

How Black English *Past* got to the present: Evidence from Samaná¹

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the tense system of Samaná English, a lineal descendant of early nineteenth-century American Black English. Independent evidence from quantitative phonological, grammatical, and narrative analyses reveals the existence of a past tense marker comparable in surface form, function, and distribution to that of Standard English. In addition, we establish the presence of a narrative Historical Present, thus far unattested in Black English Vernacular (BEV), which appears in proportions and patterns of alternation with the past tense nearly identical to those associated with middle-class white American narrators. Comparison with varieties of contemporary BEV and English-based creoles shows a structural resemblance between Samaná English and the former, but not the latter. These findings have important implications for understanding the development of contemporary BEV. (Linguistic variation, narrative analysis, Black English Vernacular, pidgin and creole linguistics, Dominican Republic)

INTRODUCTION

This article is a contribution to the description of a variety of Black English which we believe to have important implications for understanding the development of Black English Vernacular (BEV) in the United States.² This is the variety spoken natively by a small and diminishing minority of elderly residents of the peninsula of Samaná in the (otherwise hispanophone) Dominican Republic, whose ancestors – American exslaves – first settled on the island in 1824. The speakers who form the sample on which our study is based are lineal descendants of the exslaves, are locally known as “Americans,” and constitute the fourth (and last) generation to have maintained the English language for purposes of normal intragroup communication in the midst of a dominant Spanish-speaking majority.

Information about the grammar of modern-day Samaná English can furnish much-needed historical insights into the structure of early Black English, as well as contribute to the recent debate on the continuing divergence of BEV from

Standard American English (SAE) (e.g., Ash & Myhill 1986; Bailey 1987; Bailey & Maynor 1987; Butters 1986; Labov 1985, 1987; Labov & Harris 1986; Myhill & Harris 1986; Wolfram 1987). The applicability of our data to these issues depends, however, on establishing their relationship to the language spoken by the original input settlers, and of that language in turn to the variety(ies) which give rise to modern BEV, generally considered to have descended from dialects prevalent on large southern plantations during the American antebellum period. Detailed justification for positing a relationship between Samaná English and an older stage of BEV may be found in Poplack and Sankoff (1987). In what follows we provide a summary review of that argument.

According to local tradition, the ancestors of our Samanese informants came from Philadelphia, New York, and New Jersey. Indeed, there is ample documentation of sailings from these northern ports to Haiti as a result of Boyer's efforts to populate the island of Hispaniola with blacks. Now presumably, most blacks living in northern cities in the early nineteenth century were freedmen (whose vernacular may already have been subject to contact with that of local white populations). Yet this assumption is inconsistent with oral histories provided by Samaná residents concerning the reason for their ancestors' immigration: to escape slavery. This suggests that at least some of the input settlers from the northern states who survived the voyage to and initial settlement in the Dominican Republic were there en route from the South.

Despite copious historical research, it has not been possible to trace the exact geographic (or social) provenance of the colonists. Examination of original passenger lists and census records of the period reveals that most relevant demographic information was either withheld or deliberately falsified. Nonetheless, newspaper accounts of the period reporting release of slaves from Virginia and North Carolina for exportation to Haiti, whether direct (*Niles Register*, July 1825) or via New York (*Maryland Gazette*, December 1824), make a convincing case for our claim that the input settlers may have included, but could not have been limited to, northern blacks. Moreover, reports of manumission of entire plantations to this destination (ibid.) indicate that both field and house slaves figured among the immigrants. Thus, the original input settlers represented a sampling of the major population elements whose language constituted the precursor of BEV.

Yet this premise alone does not ensure the relevance of current Samaná English to questions pertaining to the origin and directions of change of BEV in the United States. It would still be necessary to determine the likelihood of externally motivated linguistic change in the language due to *subsequent* contact with Spanish- or English-speaking outsiders to the community. In Poplack and Sankoff (1987) we showed that Samaná English has in fact been resistant to external influence, particularly at the core grammatical level, due in large part to the characteristics of the enclave in which it is spoken, and the social, psychological, and religious separation of its speakers from the surrounding Dominican

population. We thus conclude that this variety of English is directly affiliated with varieties spoken by many blacks in the United States in the early 1800s. However, to buttress the external evidence, which cannot be considered fully conclusive, we will focus rather on comparative internal linguistic evidence to situate Samaná English (and by extension, older stages of BEV) with regard to SAE, present-day BEV, and English-based creoles. Study of copula usage among Samaná residents (Poplack & Sankoff 1983, 1987) suggested that the language bears no greater resemblance to English-based West Indian creoles than does modern BEV. In this article, we confirm that suggestion on the basis of analysis of another area of the grammar: the tense/aspect system.

