3

Reconstructing the Source of Early African American English Plural Marking: A Comparative Study of English and Creole*

Shana Poplack, Sali Tagliamonte, and Ejike Eze

3.1 Introduction

The morphological expression of the category of plural has been considered a robust, if variable, feature of African American English (AAE) grammar at least since the nineteenth century (Harrison 1884), largely on the basis of the consistent independent finding that the plural suffix -s is virtually always realized (Kessler 1972; Labov et al. 1968: 161; Wolfram 1969: 143) in contemporary vernaculars. In Early AAE, however, -s was often absent from nouns with plural reference, as shown in (1) below.

(1) a. That man had two *trunks*. Two *trunk* full of all kind of gold and silver and everything. Two *trunk*, big *tranks*. Full of gold and silver. (ANSE/30/1323)¹

b. Now, walk – walking with the *males*, them there *males* an’ one man a-riding – riding between two *male*, . . . (ESR/005:12)

c. All them die away ya [ . . . ] and the young *one* never take practise. (SE/005/663–5)

d. And the *ones* who come behind, they don’t practise theirself to that. (SE/005/669–70)

This is intriguing since in other areas of the grammar, notably the verb phrase, Early AAE appears consistently more conservative than contemporary AAVE
in featuring higher rates of overt morphological marking (Poplack and Tagliamonte forthcoming). The apparent approximation of contemporary AAVE to Standard English (StdE) in this area of the grammar looks very much like a case of structural convergence, one consistent with the process of decréolization. In this chapter, we assess the viability of this explanation by investigating the source of the earlier variability. In particular, are the zero plurals common in Early AAE the legacy of prior creole marking of nouns with non-individuated referents, or do they result from phonetically or functionally motivated reduction of an English plural affix?

An interesting property of the facts illustrated in (1), as of many of the other variable phenomena examined in this volume, is that informal inspection is insufficient to reveal the nature of the underlying grammar that gave rise to the overt and zero variants, since the same forms appear in all the putative source varieties. The type of evidence we appeal to in this chapter therefore emerges from the organization of these forms in discourse. The prototypical creole is said to mark plural, morphologically or otherwise, according to criteria like nominal reference, individuation, and disambiguation within the NP headed by the noun in question. In StdE, on the other hand, plural is basically always marked morphologically, at least on the semantically plural individuated count nouns on which we focus here.

By means of comparative reconstruction, this study aims to uncover the system giving rise to the plural-marking facts depicted in (1). We first review what is known of plural marking in English-based creoles (section 3.2) and in contemporary AAVE (section 3.3). In section 3.4 we trace the development of plural formation through the history of English. Making use of multivariate analysis, we test the contribution of factors selected to capture the origins of the variant forms (section 3.6), and compare the patterning of plural marking amongst the three varieties of Early AAE (section 3.7). Section 3.9 tests the predictions for English-based creoles on Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE), and compares and contrasts its patterns of plural marking with those discovered for Early AAE. Section 3.11 offers our conclusions.

### 3.2 Plural Marking in English-based Creoles

In English-based creoles, nouns are generally pluralized by adding the third person plural pronoun (*jen* or similar), either postnominally (Jamaican, Gullah), pronominally (Saramaccan, Sranan), or both (Krio, Guyanese) (Alleyne 1980a: 100). Definite nouns are morphologically marked, while indefinite nouns “usually
have unmarked plurals,” patterns that Alleyne suggests were inherited from West African languages (1980a: 101). Dijkhoff (1983) also links the variable occurrence of the Papiamentu plural marker -nan with the referential status of its head. Abstracting from Bickerton’s (1975) classification, she divides NPs into existentially presupposed, basically corresponding to definite NPs, which are overtly marked, existentially asserted, overtly marked only if plurality has not been otherwise indicated within the clause, and existentially hypothesized, corresponding roughly to generic or nonspecific NPs. Nouns in this context are never marked morphologically.

The sole attempt to test these predictions empirically in an English-based creole revealed that they did not hold. Rickford (1986) analyzed the variable occurrence of -s and zero on 128 semantically plural regular nouns in the speech of Mrs Queen, an elderly speaker of mesolectal Sea Island Creole (Gullah), according to nominal reference and the existence in the NP of a plural quantifier or demonstrative. Neither was selected as significant to the probability of plural marking, leading Rickford to conclude that the plural marking constraints [said to be] representative of basilectal creoles were not operative in the mesolect.

Mufwene (1986) contested his conclusion, asserting that the primary factors determining the presence of the English plural marker -s in Gullah were semantic, and suggesting that they were operative in English as well. He distinguished two axes of number delimitation: singular versus non-singular and individuated versus non-individuated. The first contrasts the number of the referent; the second, the speaker’s perception of it as denumerable or not. The classes distinguished by these axes also differ in terms of the kinds of determiners with which they combine: only individuated nouns may co-occur with numerals and individuating quantifiers. In contemporary StdE, with the exception of irregular forms, individuated nouns with plural reference are morphologically marked with -s, while non-individuated nouns (i.e. mass nouns and count nouns in noncount uses) remain unmarked, as in the italicized portions of (2).

(2) a. You couldn’t buy over two pound of rice, sugar, salt or anything.  
   (SE/1/343–5)

   b. You got trouble on your hand.  (ANSE/38/155A)

   c. And we just turned out like lot of cattle. You know how they turn cattle out in a pasture?  (ESR/8/104–5)

   Apparently virtually any noun can alternate freely between individuated and non-individuated uses in creoles, with individuated nouns receiving an ove
mark (as in English), and non-individuated nouns remaining “bare.” Accordingly, Mufwene (much like Alleyne 1980a; Bickerton 1975, 1979; Dijkhoff 1983; and others) proposed that plural individuated nouns should be delimited with the postnominal pluralizer, which in turn must co-occur with a possessive or the definite article. Individuated nouns delimited with other determiners require no morphological mark. In addition, the plural marker *den* should only be affixed to a noun which is both individuated and not otherwise disambiguated for number within the NP it heads.

### 3.3 Plural Marking in Contemporary AAVE

Early attempts to account for the variable, albeit infrequent, absence of plural -s in contemporary AAVE have appealed to three types of linguistic factors: (i) the principle of “non-redundant pluralization,” whereby nouns would remain bare in the environment of a numeral or some other determiner indicating plurality (e.g. Dillard 1972: 61; Stewart 1966: 64), (ii) phonetic conditioning, operating to delete or conserve an underlying plural suffix (Labov et al. 1968), and (iii) individual lexical preferences for certain nouns traditionally classified as count in English to be “reanalyzed” in AAVE as mass (Labov et al. 1968; Wolfram 1969). However, the findings on which these explanations were based do not support them in detail.

For example, although Wolfram’s (1969) analysis of plural marking in Detroit AAVE provided (at least weak) support for the non-redundant pluralization effect, Kessler’s (1972) study of Washington DC could not replicate it. Similarly, while Labov et al. (1968: 163) reported a favorable effect of following consonantal segment on plural -s absence in New York City, Wolfram (1969: 145) found only a minor phonological effect in Detroit, involving a different environment. Kessler (1972: 234) also invoked a “weak” phonological effect, but it did not replicate previous findings either. Finally, there have been various reports (e.g. Labov et al. 1968: 164; Wolfram 1969: 145; Kessler 1972: 233; and section 3.7.4) on the tendency of specific lexical items to occur with no plural marker, though these vary across studies.

