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5 'Deformed in the dialects'

An alternative history of non-standard English[1]

Shana Poplack, Gerard Van Herk and Dawn Harvie

Introduction

Many salient non-standard features of contemporary English and its varieties are widely held to be recent innovations, generated by rural, uneducated, minority and other marginal speakers. This is particularly true of morphological and syntactic features. *Ain't*, demonstrative *them* and a variety of verbal inflections, among others, have become stereotypically associated, and ultimately identified, with specific (non-standard) varieties. African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is a prime example. Its distinctive morphosyntax has spurred a massive long-term research effort to locate its origins, typically, in the African mother tongues of the ancestors of current speakers, and in attendant processes of creolisation and decreolisation.

Recent research (Poplack 2000a; Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001) has proposed an alternative history for these forms, one that is firmly rooted in the internal evolution of English vernaculars. We have argued that reliance on the prescribed standard as a metric, coupled with inattention to the history and evolution of spoken English, conspire to obscure the fact that many of the non-standard features today associated with AAVE are not innovations, but *retentions* of Early Modern English (and older) forms. Such retentions are a by-product of the sociolinguistically peripheral status of the speech communities in which they are used. This chapter describes the novel use of existing resources that led us to these conclusions. The *Ottawa Grammar Resource on Early Variability in English* (OGREVE) is a unique compilation of reference grammars of the English language written between 1577 and 1898. Though a number of other such bibliographies are available, most notably Sundby *et al.* (1991), Görlach (1998) and Fries (1925), the OGREVE is unique in its emphasis on linguistic variability of earlier times. The data of the OGREVE, when properly exploited, enable us to: (1) infer the existence of such variability, (2) trace the evolution of normative dictates associated with key linguistic variables, and, perhaps most innovative, (3) discern hints of linguistic 'conditioning' of variable usage from grammarians' injunctions. Incorporation of these conditions as factors in the analysis of contemporary variability enables us to test their current applicability and thereby ascertain the history and provenance of the variable constraints operating on these

features. The OGREVE represents an important tool in ongoing investigations into the origins of key variables of Early African American English (Early AAE) (Van Herk 1999; Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001).

In ensuing sections we explain how early grammars and vernacular speech cross-validate each other as reliable sources of information on language variation and change. We first consider the relationship between the grammatical enterprise and language in use. We then describe the constitution of the OGREVE, and detail our methods for extracting clues to variability from even the most resolute advocates of the standard (e.g. Jonson 1640/1972). The next section describes the varieties of African American English whose analysis has been informed by the attestations of the OGREVE. We illustrate the utility of the materials by comparing the trajectory of two key variables throughout the grammatical tradition with their behaviour in Early AAE – the unmarked or variable past-tense forms of strong verbs, and -*s*-marking in the simple present tense. We show that not only the Early AAE variant forms, but, more important, the linguistic (and social) factors conditioning their occurrence are the legacy of centuries of variability in English. This bolsters our claims (e.g. Poplack and Sankoff 1987; Tagliamonte 1991; Poplack 2000a; Tottie and Harvie 2000; Van Herk 2000; Walker 2000; Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001) that many features of Early AAE that have been construed as alien compared with the modern-day standard in fact have their roots in the vernacular or regional English of earlier centuries.

'Ascertaining the English tongue'

The rising status of the English language through the Early Modern period led to calls for its codification, such as Jonathan Swift's *Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712), reproduced below:

> Persons, as are generally allowed to be best qualified for such a Work ... should assemble at some appointed Time and Place, and ... some Method should be thought on for *ascertaining* and *fixing* our Language forever, after such Alterations are made in it as shall be thought requisite.

Despite pleas like Swift's, English has never had an official regulatory body, such as those established for French or Italian. For some 300 years, however, the language has had its own *de facto* 'Academy'. Composed of the authors of grammar books, usage manuals, and style guides, this Academy has collectively contributed to the standardisation of the language (at least in its written form).

Grammarians and students of linguistic variation would seem to be uneasy bedfellows at best. The major focus of variation theory is on form–function asymmetry, especially where several forms compete to perform referentially identical functions. Grammars aim to furnish an ordered view of language, in which each form serves a single function and each function is represented by a single form. The normative enterprise, instantiated in grammars,

dictionaries, usage manuals, or newspaper columns, carries the quest for form–function symmetry even further: not only is a particular form to be associated with a particular function, but competing forms are to be eradicated. A range of strategies, partially dependent on the prevalence of the forms involved, may be employed to achieve this goal. Variability may be ignored, degraded by associating one or more of the variants with boors, foreigners, or the illiterate, or explained away by imbuing variant forms with subtle semantic distinctions (Poplack 2000b). Paradoxically, however, systematic examination of the OGREVE reveals that grammatical injunctions of an earlier time may conceal the historical antecedents of many non-standard forms in the spoken language. This is invaluable information for students of dialect differentiation and linguistic variability.

Standardisation entails ironing out variability, usually by stigmatising as 'non-standard' the forms found in regional or working-class varieties. This is the point of departure for our analyses. Earlier generations of grammarians were willing (sometimes eager) to describe what they perceived as the linguistic chaos around them, if only to vilify it, as in Gill's (1619/1972: 121) observation (which provided the title for this paper): 'there is scarcely a verb which is not deformed in the dialects according to their hearer's vulgarity'. Our working hypothesis in analysing grammars of past centuries proceeds from the observation (elaborated on p. 95) that forms salient enough to have incited the opprobrium of grammarians were not only attested but probably widespread in contemporaneous spoken usage. Such attestations permit us to circumscribe the chronological extent of linguistic features, and thereby infer which ones are retentions and which are innovations.

Building the Ottawa Grammar Resource on Early Variability in English

In constituting the OGREVE, we took the designation *grammar* as a cover term not only for traditional prescriptive and descriptive grammars, but also for dialect grammars and usage manuals. This contrasts with more restrictive uses of the term in the study of the grammatical tradition (e.g. Sundby *et al.* 1991; Görlach 1998): 'a book intended for use in schools or for private reference which contains a description of the structure of a language at least on the levels of spelling/pronunciation and syntax' (Görlach 1998: 4). Our research agenda required that the stylistic coverage of the OGREVE extend to spoken, regional, and dialectal forms, which would not necessarily be fully covered in traditional grammars.