CONTINUING DIVERGENCE OF BEV

Students of Black English have recently contended that rather than (or in addition to) decreolizing, contemporary BEV is actually diverging from modern white English. In a comparative study of invariant *be* among black children and adult southern white folk speakers, and the WPA slave narratives, Bailey and Maynor (1987) showed that differences between the groups are not merely quantitative but qualitative: Invariant *be* has been reanalyzed by the youngest black speakers as an auxiliary marking habitual/durative actions. They conclude that some of the most significant differences between black and white speech are the consequences of recent grammatical changes rather than persistent creole forms of decreolization (Bailey 1987:38–39; Bailey & Maynor 1987:469). In this regard Labov cites as "the strongest single piece of evidence" (1985:3) Myhill and Harris's finding that the occurrence of the 3rd singular *-s* inflection is virtually limited to the complicating action clauses of BEV narratives, where it fulfills the function of marking Historical Present, regardless of person and number of the subject (1986:25).

In a cogent critique of arguments brought thus far to bear on the divergence hypothesis, Wolfram (1987:44–45) cites, among others, the need for (a) "time-depth dimension," that is, a baseline for the dialect at some previous point in time, and (b) independent linguistic evidence showing that black vernaculars are becoming more different from their white counterparts. In this connection, he notes that since there has been no previous attestation of a BEV present-tense narrative form, the use of this general discourse type, even in the realignment of the function of 3rd singular *-s*, could as easily be interpreted as a case of *convergence* of black and white vernaculars, as of *divergence*.

TENSE MARKING IN SAMANÁ ENGLISH

Taking Samaná English as representative of an earlier form of BEV, we can shed light on this controversy by examining the usage of tense, an area of the grammar in which Standard English and English-based creoles are widely agreed to differ

profoundly. Focusing on the system of past temporal reference, we specifically seek to establish whether Samaná usage parallels the prototypical creole system in showing aspect rather than tense prominence, observing a stative/nonstative distinction, and using an anterior marker rather than a past-tense morpheme.

The morphological system of past-tense markings on verbs constitutes a useful indicator of grammatical differences between Standard English, BEV, and English-based creoles. Labov, Cohen, Robins, and Lewis (1968); Wolfram (1969); and Fasold (1972) have concluded that tense is an underlying grammatical category in BEV, which is occasionally realized as an unmarked stem form due to subsequent phonological reduction processes. In creole languages, the zero-marked verb has been described as part of a system in which an invariant stem is preceded by markers of aspect, modality, or anteriority. It is only through access to standardized education and the standard language that past-tense morphology begins to infiltrate the creole grammar (Bickerton 1975; Singler 1984), following a trajectory of acquisition reflecting the earlier system. In what follows, we draw on the findings of these studies to contrast and compare Samaná English with these varieties with respect to past-tense marking.

The verbal forms to which we refer here as *past tense* are limited to those verbs, regular (e.g., *killed*) or irregular (e.g., *went*), which show an *overt* morphological marker of past, whether standard or nonstandard (e.g., *drug* 'dragged,' *knowed*). Forms designated as *present* include regular verbs inflected with 3rd singular -s and present-tense forms of irregular verbs whose contrasting past-tense counterpart was also used by the speaker in question (e.g., *keep*, *say*, *tell* in clauses (k), (l), and (p), respectively, of the narrative below). Verbs inflected for present tense occurring in a past temporal environment are considered instances of the Historical Present. All unmarked forms (e.g., *open* in clause (v)) are treated as *ambiguous*, since it is impossible to establish a priori the process which led to their synchronic surface form.³

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Because of widespread variation between overt morphological and zero-marking of past tense in all the varieties of English under discussion, and the resulting difficulty in disambiguating reference time of the unmarked forms, we make use for our data base of the genre of performed narrative (Hymes 1974): a naturally bounded speech act in which events are understood to have occurred prior to the moment of speaking. We adopt the definition of narrative provided in Labov and Waletzky (1967) and Labov (1972): a recapitulation of past experience, whereby narrative clauses are ordered iconically, that is, in the temporal sequence in which the events actually occurred.

