them statistically nonsignificant in most cases (Table 17). More specifically, the verbal inflection system brought by the British settlers to the southern United States would have embodied the constraints on -s variability depicted in Tables 16 and 17, or alternatively, Table 15, depending on the time the tendency towards 3rd p. sg. -s agreement began to make inroads into the spoken language of the populace.⁴¹ Extrapolating from Schneider's (1983) suggestion, we hypothesize that the early slaves would have acquired this

variable system, along with the constraints on its variability. This would be consistent with the major findings of this study, that is, that (a) the expression of *nonconcord* -s is a result of regular variable conditioning, (b) the factors conditioning its occurrence were originally identical to those conditioning the occurrence of 3rd p. sg. -s, and (c) the grammaticalization of -s as the contemporary Standard English agreement marker (as expressed by the heavy contribution of the factor of 3rd p. sg. in Table 15) subsequently overrides quantitatively many of those conditioning effects in 3rd p. sg. contexts.

We have seen from Table 17 that there are only two strong constraints on 3rd p. sg. -s usage: a phonological one inhibiting deletion when -s is a bisegmental morpheme, and an aspectual one inhibiting deletion when the aspectual reading of the verb is habitual. The latter result, which has appeared consistently across the analyses presented here, inevitably raises the question of whether -s can be interpreted as an aspectual marker, thereby implying that it would be fulfilling a function that is somehow alien to English grammar. -S clearly does mark habitual aspect (more than durative and punctual aspects), but this function is not in contradiction with that of the present tense in Standard English or more generally. Comrie (1985:37) observes that the most characteristic use of the present tense is to refer to situations that occupy a longer period of time than the present moment, but that include the present moment within them (i.e., situations that can be construed as “habitual”). He defines the situation referred to by a verb in the present tense as simply one that literally holds at the moment of speaking (*ibid.*, 38). Whether or not this situation is part of a larger one extending into past or future time is an implicature that must be worked out on the basis of other features of the real world and of the sentence. Of these, Comrie characterizes sentential aspect as one of the most important in deciding whether the situation is restricted to the present moment (punctual). We have already noted the fact that in many languages, including English, habitual aspectual meaning is in some sense *embodied* in the present tense. Comrie illustrates the special position of habitual meaning in tense-aspect-mood systems by observing that it is situated at the intersection of the three: It can be expected to be expressed by means of a tense, because it involves location of a situation across an extended segment of time; it can be aspectual, because it refers to the internal temporal contour of a situation; but it can also be modal, because it involves generalizations about possible worlds from observation of the actual world (*ibid.*, 40). Indeed, as there apparently exists no separate habitual tense apart from the present, Comrie observes that the grammatical expression of habituality will always be integrated into the aspectual or modal system rather than into the tense system. Thus, as we remarked in Section 3.0, there is no straightforward way of *distinguishing* a tense function from an aspectual function of -s, as the two are inextricably linked.

We are now in a position to return to the original question raised in this article: That of the origin and function of verbal -s in early Black English.

We begin by reviewing the available evidence for the status of -s as an intrusion versus an integral part of early Black English grammar. Recall that the arguments marshalled in favour of the status of -s as a hypercorrect intrusion (in contemporary VBE) rest on three premises: (a) -s is frequently absent in concord contexts, (b) -s is frequently inserted in other persons, as well as in nonfinite forms, and (c) -s absence is not subject to regular phonological conditioning. We address each of these in turn.

First, we have shown that although 3rd p. sg. subject-verb agreement is far from categorical in either data set on early Black English, it is present in this environment at least half (in the Ex-Slave Recordings, more than 2/3) of the time. More important, arguments against Standard English origins based on variable inflection rates cannot be considered fully convincing when we take into account that the frequencies (of nonstandard deletion [Trudgill, 1974] *and* nonstandard insertion [Cheshire, 1982]) are in fact lower than those attested for the few local British and American (Bailey, personal communication) White dialects that have been systematically studied; no one has suggested that verbal -s is not an integral part of these White dialects.