Annotated bibliography

Development of the OGREVE involved searching for potentially useful works through the establishment of broad initial criteria, followed by increasing restrictions on the materials. We first assembled an annotated bibliography

of 641 early works on the English language or English linguistics, drawn from a range of sources. These included the Scolar Press English Linguistics 1500–1800 series, comprising a reprint of 365 titles, primarily of traditional grammars, as well as the Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints series. We also consulted standard reference works on the evolution of the English grammatical tradition (e.g. Fries 1925; Alston 1965; Vorlat 1975; Sundby *et al.* 1991; Görlach 1998). Görlach (1998) provided us with many works not within the purview of Scolar Press, including Pegge (1803/1814), Jackson (1830), Smith (1855), Peacock (1863), Duncan (1870/1942), Brewer (1877), and Nesfield (1898); Sundby *et al.* (1991) gave us Harris (1752/1970) and Burn (1786/1805), and confirmed our selections of many works from Scolar Press.

Initial criteria for inclusion

Our goal of tracing variability throughout the English grammatical tradition dictated radically different criteria for inclusion from those of other compilations. Of the initial 641 works, 249 were retained based on their satisfaction of one or more of the criteria of accessibility, publication date, prestige, and possibility that variability would be mentioned. Accessibility was a practical concern. Many grammars were never reprinted, and the originals were too fragile to travel. Publication date between approximately 1550 and 1900 was partly determined by availability – sixteenth-century grammarians were more concerned with describing Latin and Greek than English – and partly by our research agenda, which focuses on the *evolution* of English variability. Our specific interest was in the language of emigrants to the New World, which may have provided a model for the first generations of African Americans. The criterion of influence on popular (educated) opinion required that we consider such well-known works as Jonson (1640/1972), Priestley (1761/1969), Lowth (1761/1967), and Murray (1795/1968). The fourth, most important, criterion was the mention of variability involving non-standard morphological and syntactic forms, insofar as this could be inferred from titles [e.g. *Common Blunders Made in Speaking and Writing, Corrected on the Authority of the Best Grammarians* (Smith 1855)] or descriptions ('somewhat of a ratbag' Görlach 1998: 256) in reference works.

Grammars excluded

Closer inspection of the 249 works retained at this stage revealed more than half to be unsuitable for our purposes, for a variety of reasons. Some works were not about grammar at all, including philosophical treatises on the nature of language or Utopian works aimed at creating new universal languages. An example is Francis Lodowyck's (1652/1968) *The Ground-Work of a New Perfect Language*. In many others, such as Burles (1652) or Farnaby (1641/1969), the subject matter (and, sometimes, the language in which they were written)

was Latin or Greek. This is especially true of the period before 1750, when English was not yet considered worthy of serious study. Some works, especially post 1800, are simply too standard for our purposes, describing an increasingly codified English. Other works from the same period aimed at a lay audience furnish taxonomies of 'blunders', usually lexical or phonological. Rather than treat grammar as a system, they simply caution readers against shibboleths such as *ayn't*, *bran new* [sic], *leastwise*, *anyhow* (Smith 1855) or *scrunch*, *chaw*, *cuss*, *Vendsday*, *yeller* (Jackson 1830).

Grammars retained

Retained for the OGREVE were any and all grammars from which we were able to infer the existence of morphological or syntactic variability. These include works written in Latin, but about English, such as Cooper (1685), perhaps the first grammar to mention *ain't*, and Wallis (1653/1969). Usage manuals were also retained, if the 'blunders' in question involved grammatical features. This winnowing process left us with ninety-eight works relevant to variability in English, ranging from Henry Peacham's *The Garden of Eloquence* (1577/1971) to John Collinson Nesfield's *English Grammar, Past and Present* (1898). Figure 5.1 shows the distribution of the works constituting the OGREVE across time periods.

Although the distribution in Figure 5.1 results to some extent from accessibility, it is largely a reflection of the publishing history of grammars of English. Grammars published before the early 1700s are more likely to be concerned, directly or indirectly, with the structure of other languages, with English often used as a vehicle for teaching them. Increased efforts to standardise the language in the 1700s and early 1800s resulted in a surge of grammars in and about English. The rise in popularity of dialect works and usage manuals in the 1800s, especially later in the century, reflects the rise of scholarly interest in regional and working-class varieties (Crowley 1989a). The goal was to document regional and especially rural forms before they were levelled by modern technology such as the telegraph and steam engine. Urban working-class forms, on the other hand, were slated for eradication. Attestations of variability are most plentiful in these genres.

The ninety-eight grammars retained tend to fall into one of four categories. Highly *prescriptive* works, imposing norms of speech and writing, deal with variation in order to castigate it. Examples include Baker (1770), Cooper (1685), and, especially, usage manuals from the 1800s [e.g. George Duncan's *How to Talk Correctly* (*c.* 1870/1942)]. Jackson (1830: *passim*), for example, categorises a variety of non-standard features as 'low', 'very low', 'exceedingly low', 'vilely low', or 'low cockney', as well as 'ungentlemanly', 'filthy', 'ridiculous', 'disrespectful', 'blackguard-like', 'very flippant', or 'abominable'. Adams Sherman Hill admonishes that '[s]ome blunders in the use of verbs are, or should be, confined to the illiterate' (Hill 1893: 79). Other works (e.g. Miège 1688; Bayly 1772/1969) appear blandly *descriptive*, reporting the