Initial examination of twenty-nine narratives of personal experience recounted by ten different speakers of Samaná English reveals a clear preference for tense marking in general in this dialect: a full 88 percent of the 1,295 verb forms used

show some overt morphological mark, while preverbal aspectual or anterior markers associated either with English-based creoles or contemporary BEV (e.g., *don*, *bin*, *come*, *steady*, *stay*) are either exceedingly rare or nonexistent.

Such tense prominence is illustrated in the following narrative, told by an eighty-three-year-old woman, about her son's death at the hands of the police

a.	That night when they <i>killed</i> him,	ORIENTATION
b.	I <i>was</i> in the kitchen making candies.	
c.	And- but <i>seems</i> as I <i>was</i> worried.	EVALUATION
d.	I <i>don't</i> know what happenin'.	
e.	I <i>went</i> to bed that night ten o'clock.	COMPLICATING ACTION
f.	When I <i>lie</i> down,	ORIENTATION
g.	I <i>didn't</i> sleep.	COMPLICATING ACTION
h.	I <i>was</i> worried.	EVALUATION
i.	Then I <i>studied</i> o— I <i>said</i> - <i>studied</i> over, I <i>said</i> , "I haven't drink— I didn't ^s drink coffee?"	COMPLICATING ACTION
j.	Because when I <i>drink</i> the coffee	
k.	it <i>keep</i> me, you see.	EVALUATION
l.	I <i>say</i> , ⁶ "but I ain't drink no coffee!"	
m.	Well, that night I <i>didn't</i> sleep.	COMPLICATING ACTION
n.	I <i>got up</i> soon in the morning,	
o.	but the telegram <i>was walking</i> before the doctor <i>call</i> .	ORIENTATION
p.	Someone <i>tell</i> , "don't call those people that hour in the night."	
q.	'Cause they <i>killed</i> him seven o'clock in the night,	ORIENTATION/EVALUATION?
r.	And that telegram <i>was walking</i> .	
s.	And I <i>got up</i> .	
t.	I <i>say</i> , "Mhm, Suzannah, I ain't shut my eyes last night!"	
u.	And I <i>went</i> to the door	COMPLICATING ACTION
v.	And I <i>open</i> the door.	
w.	They <i>jumped</i> in there:	
x.	" <i>Sargento King Shepherd muerto!</i> " 'Sergeant King Shepherd [is] dead!"	

Focusing on verbs with known past temporal reference⁸ ($n = 1,121$), we find that 67 percent show overt past-tense marking, 22 percent are overtly Present and the remaining 10 percent are what we have referred to as ambiguous (i.e. verbs on which there is no overt mark indicating tense). In contrast to the studies of BEV mentioned above which concluded that forms like these represented the natural outcome of consonant cluster simplification of an underlying morphological past-tense marker, and to studies of known creoles which assumed them to represent Historical Presents (e.g., Bollée 1977; Corne 1977; Rickford in press), here we explicitly attempt to determine their status vis-à-vis creole as well as SAE morphology. Thus, although such forms represent a relatively small

proportion of our data, they are crucial to our argument, because their surface configuration may be the result of any one of three distinct and independent processes:

1. They may result from consonant reduction or cluster simplification (in which case they should behave like Standard English Past(s)),
2. They may be instances of first or second person zero-marked forms (e.g., *say* in clause (t)) or result from 3rd singular *-s* absence (e.g., *keep* in clause (k)) (in which case they should pattern like Standard English Historical Presents), or
3. They could be synchronic remnants of the prototypical creole system of zero-marking of past-reference nonstative verbs.

The study of tense distribution in performed narratives can help elucidate these issues. The frameworks for narrative analysis developed by Labov and Waletzky (1967), Labov (1972), and Hopper (1979) have provided convincing arguments that the form and function of grammatical variation can be examined systematically. In particular, they and other researchers (e.g., Fleischman 1985; Schiffrin 1981; Silva-Corvalán 1983; Wolfson 1979) have noted the alternation of (morphologically) past and present tenses in a range of narrative texts and have demonstrated that particular tense or aspect forms typically occur in specific subsections of the narrative, where they fulfill characteristic discourse functions.