An argument based on the distribution of -s across grammatical persons cannot be viewed as decisive of this question either, given the known facts about the history of inflection in English. In any event, our analysis showed 3rd p. sg. to be the most common environment for inflection in early Black English; indeed, it was revealed by the regression analysis to be the single factor most favourable to -s presence.

Finally, our study demonstrated that at least at an earlier stage of Black English, -s variability showed regular phonological conditioning (also detectable in Fasold's [1972] Washington data), in the expected direction. This conditioning, although clearly apparent in all contexts in the individual factor analysis, was largely overridden in 3rd p. sg. by the strength of the standard concord rule.

This article has also demonstrated that, contrary to what would be expected from hypercorrection, *nonconcord* -s presence is also subject to regular conditioning (over and above the phonological), largely identical to that obtaining for concord -s. Based on our finding that two of the constraints reported throughout the history of English are operative in early Black English, we suggested that this pattern might be a synchronic reflex of the constraint ranking in the varieties of English that provided the linguistic model for the slaves. Given the difficulty of reconstructing the conditioning of a variable process that has now basically gone to completion, this suggestion remains speculative.

But whether or not the scenario we have outlined actually accounts for the facts of earlier White English does not weaken our finding that verbal -s marking within the early Black English systems we have examined is not random hypercorrection. The behaviour we have described represents a stage of the language in which a concord function for -s has already made a certain amount of progress in supplanting whatever earlier functions it might have

TABLE 18. *Rates of concord -s presence versus nonconcord -s presence by individual (Samaná speakers)^a*

Speaker No.	Concord -s Presence		Nonconcord -s Presence	
	% [-s]	N	% [-s]	N
<i>Some formal education</i>				
16 ^b	83	29	44	108
15	82	11	48	23
09 ^b	78	27	33	51
06 ^b	75	32	27	108
02	74	58	21	222
17	72	25	17	48
19 ^b	69	39	34	161
18 ^b	67	42	30	126
03 ^b	62	92	14	231
14	56	27	23	100
<i>Mean</i>	71.8			29.1
<i>No formal education</i>				
04	47	30	0	23
08	47	17	39	36
10	45	22	20	66
01	36	22	18	107
05	33	42	18	73
11 ^b	29	21	8	89
21	22	9	11	44
07	13	55	11	198
<i>Mean</i>	41.0			15.6

^aOnly 18 of the 21 speakers are considered here because the remainder had sparse data.

^bIndividuals connected with church activities.

had. We thus conclude that verbal *-s*, as well as the present tense, formed an integral part of the early Black English grammar. Further support in favour of this conclusion may be adduced from the behaviour of the individuals we have studied. We have already had occasion to observe the surprising degree of interspeaker consistency (where the data permit comparison) on the ranking of constraints. Fasold (1972:146) had hypothesized that if *-s* insertion in nonconcord contexts and 3rd p. sg. *-s* absence were to be taken together as evidence for the absence of *-s* from the underlying grammar, then it ought to be the case that individuals who show most "hypercorrection" should be precisely those with least 3rd p. sg. *-s* presence. Table 18 shows no such inverse relationship between the tendency towards concord in 3rd p. sg. and *-s* insertion elsewhere among our Samaná informants. On the contrary, we observe a highly significant ($p < .001$) correlation ($r = .667$) between concord and nonconcord contexts, such that speakers with high

rates of *-s* marking in one show parallel rates in the other, and vice versa. Our speaker sample is thus constituted of two types of individual: those who tend to mark *-s* and those who do not, regardless of grammatical person.