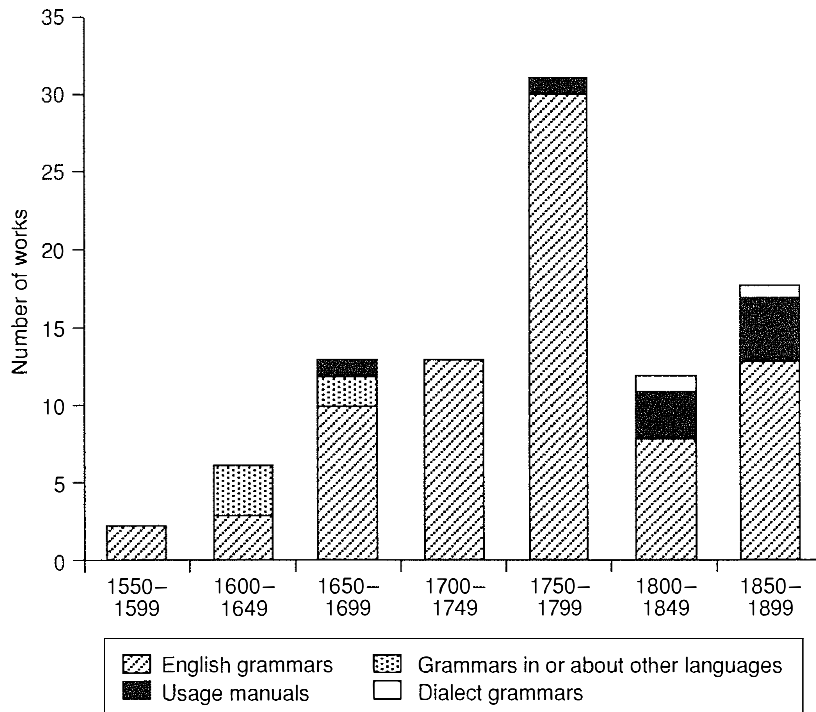

Figure 5.1 OGREVE grammars across time and genre

existence of forms that would mortify later writers, and sometimes even their own peers. Miège (1688: 110–111), for example, gives a list of common contractions that includes *int* and *ant*, forms of *ain't* that his contemporary Cooper (1685) qualifies as 'barbarous'. Juxtaposition of prescriptive and descriptive treatments is particularly valuable for our purposes, as it provides evidence that the non-standard uses were widespread enough to engender both censure (in the case of *ain't*, from Cooper) and placid acceptance (from Miège). Works retained largely for their influential nature, for example Lowth (1761/1967), make infrequent reference to non-standard forms, but are a good source of information on the type of variation salient to well-educated, highly standard speakers and writers (e.g. *got/gotten* variation in the participle). Still other works are veritable goldmines of social or regional non-standard forms. An excellent example is Joshua Pegge's *Anecdotes of the English Language: Dialect of London* (1803/1814). Pegge champions the existence of non-standard Cockney forms, such as *have took*, *com'd [<came]*, *gone dead*, *ghostes*, *hisn*, *mought*, *aks [<ask]*, and *for t•*, through reference to historical or logically analogous forms.[2] His detailed description of a non-standard variety was so far ahead of its time when it first appeared that some reviewers assumed it was a joke.

The OGREVE corpus is not intended as a representative sample of early

grammars, nor even of all grammars mentioning variation of any kind. Rather, it is a distillation of the works we have found most relevant for the diachronic study of non-standard variation, the product of a research process that cuts across traditional conceptions of what constitutes a grammar. In fact, some of the most useful works for our purposes (e.g. Pegge 1803/1814) were deliberately excluded from other collections, or relegated to appendices. The diverse sources constituting the OGREVE represent diverse approaches to the codification of the English language. Although each provides a radically different view of linguistic variability over the duration, all are complementary ways of attesting to its existence.

Mining the OGREVE for variation

We examined the grammars retained for the OGREVE for mention of features associated with African American English. These included unmarked or verbal preterites, non-standard *-s*-marking in the present tense, and the periphrastic (*gonna*) future, among others. Relevant passages were photocopied and indexed to create a master reference of over 700 pages, which we used to inform analyses of contemporary variability. From this master reference, we constructed a computer database of all relevant quotations.

The goals, organisation and style of early grammars differ substantially from their modern counterparts, requiring us to develop methods to locate the relevant material. In this section we consider three issues that we addressed to maximise the usefulness of the OGREVE: (1) evaluation of the unequal treatment of forms in the grammars, (2) interpretation of evidence of the variability, and (3) tracing evidence of the conditioning of that variability.

Evaluating the grammatical treatment of forms

Simple frequency of mention in grammars does not necessarily indicate how widespread a particular form may have been in the speech community. Not every extant form, no matter how stigmatised by some, was equally salient to all contemporaneous grammarians.

A number of factors conspired in bringing a form to their attention. A relatively recent form will generally attract a great deal of attention, usually negative. Brainerd (1989) points out that grammarians grudgingly accepted preterite contraction (*loved*>*lov'd*), which was universal by the inception of the grammatical tradition, while negative contractions (especially *ain't*), which were both later and more sporadic, were vociferously opposed. Forms with analogues in classical languages rarely incurred much controversy. On the contrary, such forms were *usually* mentioned in connection with classical languages, e.g. early references to the English periphrastic futures (*going to* and *about to*) surface in descriptions of the Greek *paulopostfuturum* (Priestley

1761/1969). Presumably, this is partly a reflection of the pedagogy of classical studies of the time, and partly an attempt by early standardisers of English to link the language for status purposes to a supposed Greek origin. Likewise, grammars frequently mentioned the co-existence of a high-status innovation and an older variant with a long tradition in educated or formal use. Forms such as *thou*, third-person *-eth* or second-singular *-est*, and unstressed periphrastic *do* in the present and preterite, were all probably near-moribund in common usage for several centuries before grammars were willing to dispense with a reference to them, or to euthanise them as 'solemn' or 'ancient'. Preterite *gat* (<*got*) is another of the rare forms to proceed directly from uncritical acceptance to obsolescence.

The variability most appealing to early grammarians involved situations that lent themselves to the exercise of logic. Cases where one variant is argued to be 'better' (based on recourse to supposedly invariant classical or logical analogues) received ample, even disproportionate, attention. The most prominent discussions involve:

- maintenance of a distinction between preterite and participle forms in irregular verbs (e.g. *drank* vs. *drunk*) to ensure clarity;
- the use of *you was* in second-person singular contexts, where the incursion of the 'plural' *you* into the erstwhile context for *thou* is said to require the plural verb form;
- the *shall/will* distinction, a mainstay of nineteenth-century prescriptivism (*Will I?* is construed as illogical, as *will* indicates volition, which a speaker need not question of himself);
- negative concord, since 'two negatives make a positive';
- the subjunctive, whose conditioning was debated in early grammars and whose very existence required defence in later ones;
- split infinitives, impossible in Latin and therefore unsavoury in English; and
- present-tense concord with conjoined subjects, collective nouns, and existentials, where errors are ascribed to inattention to the plural nature of the subject of the sentence.

Factors such as recency and analogy with respected sources amplify the attention paid by grammarians to particular features, though some of them may not have been particularly frequent in informal speech. This mismatch is hardly surprising, given that the intended audience for these grammars, especially pre-1870,[3] rarely included the working classes, whose linguistic descendants supply the material for much contemporary sociolinguistic investigation. It was usually necessary, then, to go beyond grammarians' favoured preoccupations to seek evidence of the forms of interest to our research, as detailed in the remainder of this section.