Table 1, based on our entire narrative corpus, shows that in Samaná English as well, given verb forms are concentrated in well-defined portions of the narrative, rather than appearing randomly throughout. In particular, while a variety of verb

TABLE 1. *Tense distribution across narrative sections*

	Complicating action		Orientation		Evaluation		Abstract/Coda	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Past (Past morphology in Past temporal environment)	48.3	332	31.1	126	24.4	38	27.7	13
Past (<i>had</i> , <i>was</i>) ^a	—	0	28.1	114	17.9	28	14.9	7
Present (Present morphology in Present temporal environment)	—	0	5.2	21	42.9	67	40.4	19
Historical Present (Present morphology in Past temporal environment)	32.3	222	4.7	19	4.5	7	—	0
Ambiguous	17.0	117	7.2	29	3.2	5	6.4	3
Other ^b	2.3	16	23.7	96	7.0	11	10.6	5
Total		687		405		156		47

^aThe stative verbs *had* and *was* do not, by definition, occur in the complicating action section of the narrative. We separate them from other past-tense verbs because these irregular forms may be used in the creole continuum even before past tense is acquired productively (Bickerton 1975:104).

^bThis category includes progressives, past perfects, conditionals, futures, and habitals.

forms, including the overtly marked Past(s), may be seen to occur in the *orientation* clauses, which situate the listener with regard to the general circumstance (e.g., time and place) of the events being recounted, as well as the identities of the characters involved, and in the *evaluation* clauses, which communicate to the listener the narrator's feelings about these events (i.e., provide the "point [Polanyi 1979] of the narrative), both the Historical Presents and our ambiguous verbs may be seen to be confined almost uniquely to what Labov and Waletzky (1967) have referred to as the *complicating action*. This recounts what happens in a series of clauses that are temporally ordered according to the sequence in which the events actually occurred.

The functions of these narrative sections may also be explained by the general properties of foregrounding in discourse discussed by Hopper (1979:213-14). The *foreground* is the "actual story line" or "skeletal structure" of the narrative where "events succeed one another in the same order as their succession in the real world," corresponding to Labov's complicating action clauses, whereas the *background* is the "supportive material" used to "amplify or comment on the events of the main narrative." The chief properties of foregrounded material include chronological sequencing, perfective aspect, punctual events, realis verb forms, unmarked distribution of focus, and presupposition of subject. Backgrounded clauses show imperfect aspect, stative events, irrealis verb forms, and marked distribution of focus (see also Hopper & Thompson 1980; Thompson 1987).

Direct comparison between the Standard English narrative present and the uninflected verb forms in the Samaná data is complicated by the fact that Standard English may have what Givón (1979) calls a stylistic/dialectal level which "dispenses with tense," and where the unmarked form of the verb is used "just like in creoles." He cites an "identical discourse function" between the "informal" Standard English rendition of past punctual events in (foregrounded) narrative clauses, which features present-tense marking (i.e., the Historical Present), and the creole zero form, which is predicted to occur in precisely the same clauses (p. 128).

Empirical studies of Standard English narratives (e.g., Schiffrin 1981; Wolfson 1979) suggest otherwise. These show that the Standard English "zero-form" does not function as the unique marker of foregrounded narrative material. The narrative is never told entirely in the Historical Present, but alternates, in characteristic distribution pattern, with the morphologically marked past tense. The function of such tense switching has been variously described as a device to organize the story into chronological segments (Fleischman 1985; Wolfson 1979), as an internal evaluation (Schiffrin 1981) or expressive device (Silva-Corvalán 1983), or to report events of high saliency (Fleischman 1985). Not surprisingly, these functions, though often difficult to disentangle, are associated with alternation in morphological marking of past time in the Samaná material as well.

Since, however, patterns for past tense/Historical Present alternation are attested in a variety of different sources (performed and literary narrative) and languages (English, Spanish, French), simple parallels that the Samaná data might evidence with regard to this alternation cannot be regarded as decisive of the question of its similarity to SAE. But despite the fact that such distributional tendencies may well be widespread, if not universal, Fleischman has rightly pointed out that there is no reason to expect universally consistent mapping of these notions onto the same grammatical categories (1985:8). Moreover, a Standard English grammatical category may be acquired independently of its English representation and/or native extension of use (Bickerton 1975:111). Thus, the degree to which the form taken by the particular tense/aspect category is *consistent* with its SAE (or creole) counterpart will be relevant, despite possible distributional universals of reference-time categories in discourse. In this context, we now examine the typical pattern of variation between Historical Present and past tense in SAE taken from the quantitative analysis in Schiffrin (1981) and compare it with the distribution of these forms in the Samaná data. We note first that in both data sets the Historical Present is concentrated almost exclusively in the complicating action clauses of the narrative (Table 2), where it represents approximately one-third of all verbs.⁹ The proportions are almost identical across the data sets.