In sum, although the same (few) factors are recurrently cited as constraining variability in plural -s inflection in contemporary AAVE, the effects reported have not been consistent, perhaps due to the paucity therein of zero-marked plurals (ranging from 2 percent to 11 percent depending on the variety studied). Nonetheless, as we show in what follows, these factors also account for variability in plural marking in earlier forms of English and AAE.
3.4 The Development of Plural Formation in English Nouns

The contemporary English pattern of plural formation via affixation of -s is the sole productive legacy of what, at earlier stages of the language, was a rich and complex morphology of number marking. Old English nouns fell into 10 distinct declensional classes which were variously inflected for case, number and gender (Mossé 1952: 50; Wardale 1937: 72). By the Early Middle English period the nominal declension system began to be radically simplified, with the result that forms once associated with particular nominal cases and classes began to merge (Curme 1977: 144).

Only three of the original plural types persist in Modern English. Weak plurals are formed by affixing -en to the noun stem (e.g. oxen, brethren and children, the sole survivors of this type). Mutation plurals (e.g. feet, men, women, mice, teeth, about half of which are preserved in modern StdE) are derived from vowel fronting in certain Old English nominative and accusative plurals. A class of Old English neuter nouns (including word, thing, leaf and year), which bore no overt plural inflection in the nominative and accusative, as well as a number of names of domestic animals (including horse, swine, deer, sheep), is said to have provided the model for the contemporary option of zero inflection in collectives and nouns of weight and measure (Curme 1977; Ekwall 1975; Mossé 1952: 51; Wyld 1927: 245). We shall have no more to say about the first two plural types, as they do not participate in the “variable context” defined in section 3.5.1. We return to the zero plurals below.

With the exception of the small set of irregular vestiges of Old English plural types listed above, and a somewhat larger set of nouns in which morphological singular and plural are not fully isomorphic with semantic singular and plural respectively, since the fourteenth century the vast majority of English nouns has formed the plural by affixation of -(e)s (Mossé 1952: 50). Though variability has been attested, most recurrently in nouns of weight, measure and monetary denomination, particularly when these are preceded by numerals, this has long been considered “obsolete or vulgar” (Sweet 1891: 316), and associated with regional, folk and/or uneducated dialects (e.g. Hughes and Trudgill 1979; Marckwardt 1958; McDavid and McDavid 1960, 1964; Pederson 1983).

Summarizing, both contemporary English and contemporary AAVE tend to form the plural with -s. Early AAE on the other hand, like older forms of English and (reports on) English-based creoles, features much zero plural. Which system gave rise to Early AAE plural marking? The property of plural -s variability with most repercussions for the origins debate is the fact that its
competing realizations — -s and zero — surface not only in contemporary AAVE, but also in all the relevant putative source varieties: English-based creoles, non-standard varieties of English, and Early AAE. This led Poplack and Tagliamonte (1989, 1991) to conclude that neither the existence of -s nor even its rates of occurrence were sufficient in and of themselves to resolve its prior status; this could only be accomplished by examining its distribution in the language, as determined by the hierarchy of constraints conditioning its appearance.

3.5 Data and Methods

The Early AAE data on which our analyses are based were extracted from taped conversations with 21 speakers of Samaná English (SE; Poplack and Sankoff 1987), 15 speakers of African Nova Scotian English (ANSE; Poplack and Tagliamonte 1991) and 10 contributors to the Ex-Slave Recordings (ESR; Bailey et al. 1991). We compare these with materials provided by 12 speakers of Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE, Tagliamonte et al. 1997), a West African creole,1

3.5.1 Circumscribing the variable context

We first delimit the context of occurrence of the plural marker -s, ensuring that the resulting data set is equally amenable to analysis in all of the comparison varieties (cf. Tagliamonte and Poplack 1993). Observing first that the plural categorically surfaces as zero in the vestigial contexts detailed in section 3.3 and example (2) above, we excluded these from ensuing quantitative analyses of variability, focusing instead on the variable occurrence of -s in regular, individuated, semantically plural nouns. These contexts exhaust the possibilities for productive plural marking in English and creoles, and additionally cover contexts where plural need not be overtly marked in the latter. As we shall see, the key difference between English and creoles resides in the category of generic reference. In creoles, generics are construed as non-individuating, and as such remain bare. Although number is also neutralized, strictly speaking, or English nouns with generic reference, these may either surface bare (in the context of definite and morphologically singular indefinite determiners: the or a) or be inflected with -s. Only the latter fall within the scope of this study. Such contexts (i.e. generics and, according to Dijkhoff (1983), disambiguated indefinites), in which the languages display different requirements for plural marking, will constitute the crucial test of the system underlying the distribution of -s and zero in Early AAE.
Even within the variable context of regular individuated nouns with plural reference, -s usage may be subject to exceptional distributions, phonetic neutralization and referential ambiguity, as detailed in Poplack and Tagliamonte (1994) and Tagliamonte et al. (1997). As is standard in variationist studies, we excluded forms for which plural reference could not be unambiguously inferred, basing our quantitative analysis only on productive participants in the regular process of plural formation. In the remainder of this chapter we use the term plural marking to refer only to (actual or potential) morphological marking by affixation of -s, as in the italicized portion in (3).

(3) When I look in like that, and I look in that door, and I look back in the corner, I seen them great big eyeO. (ANSE/3/884–6)

3.5.2 Coding and analysis

From the tape-recorded conversations constituting our corpora, we extracted every semantically plural individuated count noun eligible for -s affixation, totalling 2452 for the quantitative analysis of Early AAE and 1316 for NPE. Each was coded for phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic and semantic factors selected to reveal the origins of the observed variability by testing hypotheses about plural marking in Caribbean (e.g. Dijkhoff 1983; Mufwene 1986) and West African (Agheyisi 1971; Farclas 1989) creoles, contemporary AAVE (Kessler 1972; Labov et al. 1968; Schneider 1989; Wolfram 1969) and vernacular and StdE (e.g. Allan 1976, 1980; Fries 1940; McDavid and McDavid 1964), as well as to replicate empirical analyses of Gullah (Rickford 1986) and Liberian English (Singler 1989, 1991). These are described below.

3.5.2.1 Lexical identity of the head noun

Reports on the origins, development and present state of plural marking in English suggest that the occurrence of -s is highly dependent on the lexical identity of the noun to which it is affixed. To ascertain whether this also accounts for the observed variability in Early AAE, lexical entries occurring frequently (ten times or more) were distinguished from (the vast majority of) singletons.

3.5.2.2 Semantic classification

Another feature widely acknowledged to condition the variable occurrence of plural -s in English is the semantic classification of the noun to which it is affixed. The English language, both modern and early, has at its disposal a process of collectivization, expressed by a zero plural. Some noun classes are
purportedly more susceptible to collectivization than others (Baughan 1958; Curme 1977; Ekwall 1912; Wyld 1927). Perhaps most salient are (i) the class of
gregarious animals that are wild and/or hunted for food or sport (e.g. giraffe, lion, 
bear etc.) and (ii) nouns of weight (e.g. bushel, pound, ton), measure (e.g. year, mile, 
day), and monetary denomination (e.g. dollar, cent, pound). Each noun retained
in the data was categorized according to its membership in one of these classes.

3.5.2.3 Phonological conditioning
The existence of phonological conditioning is associated with the presence of an
underlying form. Although the extent to which it can reveal the nature of the
underlying system (and hence its origins) is unclear, we re-examine this factor
for two reasons. First, two varieties characterized as English-based creoles
(Gullah and Liberian Settler English) were reported to exhibit phonological
conditioning (Rickford 1986; Singler 1989). Secondly (in contrast with the
inconclusive results in contemporary AAVE), phonological effects also con-
tribute significantly to the variable realization of the homophonous verbal -s
morpheme in Early AAE (Poplack and Tagliamonte 1989; Tagliamonte and
Poplack to appear). Analysis of environmental effects in Early AAE will enable
us to situate it with respect to these varieties.