Inferring the existence of variability from attestations in the OGREVE

The search for rare clues to the early use of variant forms in the OGREVE could not always rely on contemporary categorisations of linguistic structure. An eighteenth-century author who lists standard verb paradigms might only mention non-standard unmarked past forms under *vowel substitution* (e.g. Fisher 1750/1968); negation might be considered under *contraction* (e.g. Miège 1688). Zero relative clauses surface under *ellipsis*, historical present under *enallage*, and *ain't* under *blunders*. Tense distinctions may show up as *aorist* vs. *non-aorist*, verbal marking as *accidence*, and subjunctives as *conjunctives* or *optatives*. Optimum use of the materials required bridging the concerns and language of contemporary sociolinguistic enquiry with those of early grammatical classification.

The way a grammar describes a form, and the context in which it is mentioned, can help us infer how widespread it was at the time. Uncritical mentions in descriptive and prescriptive works are especially valuable to us, as they suggest that a particular form was sufficiently frequent and well entrenched to escape censure. Here we might include the extremely widespread levelling of preterite and participle paradigms until at least the 1800s, *come*, *run*, and other unmarked preterites in the 1600s, and the *going to* future, apparently throughout its history.

A mix of critical and uncritical mentions, as in the description of *ain't* in Cooper (1685) compared with that in Miège (1688), also suggests that a form was in widespread use, with attendant stigma perhaps of recent provenance or limited effect. Similarly, defence of a particular form through appeals to usage or 'habit' suggests that the form was both widespread and salient, but not sufficiently entrenched to ward off prescriptive censure. This category includes *you was* in Webster (1789/1967: 233–234) and *have went* in Pegge (1803/1814: 242).

Implicitly critical mentions, such as those associating a form with a particular region or class (thereby situating it outside the mainstream), often suggest that the form was not only widespread in the contexts in question, but probably salient enough to draw attention outside those contexts, especially if invoked often. This is the case with many of the examples mentioned in nineteenth-century dialect works, e.g. *mought* or variable *-s*-marking (e.g. Pegge 1803/1814; Peacock 1863).

Not all critical mentions of a non-standard form are admissible evidence of its status in the usage of the time. Some grammarians (notably Fogg 1792/1970) clearly use invented forms. These, however, are usually described as such, and occur almost entirely in tables of 'false grammar' meant as exercises for students/readers to correct. Even within such tables, some examples are drawn from (and credited to) well-known authors or prestigious newspapers, assuring us that the forms involved were widespread enough to have appeared

in 'respectable' print. In other cases, authors take offence at uncommon forms, as with Smith's (1855: 5) injunctions against *you are mistaken* for *you mistake*. Thus, in the absence of clues to the contrary in the texts themselves, we do not assign undue weight to lone mentions. The strongest evidence for the early existence of a non-standard form resides in multiple attestations, both critical and non-critical. In general, if a form was frequently censured, or a standard form proposed in its place, we may infer that it was known, used and probably widespread.

Simple mention of a standard form (e.g. in tables of verb paradigms) does not imply the widespread use (or even the existence) of a corresponding non-standard form which the grammarian hopes to eradicate. Standard forms were often described simply to illustrate parts of speech or verb forms, or to educate foreigners. When, for example, Reed and Kellogg (1886: 239) give us paradigms like *run, ran, run ... see, saw, seen*, we learn nothing about the existence or frequency of non-standard preterite *run* or *seen*. On the other hand, when Smith (1855: 13) tells us that '"*Says I*," should be "*Said I*," or "*I said*"', we infer that preterite marking with the verb stem *say* was widespread enough to occasion comment. Likewise, Perley (1834: 76–79) suggests an English origin for such non-standard forms as *he was drownded in the river, it is hisn*, and *who done the work* simply by describing them as 'familiar'. He also illustrates the distance of these forms from standard(ising) English by referring to them as 'Vulgarisms ... familiar examples of bad English, particularly of false grammar ... It is hoped that the attention of instructors generally will be directed to this subject, so that their pupils shall talk, as well as write, good English' (Perley 1834: 76–77). The survival of many of these forms to the present day, and the tendency to see in them evidence of recent decay or incomplete acquisition, is clear evidence of the success of the prescriptivist enterprise in shaping language attitudes and beliefs. As we shall see in the section beginning on p. 101, its success in influencing language use has been far less resounding.

Table 5.1 graphically illustrates the widening gap between prescriptivism and praxis with regard to a locus of variability that has persisted over the centuries: variable or zero marking of past-reference verbs. Consider the treatment of a number of notoriously variable verbs (*run, ran, come, came*, etc.) in the fifty-six OGREVE works that mentioned them. Non-critical attestations of variability (represented as Os) cluster in the earliest period, at the left side of the table. As the prescriptive enterprise intensifies, acceptance of variation decreases, as evidenced by fewer Os. The reduction in the number of mentions in the middle of the table graphically illustrates how grammarians wrote formerly acceptable variation out of the story of standard English. As the standard becomes firmly entrenched (post 1800), we observe an increasing tendency to stigmatise the variable or non-standard forms as vulgar, provincial, or dialectal. The same variation, although presumably identical in use, has now been assigned a different place in the construction of standard English. Interestingly, these are the very variants that are seen by many today as incursions rather than retentions.

Table 5.1 The treatment of selected non-standard preterite forms in grammars represented in the OGREVE

	1577	1619	1640	1653	1654	1671	1674	1685	1688	1700	1711	1711	1723	1733	1735	1746	1750	1762	1765	1770	1771	1772	1784	1785	1785	1786
eat			O	O		O			O		O	O	O	O		O	O	O	O							O
run		O	O	O	O		O			O		O	O								×	O		×		
come(d)	O	O		O		O				O		O	O													
say(s)	O																									
give								O	O																	
done																										
see(n,d)															O											
have																										
go																										
be																										

	1788	1792	1793	1795	1797	1802	1803	1803	1810	1830	1834	1834	1846	1850	1851	1855	1855	1863	1866	1870	1874	1877	1880	1886	1893	1898
eat					O	O	×	O			O		O		O		×	×	O	×	×		O		×	
run	×						×				×				O	×		×	×		×		O			
come(d)							×											×								
say(s)	O									×							×									
give																										
done										×		×				×									×	
see(n,d)										×	×							×		×						
have																										
go																										
be																										

Note
O, variable (non-standard form) not stigmatized; ×, variable (non-standard form) stigmatized.