Second, there is a tendency to begin and end the complicating action section with past-tense verbs, while the Historical Present occurs most often in middle clauses (Table 3).

Third, verbs of the same tense tend to cluster together (Table 4). Both Historical Present and past tense verbs are more frequent when the prior verb is in the same tense. Rapid alternation between Historical Present and Past is not typical (Schiffrin 1981:51). Table 4 shows that even the sporadic appearance of ambiguous verbs in the Samaná data (which were excluded from these calculations) does not entirely obscure the clustering effect.¹⁰ Thus, not only do these verbs exhibit the same morphological marking as their SAE counterparts, they also pattern analogously.

What of the distribution of the ambiguous verbs? As noted earlier, if they are

TABLE 2. *Distribution of Historical Present in narrative sections*

	Complicating action	Orientation	Evaluation	Abstract/Coda
SAE ^a	30% (1288)	3% (268)	0% ?	0% ?
Samaná	32% (687)	5% (405)	4% (156)	0% (47)

^aSource: Schiffrin 1981.

TABLE 3. *Location of Historical Present in complicating action clauses*

	Initial clause	Middle clauses	Final clause
SAE ^a	18%	32%	9%
Samaná	10% (29)	39% (629)	10% (29)

^aSource: Schiffrin 1981.

underlying past-tense forms which have undergone final consonant cluster simplification, or present-tense forms (null-marked or subject to 3rd singular absence), they would be expected to show patterning similar to both their nonambiguous (i.e., overtly marked Past or Present) and their SAE counterparts, respectively. We first observe that the overwhelming majority (117/154 or 76 percent) of the ambiguous forms occurs in the complicating action clauses of the narrative, to the practical exclusion of the other narrative sections: This concentration approaches that of unambiguous Historical Presents (222/248 or 89 percent) in this section (Table 1). We also find a (weak) tendency for them to cluster with Historical Presents in internal complicating action clauses: 60 percent (68/114) of the ambiguous verbs immediately precede or follow an unambiguous Historical Present.¹¹ We interpret this as initial evidence that (at least some of) the ambiguous verbs are functioning like Historical Presents.

We thus see obvious parallels in tense variation in Samaná English and SAE narratives: Both qualitatively and quantitatively, the patterns and proportions are very similar to those provided by Schiffrin (1981). They are quite different from those found by Rickford (in press) in a narrative of a mesolectal speaker of Guyanese Creole. That speaker's complicating action clauses contain *only* verbs in the Historical Present (or actually, what we have here referred to as ambiguous, i.e., unmarked verbs). But it is the *patterning* or alternation of Historical

TABLE 4. *Clustering of Historical Present and past tense in noninitial complicating action clauses*

	Historical Present after Historical Present	Past after Past
SAE ^a	62% (368)	82% (847)
Samaná	56% (213)	64% (294)

^aSource: Schiffrin 1981.

Present and Past in complicating action clauses that characterizes Standard English narratives, rather than the exclusive occurrence of one or the other tense in a particular narrative section. Indeed, while other creolists have also applied a "historical present" analysis to variation between marked and unmarked verb forms in, for example, Seychelles creole narratives (Bollée 1977; Corne 1977), their observations of the distribution of the putative Historical Present and past-tense forms do not correspond to those attested in empirical discourse analyses of the internal structure of narrative (Schiffrin 1981; Silva-Corvalán 1983; Wolfson 1979).

Moreover, Bickerton (1981) has correctly pointed out in a critique of the Seychelles creole analyses that what appears to be alternation between morphologically marked past-tense forms and unmarked Historical Presents is masking the prototypical creole marking system. He showed that it was precisely past-reference nonstatives which remained unmarked, while past-reference statives received (what Corne and Bollée referred to as the past-tense marker) *ti*. Alternation between the *ti* and zero forms in those texts could thus be interpreted as following exactly the same rule of anterior marking that affects stative and nonstative pasts in other creoles (Bickerton 1981:85). Now, we noted earlier that the complicating action clause of the narrative is by definition the environment for nonstative (punctual) verbs, which in creoles remain unmarked. Thus, the same problem arises in the present analysis: The ambiguous forms in foregrounded narrative clauses can be interpreted as either Standard English Historical Presents or phonologically reduced Past, or both; or alternatively, as zero-marked nonstative verbs.

We draw on two types of evidence to resolve this question:

1. Whether the ambiguous zero-forms can be said to be the product of regular phonological processes of consonant reduction, obeying a constraint on information preservation, as has been shown to be the case for varieties of BEV, or rather,

2. whether their distribution (as well as that of their marked counterparts) is conditioned, as in creoles, by the stative/nonstative distinction (Bickerton 1975; Singler 1984¹²).