3.5.2.4 Disambiguation
By virtue of our definition of the variable context given in section 3.5.1, each
noun retained for analysis is fully disambiguated with regard to number refer-
ence. In what follows, however, the use we make of the term disambiguation
refers only to the concept of local disambiguation, i.e. the existence of (non-
inflectional) indicators of plurality within the NP headed by the noun in ques-
tion. Only local disambiguation is considered to affect plural marking in creoles;
in StdE, disambiguation, whether local or global, should have no effect. Accord-
ingly, each noun was also coded according to (i) whether its NP contained a
transparent indication of number (e.g. numeral, demonstrative) and (ii) whether
it was individuated, insofar as this was indicated by the choice of determiner.

3.5.2.5 Type of nominal reference
Type of nominal reference is the factor most widely invoked to explain vari-
ation in plural marking in creoles. Creoles do not assign an overt mark to nouns
with generic, and by some accounts (Alleyne 1980a, Dijkhoff 1983), other
indefinite reference, whereas in English, nouns (falling within the variable
context for inflection with -s) are not differentiated in this regard. Though not
generally acknowledged, categorization and operationalization of referential
status is very complex, especially in the case of non-specific nouns, which
(depending on scope considerations) sustain readings with varying degrees of
definiteness. Using a combination of syntactic criteria (Huddleston 1984;
Mufwene 1986) and observations of prescriptive and descriptive grammarians
(Jespersen 1909/1949; Quirk et al. 1972, 1985), we devised the following proto-
col, detailed in Poplack and Tagliamonte (1994).

Nouns modified by a possessive, a demonstrative (them/those/these), the
definite article (when used with definite reference), and/or previously men-
tioned in the discourse, were coded as definite. Indefinites included (i) numeric
quantifiers (with indefinite reference), (ii) other pluralizing quantifiers (e.g. *a
lot, some* etc.), (iii) partitive structures of the type *one/some/num/any of,* and
(iv) other indefinite expressions. Under generic reference, we included only
nouns that were unmodified by determiners, quantifiers, articles or pronouns,
as in (4) below, i.e. “pure” generics. For a modified noun to qualify as generic,
it had to be substitutable with its bare counterpart without changing meaning,
as in (4b).

(4)  
a. Interviewer: So what did you used to use *onion* for?

b. Informant: ... just used *the onions* for to cook with. (ANSE/6/474–5)

Despite our efforts to capture the nuances of nominal reference, pilot analysis
reveals that the independent effect of this factor group on variability in plural
marking cannot be assessed once combined in a multivariate analysis with the
factors of disambiguation and individuation. This is because these factors over-
lap (Poplack and Tagliamonte 1994): nouns delimited by demonstratives and
possessives have definite reference, those delimited by [+numeric, +individuating]
or [−numeric, +individuating] quantifiers fall into the category of indefinites,
while those with no determiner tend to be generics.7

3.5.2.6 NP constituency

To alleviate the problem of statistical interaction, we combined these factors
into a single factor group we refer to as “NP constituency,” which contains all
the distinctions of reference and determination adequately represented in the
data. This is an operationalization of Mufwene’s (1986) predictions, originally
presented in Singler’s analyses of plural marking in Liberian Settler English
(Singler 1989) and Liberian English (Singler 1991). We replicate it here, first
to enhance comparability, and secondly, because poor data distribution (which,
as noted above, is not unique to these data, but rather inherent) in fact pre-
cludes any other coding scheme. We therefore categorize nouns according to
prenominal modification, with the exception of generics, which may occur in
bare or determined form. The factors are then regrouped to examine the effects of disambiguation, individuation and nominal reference independently.

3.5.3 Hypothesis

If the Early AAE plural-marking system is a creole heritage, only semantically plural nouns delimited by a possessive pronoun or a definite article, as in the italicized portions in (5), should be marked morphologically. In variable terms, we may predict that such cases will be marked more frequently than those that are not so delimited.

(5)  a. I went to the door. I said, “put your hands on. I’ll cut your fingers off!” (ANSE/39/1336–7)

b. Yes, many time I’ve stumped my toes and blood run out. (ESR/8/89–90)

c. I get along good with the ones I know. (ANSE/7/765–6)

d. An’ so he shot three times and he commence to shoot until the plate commence to rattle on the table. (ESR/2/23–4)

Although, as we shall see, the specific creole postnominal pluralizer dem is not attested in any of our corpora, note that the system governing its appearance (in those creoles in which it is said to function as a plural marker) may also account for the variable occurrence of other morphological marks in Early AAE. Such a scenario has been proposed (in another connection) by Bickerton (1975), Winford (1985), and Mufwene (1983), and demonstrated by Singler (1989) for plural marking in acrolectal Liberian English. Indeed, plural marking with -s has been said to be inversely correlated with position on the creole continuum. Thus, the possibility of inferring the underlying grammar from the organization of variable marking behavior should not hinge on the presence or absence of a particular surface form. Ensuing analyses will help us determine which system best accounts for the observed variability in plural marking in Early AAE.

3.6 Results

Table 3.1 gives the results of three independent variable rule analyses (Rand and Sankoff 1990) of the contribution of phonological and semantic factors to
Table 3.1  Variable rule analysis of the contribution of phonological, structural, and semantic factors to the probability of zero plural in Saman English (SE), the Ex-Slave Recordings (ESR), and African Nova Scotian English (ANSE):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corrected mean:</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>ESR</th>
<th>ANSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Factor weight</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Factor weight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NP constituency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[+numeric, +individuating] Q</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>571</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partitive quantifier</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[-numeric, +individuating] Q</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrative</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definite article</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessive</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semantic classification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-weight/measure</td>
<td>[.53]</td>
<td>1217</td>
<td>[.52]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight/measure</td>
<td>[.42]</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>[.43]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preceding phonological segment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-sibilant consonant</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>951</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibilant consonant</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vowel</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following phonological segment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consonant</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>451</td>
<td>.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vowel</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>436</td>
<td>.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pause</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>562</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Factors not selected:
| Semantic classification | X | X |
| Preceding phonological segment | X |

* Brackets here and in ensuing tables indicate that the factor in question was not selected as significant by the stepwise multiple regression procedure incorporated in the variable-rule analysis program. Although there are not enough data to rigorously establish statistical significance for these factors, we note the remarkable similarities across varieties in direction of effect.
the probability the plural marker will surface as zero in each of the Early AAE varieties.

We first observe the by now familiar finding that non-sibilant consonants, in both preceding and following environments, favor zero plural, while vowels dis-favor. This behavior, identical to that already found for the homophonous 3rd person singular -s marker in Early AAE (Poplack and Tagliamonte 1989), is consistent with the phonotactic principles of many varieties of AAVE and English-based creoles, which tend to avoid syllable-final clusters and (to a lesser extent) syllable-final consonants. A much greater effect, as assessed by the range, is contributed by the factor we have referred to as NP constituency. Table 3.1 shows that the contexts predicted (section 3.2) to co-occur with an overt plural mark in creoles, namely the definite article and the possessive, show a marked tendency to retain -s (i.e. to disfavor zero) in Early AAE as well. But the fact that nouns with generic reference (the “bare” category par excellence in creoles) cluster among the factors with the lowest probabilities of zero plural in each of the datasets precludes explaining the variability in our materials by those creole predictions. Nor do the results correspond in any obvious way to what would be expected of StdE, as we shall see below. Yet NP constituency contributes the greatest effect to plural marking in each dataset, so we must ascertain how to interpret it. We first review the possible sources of zero plural in English.