Our suggestion that variability in *-s* marking was acquired as an inherent part of the language as a whole receives strongest support from an examination of the contribution of extralinguistic factors to its occurrence. The only extralinguistic factor found to exert a consistent effect on *-s* usage in Samaná is access to formal instruction. Contrary to expectation, individuals who have had any schooling at all, and who are closely connected with church activities, are precisely the ones with most verbal *-s* presence in *both* concord and nonconcord contexts! This suggests that *-s* usage was a prestige marker in the dialect at an earlier point in time, as would be expected if it were associated with the speech of the white masters (whatever its affect in their variety), and that its ulterior movement towards an indicator of non-standard speech in nonconcord contexts had not penetrated the language of the ancestors of the Samaná informants by the time they sailed for the Dominican Republic in 1824.⁴² Their subsequent lack of contact with other standardizing influences (Poplack & Sankoff, 1987) explains the contemporary pattern.

In sum, the facts we have presented here concerning the linguistic and extralinguistic conditioning of verbal *-s* usage all militate in favour of the suggestion that present-tense marking via verbal *-s* was an integral part of the early Black English grammar, insofar as this is reflected by the data we have examined. This process was variable, but not random, and may well have reflected synchronic variability in the input language at the time of acquisition. The reasons for its disappearance, if it has indeed disappeared from contemporary VBE, must remain an open question.

NOTES

1. The Samaná English data contained only seven instances of second person plural (2nd p. pl.) in a present context, none of which occurred with *-s*, and the Ex-Slave Recordings, only one. Given the paucity of data in the Ex-Slave Recordings overall, there is not always an illustrative example for each context.
2. The numbered codes in parentheses refer to the speaker and line number in the Samaná corpus. ESR designates the Ex-Slave Recordings and the initials identify the speaker.
3. The two sole instances of *-s* in first person plural (1st p. pl.) in the Ex-Slave Recordings occur in this direct quotation of JM's white masters.
4. Note, however, that Labov refers only to adolescent and preadolescent speech here. With the exception of his southern-raised, lower-working-class adults in casual style, the inflected verb form predominates among the adults he studied (Labov et al., 1968:161-62).
5. Labov (1987:8) observes that *-s* is involved in "radical" style-shifting.
6. Additional experimental evidence comes from Torrey's (e.g., 1983) investigations of perception and production of *-s* among black second graders in Harlem. Her results for 3rd p. sg. *-s* confirm the view that the affix does not form part of the VBE grammar, but only insofar as its number interpretation is concerned (636). Interestingly enough in view of the analysis we present in Section 8.0, the children *do* interpret *-s* as a present tense marker

(640), suggesting that at least one of the Standard English functions of *-s* is present in the dialect.

7. *-S* variability in persons other than 3rd p. sg. is variously referred to in the literature as “hyper-*s*,” “hyper-*z*,” and nonconcord *-s*.
8. Though Brewer (1986) cites 18th- and 19th-century British dialects as the source of nonconcord *-s*, she does not specifically address the issue of the origin of its use as a durative aspectual marker in early Black English.
9. This possibility is at least implicitly endorsed by Bickerton (1975) and Roberts (1976) as well.
10. Presumably on the basis of the earlier studies by Fasold (1972), Labov et al. (1968), and Wolfram (1969).
11. These figures are for the amalgamated data.
12. Such spurious comparisons can easily be discarded when detected. More puzzling is the discrepancy between the studies in marking rates of the 3rd p. sg. verbs, for which Brewer *did* calculate the proportion of *-s* out of all inflected and uninflected forms:

*% of -s marking on 3rd p. sg. verbs in the
WPA Ex-Slave Narratives (-s/-s + -Ø)*

	South Carolina	Texas
Brewer (1986)	7.0	43.8
Schneider (1983)	70.5	75.0

Whether the incongruity stems from the data base or other factors remains an open question. It was not addressed in the later paper.

13. These were extracted from a corpus of casual conversations with White middle-class Canadians recorded by Tagliamonte in 1982.
14. The only example containing both inflected and uninflected verbs provided by Roberts (1976:9) in support of his claim for a habitual function of *-s* shows exactly the same pattern: *Both* the *-s* marked (in italics) and the \emptyset marked (in bold face) verbs denote habitual/iterative aspect.

Well, when I cuss Master Ed, I *goes* 'way down in the bottoms where the corn **grow** high . . . I *looks* east and west . . . I **see** no Master Ed. Then I *itches* into him and *gives* him the worst cussing. . . . Then when I *goes* back my feeling is satisfied. . . .