PAST-TENSE EXPRESSION IN BEV

Studies of phonological influences on past-tense expression in BEV (Fasold 1972; Labov 1972; Labov et al. 1968; Wolfram 1969) have suggested that tense is an underlying category in BEV, based on the following findings: Irregular verbs are virtually always marked for past (whether in standard form or not); regular verbs, like other words terminating in consonants or clusters, are subject to *-t, d* deletion through phonological processes, which in turn are affected by the "functional load" carried by the segments. Clusters are simplified and consonants reduced most frequently in monomorphemic words (e.g., *mist*) where they

convey no semantic information, less frequently in irregular [+inflected] verb (e.g., *kept, told*) in which *-t, d* is not the sole marker of past tense, and least of all in regular verbs, (e.g., *liked*) where *-t, d* is the only unambiguous tense marker.

In comparing the Samaná materials to findings for the BEV varieties, we note first that in the former, irregular verbs with past temporal reference are virtually always marked in noncomplicating action clauses (i.e., the present-tense form is not used in these contexts). Alternation with their present-tense counterparts is basically confined to complicating action clauses, where reference time is in an event understood to be past. In this context we examine the distribution of a past-reference regular verbs eligible for consonant reduction or cluster simplification. If tense is an underlying category in Samaná English, we would expect phonological constraints on marker presence to behave analogously to attested patterns in BEV and SAE.

Phonological conditioning

The major factor conditioning past-tense marking has been found to be the nature of the segment following the *-t, d*: All studies concur that a following consonant is more favorable to deletion than a following vowel. Table 5 compares the effect of following phonological environment on the realization of final consonants in regular verbs in SAE, three varieties of BEV, Samaná English, and Guyanese

TABLE 5. *Phonological conditioning of consonant realization in regular verbs*

Group studied	Percent simplified			
	-t[-vocalic]		-d[+vocalic]	
	%	n	%	n
SAE ^a (Educated white adults)	35.7	814	15.8	495
New York City ^b (Working-class adults "single style")	47.0	115	18.0	133
Detroit ^c (Lower working class)*	76.0	?	33.9	?
Washington, D.C. ^d	76.2	143	28.7	202
Samaná	55.3	304	35.4	257
Guyanese Creole ^e (Mesolect → Acrolect)	86.3	139	66.4	149

*Both Wolfram and Fasold provide amalgamated data for three age groups; Fasold's data also amalgamate four social classes.

** We supplemented the 135 regular verbs actually occurring in our narrative corpus with another 30 past-reference verbs extracted from the conversational interviews carried out with each informant. Given the evidence from irregular verbs external to complicating action clauses, it is unlikely that these could have been contaminated by Historical Presents.

Sources: ^aNeu 1980; ^bLabov et al. 1968; ^cWolfram 1969; ^dFasold 1972; ^eBickerton 1975.

Creole.¹³ Though the ranking of constraints is parallel across all data sets (including Neu's [1980] on highly educated white American speakers), and may well reflect universal tendencies, Samaná English is most comparable in deletion rate to the contemporary BEV materials; indeed, with the exception of Labov's formal speech data, it is even more conservative, particularly in the favorable, preconsonantal environment.¹⁴ Moreover, this ranking is evidenced by every individual in our sample but one. In contrast, marker "deletion" figures for Guyanese Creole speakers (even at the mesolectal to acrolectal level) are substantially higher across the board, reaching two-thirds of the cases even in prevocalic contexts propitious to retention.¹⁵

Grammatical conditioning

Another important constraint on consonant realization is exercised by the grammatical category of the word. Deletion has been found to be conditioned by the presence of a morpheme boundary, with bimorphemic regular verbs most resistant to deletion, irregular verbs with both stem vowel change and past-tense inflection less resistant, and monomorphemic words least resistant of all.

This effect is depicted in Table 6, where the Samaná rates are again seen to mirror closely those for Detroit and Washington,¹⁶ though the ranking of monomorphemic words with regard to irregular [+inflected] verbs illustrated by the New York City data is somewhat obscured by the fact that we have excluded monomorphemes showing categorial simplification (e.g., *mus'*, *jus'*) from our calculations. Their inclusion would have raised the deletion rates for this category considerably, thereby paralleling the New York City materials in ranking, if not in actual rate. The most striking aspect of Table 6, however, is the dramatic decrease in consonant realization when *-t*, *d* represents the only morphological

indicator of past tense (i.e., in regular verbs). This is exactly what we would expect if tense were an underlying category in Samaná English. Indeed, the retention differential in monomorphemes as compared to regular verbs is even greater than that for SAE (Neu 1980). Once again, this patterning is replicated nearly all the individuals in our sample.