3.7 Sources of Zero Plural in English

Although a morphological mark is prescribed for StdE individuated nouns with plural reference, there exist at least five sources of zero plural, which if not specifically predicted by the English number system, are not inconsistent with it. We now review their effect on the morphological expression of plural in Early AAE.

3.7.1 The definite/indefinite effect

The English requirement that the countability of the NP reference be known affects NP constituency through application of a disambiguation rule, formulated by Allan (1976) as in (6).

(6) “If his listeners do not already know the countability of the NP reference, the speaker must make it known to them.” (Allan 1976)
Where the speaker judges that the NP reference is already known, s/he chooses a definite NP; otherwise the NP will be indefinite. Since awareness of NP reference entails awareness of its countability, plural indefinites are typically morphologically marked as countable. Translating this observation into variable terms, we may predict that in an English system, indefinites would be marked more frequently than definites. Poplack and Tagliamonte (1994) tested this prediction, by replacing the factor of “NP Constituency” with “Type of Nominal reference”. But in none of the corpora could definite be distinguished from indefinite reference in terms of overt plural-marking probabilities.

### 3.7.2 The individuation/saliency effect

We noted in section 3.2 that nouns are said to alternate between individuated and non-individuated uses in creoles. The same is also true of English. Whether or not the referent is individuated is basically revealed through quantifier selection, such that numerals and individuating quantifiers co-occur, almost without exception, with individuated nouns. This observation, in conjunction with the principle of saliency (Lemle and Naro 1977), would lead us to expect more overt marking in individuated contexts, i.e. those including [+numeric, +individuating] quantifiers, [−numeric, +individuating] quantifiers (*many, several*) and pluralizing demonstratives (*them/these/those*). Contrary to the expectation just enunciated, however, the probabilities of zero plural for individuating determiners (figures in bold in table 3.1) are highest.

### 3.7.3 The collectivization effect

Another exception to the requirement that pluralizing individuating determiners must co-occur with marked count nouns in English involves the process of collectivization (Sweet 1891: 315; 1898: 46; Wyld 1927: 243). A collective reading may apply to nouns with “regular” (i.e. inflected) plurals which are used in the “singular” (zero) form (7a), and with plural concord (7b) (Allan 1976: 99). This reading is said to be strictly limited to the class of nouns referring to birds and animals that are hunted for food or sport, but not as vermin, in the specific contexts of hunting or conservation (Allan 1976: 99; Hansen and Nielsen 1986), also exemplified in (7).
(7)  a. We bagged three elephant\(O\) that day. \(\text{ (Allan 1976: 102)}\)

    b. The herd\(O\) were grazing peacefully when a lion disturbed them. \(\text{ (Allan}
    \text{ 1976: 550)}\)

As indicated in section 3.4, use of the singular (zero) variant for plural reference dates back to the Old English neuter inflection, whose form is said to have spread to these contexts by analogy with a new meaning of collectivity (Brunner 1963: 50; Curme 1977: 117). Has this process been extended, in Early AAE, to still other contexts, such as those in (1)? If so, zero plural should be favored in at least one of the source contexts. Poplack and Tagliamonte (1994) examined the distribution of zero plural in Early AAE nouns coded according to their membership in classes like weight/measure, hunted animals, and plants. They found such contexts to be exceedingly rare in the data, but zero plurals were also very sparse within them, leading them to conclude that the process of collectivization is not the source of the zero plurals in Early AAE.

### 3.7.4 The lexical effect

Different countability preferences of English nouns result in certain lexical items occurring in unmarked form in vernacular varieties. Zero plural is best documented in nouns of weight, measure and monetary denomination, especially after numerals, as in (8a), taken from Nova Scotian Vernacular English (NSVE; Poplack and Tagliamonte 1991). Zero plural in such contexts has been attested for general American (e.g. Fries 1940; Markwardt 1958; McDavid and McDavid 1960, 1964; Mencken 1971), and British English (e.g. Hughes and Trudgill 1979; Wakelin 1977), as well as in specific dialects like Appalachian (Wolfram and Christian 1976), East Tennessee Folk Speech (Pederson 1983), and Cockney (Wright 1981: 115). To judge by these sources, zero plural is limited almost exclusively to the lexical items foot, mile, year, gallon, pound, bushel and month. Inch, ton, hour, week, dollar and cent are cited sporadically.

(8)  a. I had to go about twenty mile\(O\) into Swift Current. \(\text{ (NSVE/JG/1A)}\)

    b. I . . . paid twenty five dollar\(O\) for the dress and ten dollar\(O\) for the ring. \(\text{ (ANSE/8/87–9)}\)

    c. I’m a hundred years old and I don’t owe nobody five cents . . . \(\text{ (ESR/8/25–6)}\)
Although the “weight and measure” effect is not characteristic of Early AAE (table 3.1), where such nouns feature more overt marks, this does not mean that there are no individual lexical preferences for zero plural. Indeed, a number of frequently-occurring Early AAE nouns show a propensity either for zero plural (e.g. time, day) or for -s (e.g. year), and these marking patterns are shared across varieties (Poplack and Tagliamonte 1994: 246). We return to this observation below.

Summarizing, none of the above-mentioned sources of zero plural in English offers a straightforward explanation of the observed variability in the Early AAE, with the possible exception of the countability preferences of particular lexical items. What then is the explanation for the robust effect of NP constituency?

3.7.5 A functional effect

Table 3.2 reproduces from table 3.1 the probabilities of zero plural associated with the factors making up the NP constituency group, this time organized according to the factor of (local) disambiguation. The table shows that nouns least likely to surface with a zero plural are those appearing in number-neutral syntactic contexts, i.e. those that co-occur freely with singular or plural inflections and thus cannot themselves disambiguate number reference. These include nouns modified by a definite article or possessive as well as undetermined nouns, like most generics. On the other hand, in contexts in which number

Table 3.2 Variable rule analysis of the contribution of NP constituency factors, grouped according to disambiguation, in Samana English (SE), the Ex-Slave Recordings (ESR), and African Nova Scotian English (ANSE) to the probability of zero plural (reproduced from table 3.1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NP constituency</th>
<th>+/- Disambiguation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[+numeric, +individuating] Q</td>
<td>+dis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partitive Q</td>
<td>+dis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[-numeric, +individuating] Q</td>
<td>+dis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrative</td>
<td>+dis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definite article</td>
<td>-dis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic</td>
<td>-dis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessive</td>
<td>-dis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
delimitation is expressed independently of the plural affix (those including numerals or [-numeric, +individuating] quantifiers), zero plural is preferred. Note that although the individual factor weights may vary from dialect to dialect, a comparison of factor weights relative to each other within each variety reveals a distinction (clearest in ANSE and SE) between nouns that are disambiguated and nouns that are not: the former favor zero plural. Nowhere is the creole pattern of high zero in generics in evidence. A major pattern of the observed variability, then, is functional: the plural marker is affixed to a noun when plurality has not been otherwise overtly expressed within the clause containing it.