Inferring the conditioning of variability from attestations in the OGREVE

Less frequent than simple attestations of a form's existence, but infinitely more useful for the purposes of variationist investigation, are references to the *conditioning* of a variable form – that is, statements in the grammars attributing the choice of a variant to particular linguistic or social factors. As the stated purpose of both descriptive and prescriptive grammars was to represent the way language was, or should be, spoken or written through the application of the scientific method (i.e. the discovery of immutable truths or inviolable laws), it is not surprising that few grammars were willing to go beyond the acknowledgement of non-standard variation in order to explain it. This makes the references we have found to the conditioning of variability particularly valuable, although the same caveats must apply to them as to attestations of the forms themselves.

Social conditioning

Early grammars were more likely to attribute variability to social than to linguistic factors, as this did not require the acceptance of inconsistencies within the language itself. Dialect grammars (e.g. Peacock 1863) attribute non-standard forms to the local dialect. Even in mainstream grammars, non-standard forms are sometimes associated with a particular region, often Scotland, Ireland, or the north of England. When they are further equated with the working classes (Beattie 1788/1968: 192–193), we may infer that they had spread into vernacular use in other areas. Non-standard forms are often directly linked to class rather than to region, as seen in associations with colloquial speech, lack of education and/or 'vulgar' usage (see Gill 1619/1972; Jackson 1830; Perley 1834; Hill 1893). Given the demographics of post-1600 British society and emigration, it is these non-standard forms that would have been most available for transmission to New World slave societies.

The frequency with which particular forms are qualified as 'Cockney' in the OGREVE requires elaboration. In general use, the term Cockney is associated with working-class Londoners. In grammars and usage manuals (e.g. Pegge 1803/1814), though, the term seems to be used with much broader reference. During the period covered by the OGREVE, standard English was becoming more closely associated with a specifically *London* elite: 'the conversation of the highest classes in London society is now looked upon as the standard of English pronunciation' (Graham 1869: 156) (cited in Crowley 1989a: 149). It follows that non-standard forms would also be defined in London terms,[1] 'the inhabitants of London have the disadvantage of being more disgraced by their peculiarities than any other people' (Gwynne 1855: 60). Most of the authors (and readers) of these early works were London-based. They had access to a term for non-elite speech and wielded it broadly. It seems likely that 'Cockney' in the OGREVE should be read as code for 'urban non-elite', without reference to a specific region. Sweet (1890: vi–vii)

(cited in Crowley 1989a: 155) expresses clearly what the term was intended to convey and why: 'The Cockney dialect seems very ugly to an educated Englishman or woman because he – and still more she – lives in a perpetual terror of being taken for a Cockney.'

Linguistic conditioning

At the heart of the variationist enterprise is an attempt to divine the rules underlying the choice between two or more variants of a form, based on their conditioning. By 'conditioning' we mean the effect of certain linguistic contexts on variant choice. For example, auxiliary verbs in Early AAE questions (Van Herk 2000) are more likely to resist inversion to pre-subject position in negative or yes–no questions, as in (5.1) and (5.2) below, than in affirmative WH questions, as in (5.3). Thus linguistic environment conditions inversion.

(5.1) He don't know the pastor?

(SE/003/965)[5]

(5.2) You have heard from him?

(SE/003/235)

(5.3) What *do* you call them?

(ANSE/007/758)

Shared conditioning of variant choice across language varieties is far stronger support for a shared origin than is the simple sharing of variant forms, which may be generated by entirely different, underlying grammars (Bickerton 1975; Tagliamonte and Poplack 1993; Poplack and Tagliamonte 1996). Likewise, similar conditioning over time is the strongest possible evidence that a current form is the legacy of an earlier period. The most innovative aspect of our investigations into the OGREVE is this emphasis on tracing the conditioning of current variability.

One prime example relates to the ultimate stereotype of non-standard speech, the negator *ain't*. Research on *ain't* variability reveals that it surfaces almost entirely in present tense *be* + *not* and *have* + *not* contexts, in both British (Wright 1898–1905: III, 88; Cheshire 1982) and American dialects (Feagin 1979: 217; Christian *et al.* 1988: 169) as well as in Early AAE (Van Herk 1999; Howe and Walker 2000). In other words, *ain't* alternates with *has not* and *is not*, but not *was not, did not,* or *does not*. The OGREVE reveals that the identical conditioning was already in place over 300 years ago: Miège (1688: 110–111) gives *int* and *ant* as permissible contractions, but only for *isn't* and *hasn't*.

Another example of long-standing conditioning involves the use of *was* in contexts where present-day standard English would require *were*. Variationist

research reveals that, among other contexts, second-person singular favours use of *was* in contemporary Scottish use, as well as in several varieties of Early AAE (Tagliamonte and Smith 2000). Thus speakers are more likely to say *you* [singular] *was* than either *they was* or *we was*. The OGREVE shows Noah Webster (1789/1967: 233–234) describing – and defending – just such a distinction:

> In books, *you* is commonly used with the plural of the verb *be*, *you were;* in conversation, it is generally followed by the singular, *you was*. Notwithstanding the criticisms of grammarians, the antiquity *and universality* [emphasis ours] of this practice must give it the sanction of propriety; for what but practice forms a language? This practice is not merely vulgar; it is general among men of erudition ... Whatever objections may be raised to this inflection, *it is the language of the English* [emphasis Webster's], and rules can hardly change a general practice of speaking; nor would there be any advantage in the change, if it could be effected.
>
> (Webster 1789/1967: 233–234)

Webster's restriction of non-standard *was* to second-person singular contexts is his sole concession to non-standard verb concord. It continues to apply in the Early AAE materials recorded some two centuries later (Tagliamonte and Smith 2000).

Given the gap between our concerns and those of early grammarians, it is remarkable that we are often able to find such clues to the presence and conditioning of non-standard features. It is the bridging of these seemingly polar opposites, the prescriptive tradition of past centuries and the variable data of sociolinguistically peripheral communities, that permits us to construct our alternative history of African American English.

African American English in the diaspora

The data on which the analyses of the next section are based come from varieties of English spoken in the African American diaspora. Prompted by conditions in the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, thousands of African Americans dispersed to Canada, West Africa, the Caribbean and South America. Because the communities they established have remained isolated from the surrounding population as a result of geographic, linguistic, ethnic, social, educational, and religious differences, the linguistic structures used by the first settlers have survived into current generations. This provides a unique window onto an earlier stage of African American English, without which the various scenarios for the origins of contemporary AAVE cannot be fully assessed.