Distribution of ambiguous verbs

Examination of the effects of the major constraints on past-tense expression in Samaná English and comparison with attested results on American black and white English varieties strongly supports the suggestion that at least some of the ambiguous verbs in the complicating action clauses of the narratives in our corpus are actually past-tense forms with deleted *-ed*. Evidence that others are not is that Historical Presents may be adduced from the following analysis of the distribution. The ambiguous cases are of course all regular verbs in our data. Assuming that within any single part of the narrative the ratio of present verb to past tense uses is independent of whether the verb is irregular or regular, we can deduce this ratio using the unambiguous irregular verb evidence within that part of the discourse. In this way we confirmed that in all parts of the narrative there are never any fewer unmarked forms among regular verbs than expected on the basis of comparison with their irregular counterparts, and in particular, that there are far more Historical Presents (among both irregular *and* regular verbs), numerically and proportionately, in the complicating action than in the non-complicating action clauses. This is exactly what would be expected, given that we know Historical Presents to be virtually restricted to the former.

The unmarked regular forms in excess of the number of Historical Presents predicted on the basis of the irregular verb ratio can be attributed to the category of past-tense verbs having undergone deletion of *-ed*.

Now, since *-t*, *d* deletion is phonologically conditioned, it is reasonable to predict that this conditioning will be less evident among the regular verb data in the complicating action sections if they are contaminated by Historical Presents. Actually, since the Historical Presents are in a clear minority, even in the complicating action clauses, and the phonological effect is moderate in the overall – 55 percent deletion in preconsonantal versus 35 percent in prevocalic position (Table 5) – we can predict that such dilution of apparent conditioning will be marginal. And in fact it is not detectable at all when we compare the rows of Table 7: The magnitude of effect of a preconsonantal versus prevocalic environment is identical across all narrative clauses. Note, however, that the increase in *-t*, *d* absence in complicating action clauses is parallel in both preconsonantal and prevocalic environments. This is understandable, since there should be no dependence on phonological context for which tense is used.

In fact, when we reduce the number of occurrences in Table 7 in accordance with the number of Historical Presents previously calculated to be present, equal division between preconsonantal and prevocalic, as is generally the case, is

TABLE 6. Grammatical conditioning of consonant realization

Group studied	Monomorphemic (<i>first</i>)		Irregular [+infl] (<i>kept</i>)		Regular verb (<i>walked/died</i>)	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
SAE ^a (Educated white adults)	32.4%	1072	—	—	9.3%	237
New York City ^b (working-class adults "single style")	74.6	386	(41.4	111)*	31.4	248
Detroit ^c (Lower working class)	72.1	?	—	—	33.9	?
Washington, D.C. ^d	—	—	80.0	?	44.2	?
Samaná	74.2	415	73.8	160	44.5	561

*These are Labov's data for a subsample of eleven individuals not identified as to age or class. Sources: ^aNeu 1980; ^bLabov et al. 1968:128; ^cWolfram 1969; ^dFasold 1972:74;

TABLE 7. Rates of -t, d absence in regular verbs across narrative sections

Narrative section	—/[-vocalic]	—/[+vocalic]
Noncomplicating action	67% (27)	42% (19)
Complicating action	77% (35)	50% (54)

the phonologically conditioned rates of -t, d deletion become substantially the same in the complicating action as in the noncomplicating action clauses, as may be seen in Table 8.

This confirms that both phonologically simplified pasts and Historical Presents exist among the regular as well as the irregular verbs, a tendency which is especially marked, as we have predicted, in the complicating action clauses of the narrative.

DECREOLIZATION?

The evidence we have presented thus far is consistent with the hypothesis that tense is an underlying category in Samaná English. This in itself, however, is not necessarily incompatible with a creole-origin configuration, since there are creoles in which the category Past is attested, usually as a result of subsequent decreolization. Indeed, in decreolizing languages which have been studied in detail, the shift from anterior to past marking is said to figure among the earliest superstrate influenced changes (Bickerton 1981:85).