15. Perhaps this “tense-*z*” corresponds to what we and others have analyzed as Historical Present, and Myhill and Harris, as Narrative Present.
16. Holmqvist (1922:2) suggests that it may simply be an analogical extension from 2nd p. sg., which ended in *-s* in Old English and other Germanic languages.
17. The reasons for this rather unusual development have not been treated in any work on the history of English that we have consulted: 3rd p. sg. is considered the most basic form, on which the morphology of the other person forms of a tense is modeled (e.g., Bybee & Brewer, 1980). Manczak (1963:36) has suggested that the persistence of *-s* on 3rd p. sg. can be accounted for by his “hypotheses XIII and XIV”: that the roots and endings of the third person and of the singular undergo fewer analogical changes than those of other persons and numbers.
18. Trudgill (1974) only provides data on the social and stylistic conditioning of *-s* occurrence.
19. For the relationship of Samaná English to early American Black English, see Poplack and Sankoff (1980/1983, 1987), Tagliamonte and Poplack (1988). These references also provide details of sample selection and corpus constitution.
20. The analyses we report of the Ex-Slave Recordings are based on data extracted from high-

quality, reel-to-reel copies of the original Library of Congress tapes, kindly made available to us by Guy Bailey, and not from the transcripts or the cassettes.

21. The majority of the Ex-Slave informants (8/11) had 25 potential contexts for verbal *-s* or less per person.
22. With the exception of 2nd p. pl., for which there were sparse data in both corpora; see note 1. This context was excluded from further analysis.
23. An obvious exception is that of present-tense verbs in complicating action clauses of narratives, which, by virtue of their occurrence in these contexts, have past temporal reference. Because expression of Historical Present falls within the standard uses of the English present tense, such forms were necessarily retained in our data base. It is only when these verbs are regular (weak) that an unavoidable ambiguity arises as to whether their uninflected form results from deletion of present- or past-tense inflections. (For more detailed treatment of this problem, see Tagliamonte & Poplack, 1988:517–18.) In this study, however, verbs in narrative clauses only represent approximately 15% of the data (Table 14), and of these, less than a quarter fall into the regular category (ibid., Table 1). We thus estimate the number of verbs in the data set that are truly ambiguous as to past- or present-tense inflection to be under 4%. Compare Myhill and Harris (1986:29), who include regular past-tense verbs in the variable environment for *-s*. Additional motivation for excluding past-reference contexts from analysis comes from the fact that *-s* inflection here was virtually nonexistent in our data (v. also Section 7.4.2, especially Table 14).
24. Only 20 examples of “invariant” *be* occurred in the Samaná corpus, half of which were inflected with *-s*. Instances of inflection on other nonfinite verbs were very infrequent ($N = 10$) in these data, and, with one exception, nonexistent in the Ex-Slave Recordings. Finite forms of *be* were also excluded from our study, both because of its suppletive present-tense forms, which may have been acquired independently, and because widespread deletion of the copula by an independent process (Poplack & Sankoff, 1987) makes concord impossible to determine in many cases. Finite forms of *have* were also excluded, following Fasold (1972).
25. This is in contrast to Labov et al. (1968:166), who found that the verb *got* in Nonstandard Negro English showed a high concentration of “hyper-*s*” in 3rd p. sg. as well as other persons.
26. Productive uses of these verbs were retained in the analysis, e.g., *But that I tells people sometime* (03/1258).
27. Indeed, given the fact that only two variants are treated, figures for the alternate analysis may be obtained simply by subtracting the ones provided from 1.
28. In Washington, only 13% of the time.
29. The extremely low rate of verbal *-s* usage in the Ex-Slave Recordings (42 cases in all) is not a reflection of generalized absence of this consonant from the data. Though we have not yet examined this systematically, *-s* is apparently used freely in plurals. In view of the distribution in Table 6, we are unsure of how to interpret Holm’s (in press) remark that “the use of the uninflected verb for the present tense . . . predominates in the language of each speaker” in the corpus, unless he is referring to persons other than 3rd, since we have seen that 3rd p. sg. verbs are in fact *inflected* 71% of the time. If this is the case, can lack of inflection in non-3rd p. sg. contexts—the norm in most contemporary dialects of English—be appropriately characterized as an apparent remnant of an earlier English-based creole (ibid.)?
30. Of course, *-s* is also most likely to occur with 3rd p. sg. in Detroit and Washington, but at substantially lower rates. It is nonetheless the case that Wolfram (1969:133) reports up to 43% 3rd p. sg. *-s* in upper-working-class speech. It is also of interest that the rate of retention of 3rd p. sg. *-s* in Samaná exactly parallels that found by Bailey in contemporary Southern White folk speech: 57% (Bailey, personal communication).
31. Occurrences of this context in the Ex-Slave Recordings are too rare to permit analysis.
32. Of the eight contrasts between vocalic and consonantal effects in Table 8, there are enough data and enough of a difference so that one is significant at the 0.01 level and three more are significant at the 0.1 level (using a χ^2 test with continuity correction).
33. The phonological effect found in the Washington phonological sequence data is actually quite strong; as in Samaná, an intervocalic environment clearly promotes retention of *-s*.