3.7.6 Functionalism and the creole hypothesis

Now, we have seen that the factor of disambiguation – specifically, local disambiguation – plays an important role in plural-marking predictions (Bickerton 1975; Dijkhoff 1983; Mufwene 1986; Rickford 1986) for creoles. To what extent does the Early AAE pattern depicted in table 3.2 mirror those predictions? There is at least one critical difference. Under a strict local disambiguation system, generics (which tend to surface undetermined) should show high rates of morphological marking, as in fact they do in these materials. But in creoles, the opposite is predicted. Indeed, the only way to distinguish between a garden-variety disambiguation system and the creole local disambiguation system is through the behavior of generics. Interestingly, when Singler (1989) first operationalized and tested Mufwene’s predictions (section 3.2) on the Liberian English creole continuum, as well as on the diaspora variety, Liberian Settler English, he found that they basically did not hold. But it was the behavior of generics, throughout the Liberian continuum as well as with the three Settlers Singler studied, that led him to observe that “in retaining a tendency to avoid marking generic nouns as plural, Liberian Settler English displays a creole characteristic” (1989: 58).

3.8 Plural Marking in Nigerian Pidgin English

In this context it will be instructive to confront our findings for plural marking in Early AAE with reports and findings for plural marking in creoles, and to compare these in turn with observed plural marking behavior in such a system. In this section we examine NPE, spoken since the eighteenth century in Nigeria (e.g. Fayer 1982, 1990: 185), where it now qualifies as a lingua franca (Agheyisi 1988; Farclas 1989; Fayer 1990; Mafeni 1971; Shnukal and Marchese 1983).
Although technically an “extended pidgin” (Alleyne 1980b; Todd 1974), since for much of the population it does not enjoy mother-tongue status, on linguistic grounds such varieties are indistinguishable from creoles (Singler 1988). Indeed, NPE has figured prominently in a recent effort to assess West African substrate influence on the tense-mood-aspect and copula systems of AAVE (DeBose and Faracas 1993). The authors stress the considerable morphosyntactic correspondences between this and the other languages of Southern Nigeria, observing further that the structures which typify these languages are in turn “almost identical to those which characterize the great majority of Afro-American language varieties, and that the forms used in Nigerian Pidgin are strikingly similar to those used in the English lexifier creoles of the Caribbean” (1993: 375).

3.8.1 Number marking in NPE

Little has been published about number marking in NPE, beyond the widespread assumption that it is optional now (Agheyisi 1971: 131; Faracas 1989: 353), and apparently has been since at least the eighteenth century (Fayer 1982: 102). According to Faracas (1989), most nouns are assumed to be singular in NPE unless otherwise indicated morphosyntactically or pragmatically. In addition, a generic reading is said to be available for bare nouns. Among the morphosyntactic means reported to signal plurality are the following, illustrated with data from our corpus of relatively acrolectal NPE: prenominal determiners, such as numerals and number-transparent indefinite quantifiers, as in (9), and postnominal *den*, as in (10), which is claimed to be the most common (Faracas 1989: 353), if not the only (Mafeni 1971: 110) plural marker in NPE. Not specifically listed among plural markers in the sources we consulted (though it is cited in Faracas’s (1989) example 768 as a “borrowing”) is the (StdE) affix –vs. This is exemplified in (9) and (11). Other ways of signaling plurality in the absence of a mark are said to be contextual, relying on prior information to disambiguate the number of the noun in question.

(9) a. a don taya kas a bIn put /ftin awas tude. (01/538)
   “I’m tired because I put in fifteen hours (at work) today.”

   b. meni giels wan mek a bi dea baijen. (09/2261)
   “Many girls wanted me to be their boyfriend.”

(10) bifo na dog, dey de ssn… na wun biai dem de go… (07/293)
   “Before, it was dogs that they were sending [to the moon]… now human beings are going.”
Table 3.3  Overall distribution of plural markers in Nigerian Pidgin English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% of data</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-s</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>783</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zero</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>519</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>post-nominal dem</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-s + dem</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
<td></td>
<td>1316</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(11) a. If yu go daun Walkley, at taim na brxd, adiniri brxd, at taims na kek. (06/257)
“If you go down to Walkley, at times it’s ordinary bread; at times it’s cake.”

b. awa pipi se wén mani no kil man, fiɛns an ɛda riɛšn no kil am, wuman no kil am, se im go las bng. (09/1744)
“Our people say that when money doesn’t kill a man, friends and other relations don’t kill him, women don’t kill him, he’ll last a long time.”

These observations correspond in essence to the characterizations of plural marking in Caribbean English–based creoles in section 3.2 above. There are also clear parallels with the number systems of the various West African languages spoken by our informants, which tend not to distinguish singular and plural morphologically (Carnochan 1962; Lawal 1986; Welmers 1973). Rather, in both Igbo and Yoruba, for example, bare nouns receive generic reading, and individuation (singular or plural) is expressed through the addition of specific modifiers. In Igbo, the first language of most of the NPE speakers in our sample, animate and inanimate nouns must be further distinguished. Bare inanimate nouns have generic reference, while bare human nouns receive a singular interpretation, unless plurality is otherwise specified (Welmers 1973: 220). A similar contrast between [±human] and [±animate] is found in a number of other West African languages.

NPE has an additional interesting property: like the Early AAE varieties, it features robust use of -s and zero in plural marking contexts, making it ideal for our comparative purposes. This may be seen in table 3.3, which gives the overall distribution of plural markers in our NPE data.
Source of Early AAE Plural Marking

We first note that postnominal *dem*, as in (10) and (12), claimed to be the most commonly utilized means of signaling plurality in NPE nouns, is vanishingly rare, not even accounting for 1 percent of the data.

(12) a. an ol doz tipz dem, a no de si. (02/887)
   “And all those things, I don’t see them.”

The English affix *-s*, on the other hand, though not cited in treatments of NPE number marking, represents the most frequent variant, at 59 percent. Has it been “borrowed” into NPE, as suggested by Faraclas (1989: 358)? The response to this question lies, once again, in the conditioning of its variable occurrence. If the factors determining the appearance of *-s* in the data are consistent with those relevant to an English system of plural marking (as established in section 3.7 above), we may conclude in the affirmative.

Accordingly, we begin by replicating on NPE our analyses of plural marking in Early AAE. Subsequently, we incorporate the factor of animacy, to assess whether this key determinant of number marking in the West African languages these informants speak natively (Tagliamonte et al. 1997) also plays a role in their NPE.

3.9 Results

The results of the variable rule analysis of the contribution of these factors to plural marking in NPE are as in table 3.4. As a first observation, neither preceding nor following phonological segment was selected as significant to the morphological expression of plural. Unlike Early AAE, where phonological factors exercise a robust and statistically significant effect, a null plural in NPE cannot be construed as resulting from the application of a phonological rule, and should rather be viewed as the output of a grammatical process. What is this process? The same table shows that two non-phonological factors were selected as significant – semantic classification of the noun and NP constituency. But the specific noun-class effect associated with zero plural in English is not characteristic of NPE. If anything, as in Early AAE, nouns of weight and measure appear to favor an *s*-marked plural. This is exemplified in (13).

(13) a. a dey slks mins wI am fə Enlan. (01/13)
   “I was with them for six months in England.”
Table 3.4  Variable rule analysis of the contribution of phonological, structural, and semantic factors to the probability of zero plural in Nigerian Pidgin English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corrected mean</th>
<th>Factor weight</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NP constituency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>511</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partitive quantifier</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessive</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[-numeric, +individuating] Q</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definite article</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[+numeric, +individuating] Q</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrative</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semantic classification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-weight/measure</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>1141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight/measure</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preceding phonological segment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-sibilant consonant</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>604</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vowel</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following phonological segment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consonant</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>552</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vowel</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors not selected:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b.  i gIv mi wɔn hɔndrəd pouns; a valyu dat wɔn hɔndrəd pouns.  (09/994–5)
    “He gave me one hundred pounds; I valued that one hundred pounds.”