Our research programme investigates the speech of members of three such communities – one in the Samaná peninsula of the Dominican Republic

(Poplack and Sankoff 1987) and two in Nova Scotia (Poplack and Tagliamonte 1991) – first settled in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The focus is on language *use*. Conclusions are based on systematic examination and empirical analyses of the language of 101 speakers of diaspora varieties of African American English, and thirty-five speakers of control varieties. The data analysed consist of hundreds of hours of high-quality recordings of informal conversations with community members, focusing on the elderly speakers most likely to preserve earlier linguistic features. The size and quality of the data set enable us to identify subtle conditioning factors whose direction of effect and statistical significance are revealed through analysis of thousands of tokens of each linguistic feature.[6]

A hallmark of this work is the cross-validation of linguistic findings across the diverse diaspora communities, further validated through comparison with the Ex-Slave Recordings – linguistic data collected in the 1930s and 1940s from African Americans born into slavery. This helps to rule out the possibility that features we take to be conservative are not the result of internal linguistic change, nor of post-settlement contact with surrounding communities. The sociolinguistically peripheral status of these communities, with respect both to each other and to mainstream developments, makes it likely that any linguistic features and conditioning they share descend from a common stock.

In fact, precise and subtle similarities surface with regularity in the three diaspora communities whose language we have studied, suggesting that their language can be taken as representative of an earlier stage of AAVE. Many of these Early AAE features have also been situated with respect to similar dialectal forms in Canada, Great Britain and the United States (as well as to superficially similar but structurally different forms in the creole varieties). The OGREVE has enabled us to trace, for the first time, the *developmental* aspect of these features, by establishing the trajectory of their linguistic antecedents through the English grammatical tradition. In the next section, we investigate the dialogue between the OGREVE and the Early AAE materials as they relate to two core features of the African American English tense/aspect system: the variable expression of past and present tense.

The results

Variation in past-tense marking

Variability between marked (5.4a) and bare (5.4b) past-tense verbs is a hallmark of AAVE.

(5.4a) A bunch of us *walked* up the stairs and *sat* down and Caroline *looked* up.

(ANSE/039/735)

(5.4b) As they *return,* the doctor *went*. And when the doctor *went*, she *come* and she *work*, she *work*, she *work*.

(SE/002/1176)

Although bare forms were initially considered the result of phonologically motivated removal of the English past-tense marker {ed} in weak verbs such as *work* and *return* in (5.4b) (e.g. Labov *et al.* 1968; Fasold 1972), it was soon suggested (following Bickerton 1975) that the alternation between marked and stem forms conveyed different (creole) aspectual readings. Continuing attempts to address these suggestions (e.g. Winford 1992; Tagliamonte and Poplack 1993; Blake 1997; Patrick 1999) show that the unmarked past is typically construed as alien to the English grammar of past-tense marking, particularly when 'strong' verbs, such as *come* in (5.4b), are involved.

The data of the OGREVE are particularly relevant to the question of whether the alternation between bare and marked pasts signals specific aspectual and temporal distinctions, like those of creoles (Bickerton 1975; Winford 1992), or whether they are the product of simplification processes in weak verbs and inherent variability in strong verbs.

Inspection of attestations involving past-tense formation shows that alternation of preterite with present (usually zero) morphology has been attested in English since at least the sixteenth century. We first encounter the *enallage* of present for past in Peacham (1577/1971: no page numbers):

> Enallage of tyme, when we put one time for another, thus. Terence. I come to the maydens, I aske who she is, they say, the sister of Chrisis, for, I came to the maydens, I asked who she was ...

Over a century later Miège (1688: 70) observed:

> The Present Tense in particular is sometimes used for the Preter Imperfect. As, having met with him, he brings him to his House, and gives him very good Intertainment. There we say brings for brought, and gives for gave.

Enallage of Tense was also listed under Lowe's (1723–1738/1971: 7) *figures of syntax*: 'Then comes Alexander with all his forces' for 'Then came Alexander' (see also Collyer 1735/1968). Fisher (1750/1968: 125) described enallage of vowels ('sware, for swore; speak, for spoke') that resulted in present morphology on past reference verbs. Other grammarians seeking to explain the variation between zero and overt past inflection invoked the desire 'to give vividness and reality' (Bullions 1869: 39) to past events via the 'historical' present.

Most attempts to account for the variable expression of the English past tense in early grammars, however, invoke the verb-class membership of irregular verbs remaining from a vigorous Old English cohort of about 360

(Strang 1970: 147; Krygier 1994: 247). The number, membership, and very existence of such verb classes have been contested since at least the early seventeenth century, however. Some grammarians (e.g. Fenning 1771/1967: 65) simply provided long tables of verb conjugations, considering that more general rules for past-tense formation 'are so numerous and intricate, that they rather perplex the judgement than assist the memory of the learner'. Fenning's contemporaries Bayly (1772/1969) and Fogg (1792/1970: 144–146) arrived at twelve irregular verb-class distinctions, based on perceived correspondences between present, preterite and participle forms. Greenwood (1711/1968) described only two types of irregular verbs, while Gill (1619/1972) claimed that there should be three conjugations, as there were only three 'tenses' in English (present, preterite and perfect). Variability even within these classes is confirmed by Gill's (1619/1972: 121, emphasis added) comment on his 'third' conjugation: 'In this conjugation also belong almost all the common verbs of the second conjugation (not because of any peculiarity in our language, but because *common usage attempts anything*)'.

It is clear that, during much of the period covered by the OGREVE, expression of past time was so variable that even prescriptivists described it in detail. Table 5.1 traces some of these verb forms across fifty-six grammars over three centuries. The acceptance of currently non-standard variants illustrates grammarians' uncertainty over which verbs to assign to which classes. A mention of preterite *come* or *run*, for example, indicates a willingness to class them with verbs whose preterite form is the same as that of the participle (or the stem). The contemporary rigidity of prescribed verb-class membership, foreshadowed by the reduction in uncritical mentions of variation over time, is clearly a later development, one that conceals the variability of earlier English.

Our analyses of Early AAE past marking (Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001) tested the contribution of verb-class membership to the probability that a stem form would be selected in past-tense strong verbs. We divided 4130 strong verbs into the following classes: class I (stem = participle, e.g. *come/came/come*), class II (preterite = participle, e.g. *meet/met/met*), and class III (stem ≠ preterite ≠ participle, e.g. *go/went/gone*),[7] after Christian *et al.* (1988). Initial results suggested that verb-class membership was, indeed, the primary determinant of stem form preterite marking. But closer inspection shows that the 'classes' are made up of disproportionate numbers of a few verbs, and that these in turn display idiosyncratic marking patterns.