3rd p. sg. -s absence by surrounding phonological sequence

	V __ #V % ∅	V __ #C % ∅	C __ #V % ∅	C __ #C % ∅
Detroit	61.8	72.2	67.4	62.4
Washington	50.8	72.9	64.2	65.5
Samaná	31.4	36.0	41.6	48.1

Given these findings, it is unclear why Fasold was so categorical in rejecting the possibility that verbal -s could be phonologically conditioned.

34. Although not reported, a (slight) preference for inflecting verbs with full noun phrase subjects is also observable in Myhill and Harris' (1986) VBE data: 14.9% versus 9.6% marking for pronominal subjects (abstracted from Table 2, p. 27).
35. Though the figures for -s insertion on nonconcord verbs preceded by full NPs necessarily involve only 3rd p. pl., the contrast with pronominal subjects is genuine, as marking occurs at a rate of 28% here, compared to 38% with full NPs and 70% with full NP + relative (Samaná data).
36. The Ex-Slave Recordings contain no structured narratives to speak of and could not be analyzed in this way.
37. There is ample evidence to support the unique behaviour of *verba dicendi* in narrative style in general. Johnstone (1985:18) suggests that in stories these function as "semantically neutral place markers, indicating only that what follows is supposed to be taken as someone's exact words." Vincent (1983) showed that in Montreal French narratives, *il dit, je dis*, etc. function as discourse particles, replacing others like *tu sais, n'est-ce pas*, which occur in nonnarrative contexts. In the Samaná narratives, 3rd p. sg. *say*∅ is nearly categorical.
38. The data contained in the Ex-Slave Recordings are too sparse to permit multivariate analysis.
39. The two significant factor groups show essentially the same values with or without the presence of the other factor groups. Two others, following phonological environment and type of subject, were almost significant at the .05 level.
40. Recall that Tables 16 and 17 depict analyses with different underlying forms, so that a factor with a heavy contribution to "insertion" will show up as contributing a small one to "deletion."
41. Bailey, Cukor-Avila, & Maynor's recent (1988) analysis of the factors conditioning -s variability in late 15th-century English letters lends strong support to this suggestion.
42. It will be noted that speakers with higher levels of education show a greater differential between marking of concord and nonconcord -s, as measured by the difference between the rates in the two contexts. This is in large part due to their overall average inflection value being situated near 50%, whereas the other speakers are compressed at the lower end of the scale; when the averages are made comparable by the application of the logit transform, the difference between the two groups is reduced by about a half. The significance of the residual tendency of educated speakers to distinguish more between the two contexts as evidence of rapprochement to Standard English norms is outweighed by their even stronger tendency to use -s in nonconcord contexts.

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