More revealing is the effect of “NP constituency,” the factor group operationalizing Mufwene’s (1986) and other predictions for creoles. Recall that empirical tests of these predictions (Singler 1989, 1991) on Liberian varieties revealed that only one important effect could be confirmed: NPs with generic
reference, as in (14), showed a greater propensity to surface bare than any other NP type, the tendency Singler (1989: 58) referred to as "creole characteristic."

(14) a. na de wey got de slip. (09/955)
   "That's where goats sleep."

b. wi get friens wey wi de camst al di taim. (01/647)
   "We have friends that we go out with all the time."

NPE resembles Liberian Settler English in showing a high generic effect with regard to the other factors in the NP constituency group. This result supports both the predictions for creoles and Singler's empirical findings, at least insofar as the behavior of generics is concerned. But the effect in table 3.4 is not as clear as that found by Singler: in NPE the distinction between the effect of generic reference and that of the other factors is gradient, rather than sharp. In particular, generics appear to contribute the same effect as partitives, a finding that does not correspond to any predictions.

In seeking to explain this result, we now consider the possibility that the analysis we have imposed in table 3.4 (via factors selected to replicate our analyses of Early AAE) does not fit well with the facts of NPE. We noted earlier that animacy is a key determinant of morphological structure in many West African, as well as other languages of the world. One opposition that correlates closely with animacy (or with its common linguistic reflection, the distinction between human and non-human) is the existence of number. NPs ranking higher on the animacy hierarchy (e.g. those referring to humans) generally feature a number distinction, while those ranking lower do not (Comrie 1981: 181). This is exemplified in (15a–b).

(15) a. di bəz de lisin tu am. (01/639)
   "The boys were listening to him."

b. a kəm ənta bigIn wash pleʔ. (01/098)
   "I came in and started washing plates."

Translated into variable terms, if NPE plural-marking patterns are the grammatical legacy of a typical West African language, the factor of animacy should exercise a statistically significant effect on the choice of overt plural marks. Table 3.5 incorporates the factor of animacy into an analysis also testing the effects of phonological environment and type of determiner.
Table 3.5 Variable rule analysis of the contribution of phonological, structural, and semantic factors to the probability of zero plural in Nigerian Pidgin English, incorporating the factor of animacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corrected mean</th>
<th>.397</th>
<th>Factor weight</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Animacy of the noun</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[-animate, -human]</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>992</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[+animate, +human]</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>324</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of determiner</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undetermined</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>515</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessive</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>86</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definite Article</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>192</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrative</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>162</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-numeric Quantifier</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>122</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numeric Quantifier</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>237</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preceding phonological segment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-sibilant consonant</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>604</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vowel</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>361</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following phonological segment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consonant</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>532</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vowel</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>165</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Factors not selected:
Preceding phonological segment; following phonological segment

Both determiner type and animacy are selected as significant. Number-neutral determination structures, including possessives, definite articles and bare nouns (figures in bold in table 3.5), favor a null mark. This runs counter to the received wisdom about plural marking in creoles, according to which a mark should be favored in contexts where plurality has not been otherwise disambiguated in the NP headed by the noun in question. In NPE, in contrast, these contexts show the greatest probability of zero plural, even possessives and definites, the determiners predicted in the creole literature to receive an overt mark. What seems to be operating here is not a “functional” effect, as has been
invoked for other English-based creoles, but a counter-functional one, akin to the principle of saliency proposed by Lemle and Naro (1977) with regard to subject–verb agreement. As in the Brazilian Portuguese case they describe, the NPE plural also tends to be marked overtly in contexts in which its absence would be most noticeable. This is illustrated in the examples in (16a) and (16b), where the nouns follow number-transparent determiners.

(16) a. a kəm du sociology fo ʈɾiˈjias a kəm kəm aut. (013/217)
   “I did sociology for three years. I came out.”

   b. əl doz deti ʃəs wey əl doz yeYe həis wey dey fo strit de du yu no. (01/479)
   “All those dirty jobs that all those worthless boys in the street do, you know.”

The greatest probability of zero marking is contributed by the undetermined nouns, which we know to consist mainly of generics. This effect was confirmed in Poplack and Tagliamonte (1994), who re-analyzed the data according to referential status of the NP. Recall that the behavior of generics, though characterized as the “creole” effect in discussions on plural marking, is in the first instance, an African-language effect. For example, Igbo, the first language of most of our informants, is basically devoid of nominal inflectional morphology, and bare nouns normally receive generic reading. As mentioned above, because animacy crosscuts nominal reference and determination in Igbo, if a system analogous to it were operating in NPE, we should expect to find most zero plural on [–animate] nouns and most overt marking on [+human] nouns, with [±animate, –human] nouns showing an intermediate effect. And indeed, the factor of animacy favors morphological marking in the direction posited, regardless of the configuration of other factors.

Summarizing, variability in plural marking in NPE is conditioned by two factors. One is animacy: nouns with human referents favor overt marking. The other is some combination of the syntactic structure of the noun phrase and the referential status of its head, particularly insofar as this is manifested in the behavior of undetermined nouns, which in turn tend to have generic reference. Such nouns display the highest probabilities of null marking.

How do these findings hold up against the predictions for creole systems more generally? First, overt marking is predicted to occur least in otherwise disambiguated contexts; the opposite is the case in NPE. Second, more overt marking is predicted in definite contexts, yet these feature most zero in our
data. Third, and perhaps foremost, is the prediction that nouns with generic reference will surface with no overt mark. This effect does obtain in NPE. But our analyses show that it cannot be unambiguously disentangled from the undetermined status of most generic nouns in the plural, nor, as it turns out, from the factor of animacy. We conclude that the results, while not inconsistent with all the predictions for creoles, at least as enunciated by Mufwene (1986) and others, do not support them in detail. A similar finding was reported by Singler (1989) for Liberian Settler English. On the other hand, the factors contributing significant effects to plural marking in NPE are entirely consistent with a scenario involving substratum influence from Igbo, a hypothesis which was confirmed by Tagliamonte et al. (1997).

More important to our comparative endeavor in this chapter, no factors relevant to, or even consistent with, an English system of plural marking were revealed to be significant in any of the analyses of NPE, regardless of configuration of data. This despite the extensive contact experienced by the speakers in our sample with that language. Rather, the factors selected as significant may only be construed as relevant to the substrate or to NPE itself.

3.10 Situating Early AAE vis-à-vis Other Comparison Varieties

What are the implications of these results for assessing the origins of contemporary AAVE? We have stressed that inferences in this regard should be based on systematic comparison of plural marking in its precursor(s) as well as in English-based creoles, as made in preceding sections. But we must also rule out the possibility that the Early AAE data were coded in ways that obscured the relevant distinctions, as we have seen to be the case for the analysis of NPE in table 3.4, an issue first raised by Bickerton (1975: 131) with regard to Labov et al.’s (1968) and other early analyses (Fasold 1972; Labov 1969; Wolfram 1969) of past-tense marking in AAVE. Accordingly, table 3.6 compares the NPE patterns with those for Early AAE, now recoded for the factors of animacy and nominal reference to enhance comparability, as well as with results for several English-based creoles.