Table 5.2 shows that 'verb class I' is made up largely of the verb *come*, which in most Early AAE varieties tends to surface in unmarked form. Preterite *come* is a stereotype of non-standard English dialects, attested in North America (Pedersen 1967; Feagin 1979), England (Tidholm 1979; Tagliamonte 1999), and elsewhere (Zettersten 1969; Ramisch 1989). It has figured prominently in the English grammatical tradition since 1577, as illustrated in Table 5.1. 'Verb class II' is also largely made up of a single verb, *say*, which in three of the four Early AAE varieties tends to surface in unmarked

Table 5.2 Distribution of stem forms of strong verbs according to lexical identity, verb-class membership and text frequency in four varieties of Early AAE

	SE		*ESR*		*ANSE*			
					NPR		*GYE*	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Class I								
come/came/come	36	404	94	49	76	49	50	80
run/ran/run	38	8	100	8	67	6	78	9
become/became/become	100	8	–	–	100	1	–	–
Class II								
say/said/said	75	296	33	58	38	71	5	39
tell/told/told	18	192	0	25	14	22	–	–
send/sent/sent	34	77	0	7	–	–	–	–
make/made/made	3	70	11	9	0	11	28	18
bring/brought/brought	3	61	0	11	17	6	80	5
leave/left/left	8	59	0	7	–	–	50	10
build/built/built	17	47	–	0	0	1	–	–
buy/bought/bought	0	37	0	24	100	2	0	4
find/found/found	11	37	33	3	0	2	–	–
meet/met/met	3	31	–	0	–	–	–	–
teach/taught/taught	19	27	60	6	–	–	27	11
keep/kept/kept	8	26	0	5	100	2	–	–
think/thought/thought	9	11	17	6	0	10	0	8
hear/heard/heard	16	19	–	0	–	–	–	–
Class III								
go/went/gone	2	373	0	52	8	107	14	126
get/got/gotten	14	101	7	43	13	55	29	73
know/knew/known	9	98	19	16	50	16	39	56
give/gave/given	42	59	93	14	60	5	92	12
see/saw/seen	30	53	33	6	5	20	–	–
do/did/done	5	20	18	11	0	19	21	24
speak/spoke/spoken	10	20	–	0	–	–	–	–
break/broke/broken	0	21	25	4	–	–	–	–
Total	25	2488	30	537	23	535	27	574

Note
SE, Samaná; ESR, the Ex-Slave Recordings; NPR, North Preston; GYE, Guysborough enclave. Reproduced from Poplack and Tagliamonte (2001).

form (Table 5.2). Like *come*, preterite *say* has a long history of use in English and English-derived varieties. *Say* figured (along with preterite *come*) in the enallage in Peacham (1577/1971: no page number): 'I come to the maydens, I aske who she is, they say, the sister of Chrisis.' *Say* also has a history of inflection with verbal *-s*, as in Samaná, invoking regional, uneducated, and/ or working-class speech throughout the English-speaking world.

The tendency for *come* and *say* to surface as stems is shared by *give* and *run*,

in both Early AAE and the OGREVE (Tables 5.1 and 5.2). Other verbs, however, are almost always inflected (e.g. *went*, *have* and *be*). *Had* and *was* are so frequently marked, in both the OGREVE and in non-standard dialects, that they are typically excluded from quantitative analyses (Rickford 1986; Winford 1992; Tagliamonte and Poplack 1993; Blake 1997; Patrick 1999; Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001). So firmly entrenched are preterite *had*, *went*, and *was/were* that *no* unmarked, or present-tense variants, are attested for these verbs in the OGREVE (indicated by the shaded portion of Table 5.1). Lack of mention is not in itself evidence against the existence of past tense *have*, *go* and *is/are* – after all, some grammarians fail to mention non-standard forms. What is compelling, though, is the *relative* treatment of these verbs: *come*, *run*, *give* and *say* surface as stems; *had*, *was/were* and *went* do not. This profile parallels precisely the patterns for Early AAE summarised in Table 5.2.

The fact that some verbs occur largely in stem form, while others are nearly always inflected, argues that inflectional preferences are lexically based and not the result of more generally applicable grammatical tendencies, as would be expected of markers of tense and/or aspect. This bolsters our conclusion that both stem (and marked) forms of these verbs in Early AAE can be traced to an earlier stage of the English language.

The present tense

The near absence of present-tense *-s* on AAVE third-person singular verbs [as in *know* in (5.5a and b)] and its 'unpredictable' occurrence elsewhere [e.g. *treats* in (5.5b)] led early scholars (Labov *et al.* 1968; Fasold 1972) to conclude that this inflection was not part of the underlying grammar of AAVE.

(5.5a) He *know* the first guy that *shoots* the deer and everything. (ANSE/062/361)

(5.5b) And they all treating me mighty nice, all the White folks that *know* me, they *treats* me nice. (ESR/003/32–34)

As with variability in the expression of the past, researchers have long been at odds over how best to account for the function of verbal *-s* in AAVE. Explanations have included hypercorrect insertion (Labov *et al.* 1968; Fasold 1972), aspect marker (Jeremiah 1977; Pitts 1981; Brewer 1986) and narrative marker (Myhill and Harris 1986). The variable occurrence of verbal *-s* across grammatical persons and numbers is also well documented throughout the history of the English language. Alternation among inflections (including *-s*, *-þ* and zero) of the simple present-tense paradigm has been attested since the Old English period (Jespersen 1909/1949; Holmqvist 1922; Brunner 1963; Curme 1977; Wakelin 1977). Competing variants have traditionally been

Murray (1873: 211) formulates the rule as follows: 'When the subject is a noun, adjective, interrogative or relative pronoun, or when the verb and subject are separated by a clause, the verb takes the termination *-s* in all persons', illustrating with the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Scots and Northumbrian data in (5.6) and (5.7).

(5.6) The burds *cums* an' *paecks* them but They *cum* an' *teake* them.

(5.7) Fuok at *cums* unbudden, *syts* unsaer'd.
'Folk that comes unbidden, sits unserved.'