The factors conditioning plural marking in Early AAE could hardly differ more from those operative in NPE. Early AAE shows a robust phonological effect, NPE has none. Early AAE shows a local disambiguation effect, with more morphological marking in contexts that are number-neutral, while NPE shows the opposite, with more plural marking in contexts that are number-transparent
Table 3.6  Variable rule analysis of the contribution of recoded factors to the probability of zero plural in Samaná English (SE), the Ex-Slave Recordings (ESR), and African Nova Scotian English (ANSE), compared with Gullah (Rickford 1986: table 3), Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE), Liberian Settler English (LSE) (Singler 1989: table 9), and Liberian English (LE) (Singler 1991: table 36.2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Early AAE</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ANSE</td>
<td>ESR</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Gullah</td>
<td>NPE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Corrected mean</strong></td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total N</strong></td>
<td>1353</td>
<td>427</td>
<td>1672</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>1316</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Animacy of the noun**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>[animate, -human]</th>
<th>[animate, +human]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[animate, -human]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[animate, +human]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Type of nominal reference**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>[ ]</th>
<th>[.27</th>
<th>[ ]</th>
<th>[ ]</th>
<th>[.57</th>
<th>[.59</th>
<th>[.65</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generic</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>[.58</td>
<td>[.55</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>[.64</td>
<td>[.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definite and indefinite</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>[.45</td>
<td>[.42</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>[.49</td>
<td>[.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Preceding phonological segment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>[ ]</th>
<th>[.58</th>
<th>[.55</th>
<th>[.65</th>
<th>[.64</th>
<th>[.72</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-sibilant consonant</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>[.37</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibilant consonant</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>[.49</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Following phonological segment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>[ ]</th>
<th>[.61</th>
<th>[.53</th>
<th>[.62</th>
<th>[.61</th>
<th>[.61</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consonant</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>[.53</td>
<td>[.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vowel</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>[.37</td>
<td>[.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pause</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>[.37</td>
<td>[.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(cf. tables 3.1 and 3.5). Generic reference, or zero determiner, contributes the lowest probability of zero marking in the Early AAE varieties in which it was selected as significant, the highest in NPE. Animacy is not significant in Early AAE; it contributes the strongest effect in NPE. We interpret the latter two effects as being related to substratum influence in the NPE case, and lack thereof in Early AAE.

How do the NPE results compare with those of the other pidgin/creole varieties? The accountable empirical methodology afforded by the variationist paradigm is beginning to yield results suitable for cross-linguistic comparison of the contributions to plural marking in the English-based creoles.\(^5\) Table 3.6
reveals that these are: (i) the generic reference effect, which shows up in each of NPE, Liberian Settler English and Liberian English, and (ii) the animacy effect, which shows up in NPE and Liberian English. Preceding phonological segment is selected as significant in most varieties; these share a variable process of consonant cluster simplification, though they handle epenthetic vowel insertion after sibilants differently. Where the Early AAE varieties differ from English-based creoles is with regard to following phonological segment,7 In each of the former (but none of the latter), we observe the by now familiar effect: consonants favor zero realization. We conclude that though Early AAE and English-based creoles mark the plural by means of the same two variants (−s and zero), their selection is constrained by different configurations of constraints.

3.11 Discussion

Summarizing, in the three varieties of Early AAE studied here, plural marking via −s was far more variable than in contemporary AAVE. We have attempted in this chapter to uncover the source of that variability. Our findings indicate that despite rates of zero plural far in excess of what is reported today, a robust system of variable plural marking was already in place. Motivating that system was the rule in (17).

(17) Mark semantically plural regular individuated count nouns with −s.

Competing with this rule was the well-documented African American English phonological tendency to remove the −s where its presence would result in a syllable-final cluster, or, to a lesser extent, consonant. And cross-cutting these was the functional rule in (18).

(18) Make the number reference of the NP known when not otherwise overtly expressed clause-internally.

This type of interplay between (morpho-)phonological reduction and function is a well-documented process in language and is not unique to either English or creoles.

What then is the origin of these plural-marking patterns in Early AAE? To the extent that they can be characterized as language-specific, they are consistent with those attested in the development of contemporary English. The historical record leaves no doubt that the zero plural was once a fully viable
entity in English in its capacity as neuter inflection, as detailed in section 3.2. Though this plural type is reported to have merged with its more productive counterpart in -s by the Middle English period, it is equally clear that an important residue of forms remained recalcitrant, constituting a (continuing) source of embarrassment for the grammarian. Indeed, perusal of grammars of English, whether early or modern, confirms that the zero variant has always featured in treatments of plural marking. Three explanations are traditionally offered for its persistence, one invoking word-class membership, a second attributing it to determiner type, and the third endowing it with a “new” meaning, namely collectivization. The first two of course recall those more recently invoked to explain plural marking variability in AAVE (section 3.3).

Though these may well be different labels for a single effect (Poplack and Tagliamonte 1994), we stress here that they include a robust precedent for the variability observed in many descendant varieties. Our findings suggest that this variability is what Early AAE inherited: the phonological effect may be viewed as a reflection of the preference (also observed in contemporary Nova Scotian Vernacular English) for deleting plural -s where this results in cluster simplification. The English tendency for zero plurals to cluster in certain word classes is evidenced, if not by a propensity towards zero-marking specifically in nouns of weight and measure (which in turn rarely occur without numeric determiners), then by a shared preference for zero forms in other lexical items (section 3.6). Perhaps the most compelling evidence in favor of the suggestion that the plural-marking patterns observed in our materials were acquired from English, however, comes from the behavior of the (functional) factor of disambiguation. We noted earlier that the oft-cited English “numeric determiner effect” could itself be construed as functional, a suggestion supported by the fact that as far back as Old English, prenominal adjectives were already doing double duty as number markers in at least two nominal declensions. Indeed, such disambiguated contexts were found to contain proportionally more zero plurals in a neighboring Nova Scotian Vernacular English variety than in Early AAE (Poplack and Tagliamonte 1994). We may interpret this as further evidence that disambiguation constraints interact with morphological marking in varieties of English permitting plural-marker deletion.

Our conclusions with regard to the source of the plural-marking patterns in Early AAE are bolstered by a (methodologically consistent) comparison with NPE. Although Early AAE and NPE share the same plural markers, their variable selection is conditioned by factors of a different order. Those identified for Early AAE are remnants of those operating at an earlier stage of the English language (and still visible in the variability featured by other contemporary vernacular varieties of English). Those relevant to NPE are arguably substratal
features, since they are precisely the ones attested in Igbo, the first language of most of our informants, as well as in other African languages. Such influence is to be expected of an extended pidgin like NPE, among whose characteristics are continued contact with the substrate(s). The quintessentially creole “generic effect” is also apparent in both the West African creoles studied by Singler, while neither nominal reference nor animacy affect Early AAE in the directions predicted by creole or African substrate influences.

In this chapter we have complied with Bickerton’s (1975: 25) observation that similarity between languages cannot be proven “by simply producing superficially similar surface structures in those languages, [but rather] by producing grammars which [are] substantially identical.” This caveat is particularly germane to the study of plural marking, since in each of the comparison varieties, the same variants – the English affix -s and phonetic zero – account disproportionately for the available options. In none of them do the overt creole (or relevant African-language) plural form(s) figure in the productive inventory. Yet making use of systematic variationist methodology, and a broadly comparative base, we have succeeded in demonstrating that the factors responsible for their variable organization in Early AAE and NPE discourse are different. This provides strong empirical confirmation, contra Patrick et al. (1993), of our earlier demonstrations (following Bickerton 1975, and Singler 1990; cf. also Mufwene 1984; Rickford 1977; Winford 1985) that the grammar underlying variable linguistic elements may be inferred from their distribution and conditioning in discourse. Moreover, this is the case even when none of the surface forms originate from that grammar.

We have also documented substantial similarities among the three varieties studied here, despite their having evolved in widely separated parts of the world for nearly two centuries. This, along with a growing body of other evidence (Poplack and Tagliamonte 1991, and forthcoming), militates in favor of a genetic relationship among them. Notably, none of the effects reported (or documented by us) for NPE, or for the other English-based creoles, are operative in Early AAE. This is particularly evident in the behavior of generics. An explanation of Early AAE number marking based on decreolization thus cannot be substantiated.

The existence of robust variability and the constraints operating upon it has heretofore been obscured by the (parallel?) development in both StdE. and contemporary AAVE of a plural-marking system in which -s is the norm. This points up the problems involved in exclusive reliance on contemporary StdE as a comparison point, without also considering the details of its development. We are now in a position to explain the anomalous finding that Early AAE features more zero marking than contemporary AAVE, when the opposite is true in
most other cases of morphological variability we have examined: both the zero marks and the variable grammar giving rise to them were present in contemporaneous varieties of English which formed the models for Early AAE speakers.

Notes

* We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Social Science and Research Council of Canada for the project of which this research forms part. This chapter is an abridged and synthesized version of Poplack and Tagliamonte (1994) and Tagliamonte et al. (1997).

1 Codes in parentheses identify speaker and line number in the following corpora: Samana English (SE), the Ex-Slave Recordings (ESR), African Nova Scotian English (ANSE), Nova Scotian Vernacular English (NSVE), and Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE).

2 Full details of data collection, coding and analytical procedures may be found in Poplack and Tagliamonte (1991, 1994) and Tagliamonte et al. (1997).

3 This dependence explains the erratic behavior (not shown here) of the factor of nominal reference in variable rule analyses also containing the factors of disambiguation and individuation, as inferred from type of determiner. It may well also be responsible for the fact that neither (what we have called) nominal reference nor type of determiner was selected as significant in Rickford’s (1986) variable rule analysis of plural marking in Mrs Queen’s speech (section 3.2).

4 Variability in the treatment of collective nouns as singular or plural persists to this day (cf. British and American English).

5 We noted in section 3.5.2.5 that the factors of nominal reference and NP constituency could not be combined in a multivariate analysis because of the overlap between them. However, independent analysis of their contributions to plural marking (Tagliamonte et al. 1997) reveals that these are basically just different labels for the same phenomenon.

6 In fact, the quantitative results in table 3.6, though all derived from variable rule analyses, are not entirely analogous, for the usual reasons relating to coding practices, factor-group configurations and factors considered. We therefore reproduce only factors directly comparable to the ones discussed here. Some figures were recalculated for purposes of clarity. For example, factor weights for Liberian English, Liberian Settler English, and Jamaican Creole were given for -s presence; we converted them to probabilities for zero. Because no totals were given in the analysis of Liberian English, we reproduce the probability for the generic category only, and indicate that the other factors in its factor group contributed a lesser effect to the probability of zero plural. Similarly, although Patrick et al. did not code the factor of “Type of Nominal reference” identically to the way we did, we were able to convert the percentages and totals they provided into figures comparable to those reported here. The results reproduced in table 3.6 all come from runs including several other
factor groups. These may have affected their relative importance (as assessed by the range), and even whether or not they were selected as significant. The comparisons we make in section 3.10 therefore involve only the constraint hierarchies. We follow convention in referring to the speech of “Mrs Queen” as Gullah, and that of Singler’s three informants as Liberian Settler English. As previously, factor groups indicated by square brackets were included, but not selected as significant in the analysis. Factor groups indicated by a dash were not considered.

7 With the exception of Gullah (on whose status we take no stand), which patterns like the Early AAE varieties. Rickford himself observed that the absence of the plural marker in Mrs Queen’s speech was best described as a deletion rule with phonological constraints (Rickford 1986, 1990).

References


Source of Early AAE Plural Marking


Language in Society

GENERAL EDITOR
Peter Trudgill, Chair of English Linguistics, University of Fribourg

ADVISORY EDITORS
J. K. Chambers, Professor of Linguistics, University of Toronto
Ralph Fasold, Professor of Linguistics, Georgetown University
William Labov, Professor of Linguistics, University of Pennsylvania
Lesley Milroy, Professor of Linguistics, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

1 Language and Social Psychology
   Edited by Howard Giles and Robert N. St Clair

2 Language and Social Networks (Second Edition)
   Lesley Milroy

3 The Ethnography of Communication (Second Edition)
   Marjolaine Sarrouilhe

4 Discourse Analysis
   Michael Stubbs

5 The Sociolinguistics of Society: Introduction to Sociolinguistics, Volume I
   Ralph Fasold

6 The Sociolinguistics of Language: Introduction to Sociolinguistics, Volume II
   Ralph Fasold

7 The Language of Children and Adolescents: The Acquisition of Communicative Competence
   Suzanne Romaine

8 Language, the Sexes and Society
   Philip M. Smith

9 The Language of Advertising
   Turhan Vestergaard and Kim Schrøder

10 Dialects in Contact
    Peter Trudgill

11 Pidgin and Creole Linguistics
    Peter Midhunter

12 Observing and Analysing Natural Language: A Critical Account of Sociolinguistic Method
   Lesley Milroy

13 Bilingualism (Second Edition)
   Suzanne Romaine

14 Sociolinguistics and Second Language Acquisition
   Dennis R. Preston

15 Pronouns and People: The Linguistic Construction of Social and Personal Identity
   Peter Midhunter and Ron Harris

16 Politically Speaking
   John Wilson

17 The Language of the News Media
   Allan Bell

18 Language, Society and the Elderly: Discourse, Identity and Ageing
   Nicholas Compland, Janine Compt and Howard Giles

19 Linguistic Variation and Change
   James Milroy

20 Principles of Linguistic Change
   William Labov

21 Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach
   Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong Scollon

22 Sociolinguistic Theory: Language Variation and Its Social Significance
   J. K. Chambers

23 Text and Corpus Analysis: Computer-assisted Studies of Language and Culture
   Michael Stubbs

24 Anthropological Linguistics
   William Foley

25 American English Dialects and Variation
   Wilt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes

26 African American Vernacular English: Features, Evolution, Educational Implications
   John R. Rickford

27 Linguistic Variation as Social Practice: The Linguistic Construction of Identity in Belen High
   Pamela Eckert

28 The English History of African American English
   Edited by Shana Pappal
The English History of African American English

Edited by
Shana Poplack
Contents

List of Tables                                    x
List of Maps                                      xiv
List of Figures                                   xiv
Series Editor’s Preface                          xv
Preface                                          xvi
List of Abbreviations                            xviii
List of Contributors                             xx

1 Introduction                                    1
   Shana Poplack

   1.1  Preamble                                  1
   1.2  The Diachrony Problem                    3
   1.3  The African American Diaspora           4
   1.4  Validating the Diaspora Data as Evidence of an Earlier Form of AAVE  10
   1.5  A Note on Nomenclature: “Early” AAE      13
   1.6  A Variationist Perspective              14
   1.7  Comparative Reconstruction             15
   1.8  The Principle of “Diagnosticity”         18
   1.9  Non-Independence of Explanatory Factors 19
   1.10 Morphophonological Variables            20
   1.11 Morphosyntactic Variables               22
   1.12 Syntactic Variables                     23
   1.13 Sociohistorical Considerations          24