The early associations of non-concord *-s* with the north and the working classes effectively guaranteed its marginal status in older grammars, since early grammarians, especially prescriptivists, concerned themselves largely with the middle-class language of the metropole. We can, however, trace explicit reference to the Northern Subject Rule at least as far back as Beattie (1788/1968: 192–193), who invokes not only the variability (*coffer-lids* that *close* vs. *two lamps* ... *lies*), but also its social and geographic provenance:

> in old [i.e. Early Modern] English, a verb singular sometimes follows a plural nominative; as in the following couplet from Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis, She lifts the *coffer-lids* that *close* his eyes, Where lo, *two lamps* burnt out in darkness *lies*. The same idiom prevails in the Scotch acts of parliament, in the vernacular writings of Scotch men prior to the last century, *and in the vulgar dialect of North Britain to this day: and, even in England, the common people frequently speak in this manner*, without being misunderstood.
> (Beattie 1788/1968: 192–193, emphasis added)

Note that although Beattie links the form to the north, including Scotland, he also describes its use among the 'common people' of the rest of England. The Northern Subject Rule may well have been used across a wider range of classes in the north than elsewhere, but by the end of the eighteenth century it was clearly no longer restricted to that region, at least among the lower social strata.

The fact that the Northern Subject Rule involves a combination of type of subject [noun phrase (NP) vs. pronoun] and adjacency (proximity of the NP to the verb) makes this condition on variability particularly amenable to empirical test. Table 5.3, adapted from Table 7.6 in Poplack and Tagliamonte (2001), demonstrates that these effects remain operative in Early AAE, as well as in many other *-s*-preserving dialects.

Table 5.3 depicts a variable rule analysis of the contribution of the terms of the Northern Subject Rule to the probability that *-s* will be selected in approximately 1188 third-person plural contexts admitting the simple present tense. In each one, adjacent pronouns (5.8), were distinguished from non-adjacent pronominal and noun-phrase subjects (5.9).

(5.8) He *live* with mama thirty, thirty-two years ...
(ESR/013/339)

(5.9a) The inside box with the coffin what *sits* down in the grave.
(ANSE/015/904)

(5.9b) Every time somebody I know *die*, that's when I get the urge.
(ANSE/053/1252–3)

The well-documented propensity for *-s* to appear on verbs whose subjects are non-adjacent, and to be avoided when the subject is an adjacent personal pronoun (5.8), is apparent in the conditioning of variable *-s* usage in most Early AAE varieties. This is particularly true of the third-person plural contexts displayed in Table 5.3, which dialectologists cite as most relevant (Wakelin 1977; Ihalainen 1994; Schendl 1994). The identical constraint hierarchy shared by three out of four Early AAE varieties and its parallels to the conditioning of *-s* variability described in the OGREVE confirm that the effect of subject type and adjacency in Early AAE present-tense marking is a legacy of English. These findings suggest that verbal *-s* must already have been inherent in the language of British colonists which constituted the target for first generations of African Americans in the United States. That language was transmitted, along with the constraints conditioning its inherent variability, to ancestors of the Early AAE speakers.

Summary

In this chapter, we have detailed the construction of the OGREVE, a corpus

Table 5.3 Four independent variable rule analyses of the contribution of factors selected as significant to the presence of verbal *-s* in *third-person plural* in four varieties of Early AAE

							ANSE					
	SE			*ESR*			*NPR*			*GYE*		
Corrected mean	0.260			0.064			0.114			0.068		
Total *N*	699			72			173			244		
Northern subject rule	*Prob*	%	N	*Prob*	%	N	*Prob*	%	N	*Prob*	%	N
Non-adjacent pronoun or NP	0.59	37	151	0.70	17	24	0.41	12	57	0.78	20	80
Adjacent pronoun	0.47	25	512	0.39	4	46	0.56	16	97	0.35	4	160

Note
SE, Samaná; ESR, the Ex-Slave Recordings; NPR, North Preston; GYE, Guysborough enclave; NP, noun phrase. Adapted from Poplack and Tagliamonte (2001).

of nearly 100 grammars of the English language published since 1577. Its purpose is to discern the existence and conditioning of prior variability from works whose professed aim was to eradicate it. By tracking attestations of variation in multiple works from differently constituted genres (mainstream and dialect; descriptive and prescriptive), we situate forms within the trajectory of the development of English. Despite the apparent gulf between a research agenda emphasising analysis of linguistic variability, and the concerns of these early grammars, which promote invariance, we have succeeded in exploiting the unacknowledged dialogue between prescription and praxis.

Linguistically principled investigation of the OGREVE, informed by systematic analysis of linguistic variability, has enabled us to propose an alternative history for African American English, a thoroughly studied yet still misunderstood non-standard variety of English. We traced Early AAE patterns of linguistic variability through the OGREVE, discovering, operationalising and empirically testing diachronic clues to their conditioning. The results of this exercise revealed numerous and non-trivial similarities between Early AAE and the English historical record. This in turn suggests that many aspects of Early AAE described as innovation, incomplete acquisition or contact-induced change are in fact retentions of once robust features since eradicated from the accepted standard.

The OGREVE is very much a work in progress. As our research programme continues to develop, new sources will be added, new data will be drawn from those already consulted, and new studies will be informed by the insights gained from work to date. The development of resources such as the OGREVE requires a substantial commitment of time, energy and intellectual curiosity. We hope to have shown how analysis of the resulting materials, by revealing the variability inherent in earlier English, can enrich the study of any language variety derived from it.

Notes

1 Construction of the OGREVE was generously supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRCC) in the form of research grants to Shana Poplack. Dick Watts and Jürg Schwyter first brought the Scolar Press Collection to our attention, and participants in LIN 7942: *Language variation & linguistic ideology* unearthed a number of other important sources. Staff at the Inter-Library Loans Department of the University of Ottawa and the supplying libraries kindly acceded to most of our requests for references. Their contribution to this project is gratefully acknowledged.

2 All these features are widespread in African American English, white North American dialects and Caribbean creoles.

3 Universal mandatory education in Great Britain began in 1870, thus increasing the exposure of dialect users to the standard, and presumably vice versa (Crowley 1989a).

4 Note that there is a similar tendency to refer to a current non-standard variety, despite its wide geographical reach, as 'Estuary' English.

5 Codes in parentheses identify: (1) the corpus: Samaná English (SE), Ex-Slave

Recordings (ESR), African Nova Scotian English (ANSE); (2) the speaker; and (3) the location of the utterance in the recording, transcript, or data file.

6 For detailed analyses of these materials, we refer the reader to Poplack (2000a), Poplack and Tagliamonte (2001).

7 An invariant class IV (*hit/hit/hit*) was by definition excluded from the variable analysis.