Bickerton (1980, 1981) suggests that a stage in which anterior marking obtained in a language may be reconstructed on the basis of synchronic evidence. He notes that the process of decreolization may be distinguished from natural internal evolution: The former is characterized by changes in surface form prior

TABLE 8. Rates of -t, d absence in presumed past-tense regular verbs across narrative sections (reduced to account for the presence of Historical Presents)

Narrative section	—/[-vocalic]	—/[+vocalic]
Noncomplicating action	65% (26)	37% (18)
Complicating action	69% (26)	40% (45)

to change in grammatical function, whereas the latter preserves early form imbuing them with new functions. If the synchronic state of a language is decreolization, and if the original creole had the prototypical anterior marker, then according to the above scenario, a new marker would have been adopted in addition to it, with both originally covering the same meaning. The new form would then gradually take over the grammatical function of [+past], as the old one disappears or becomes restricted in use. In the ideal case, we should be able to locate synchronically both the past-tense marker and remnants of the original marker, with the former fulfilling the grammatical function of the latter. This is precisely what Bickerton (1975, 1981) has done in Guyanese and other decreolizing varieties. In this context, it is instructive to examine in some detail the process of decreolization inferred from synchronic data on Guyanese Creole and compare it with our Samaná materials.

Effect of verb type on past-tense expression

The earliest past tense forms to be acquired productively in Guyanese Creole are the phonologically salient consonant-final [+syllabic] verbs (i.e., those whose underlying forms terminate in coronal stops, e.g., *wanted*). Later, irregular Past (e.g., *kept*) and, finally, morphologically marked regular nonsyllabic verbs (*died*, *walked*) appear and gradually begin to conform to the Standard English distribution of past-tense marking (Bickerton 1975:108). This acquisition pattern is reflected in the proportions of tense marking in Table 9, where regular [+syllabic] verbs can be seen to be marked three times as often in Guyanese

TABLE 9. Proportion of past-tense marker presence by verb type (recalculated from the data of Table 6)

Group studied ^a	Irregular	Regular	
	vb[+infl] (<i>kept</i>)	[+syll] (<i>wanted</i>)	[-syll] (<i>died/walked</i>)
Samaná	26.2%	55.2%	55.5%
Guyanese Creole* Mesolect → Acrolect	(30.8%) ^b	59.8%	19.0%

^aStudies of past-tense expression in BEV have focused on consonant cluster simplification and thus have not systematically treated -ed absence in [+syllabic] verbs.

^bBickerton's figures are based on all irregular verbs, including those not eligible for consonant cluster simplification (e.g., *saw*), whereas ours include only those with underlying consonants or clusters. As mentioned earlier, irregular verbs with past temporal reference external to the complicating action clauses of the narrative are virtually always marked in Samaná English. Had we included these in our calculations, the overall rate of marker presence would be seen to be considerably higher than that for Guyanese Creole.

*Source: Bickerton 1975.

Creole as their nonsyllabic counterparts, even by speakers approaching the acrolectal level. In Samaná English, on the other hand, the salient syllabic verbs and the less salient nonsyllabics behave identically.¹⁷

Effect of aspectual distinctions on past-tense expression

Variability in the acquisition of past-tense forms among Bickerton's informants can best be accounted for by the factor of verbal aspect. In the process of decreolization, we observe a distribution of the English category of tense which is consistent with the underlying creole grammar, as inferred from the finding that nonpunctual past-reference forms are handled differently from their punctual counterparts (Bickerton 1975:111). The fact that the aspectual constraint persists so late in the decreolization process leads Bickerton to discard a phonological explanation for past-tense acquisition in creoles (158). Indeed, on the basis of his findings, he calls for a reexamination of BEV along similar lines to establish whether the same factors are operative. We thus examine the effect of verb punctuality on past-tense marking in Samaná English (Table 10).

Singler's (1984:186) data on Liberian English support Bickerton's observation that speakers throughout the continuum maintain an aspectual distinction, as evidenced by consistent differences in marking rates, even among the highly educated. In Standard English, of course, there is no contrast between these categories insofar as morphological marking is concerned: Past-tense markers are affixed to eligible verbs without exception. Likewise, in Samaná English, the incidence of tense-marking on past-reference nonpunctuals and past-reference punctuals is virtually identical. This distribution differs both from the prototypical creole rule of anterior marking, where a null mark is given to past-reference nonstatives, and from the pattern of tense morphology associated with

decreolizing varieties, where markers are disfavored in nonpunctual environments. If anything, there is less marking in Samaná English on punctual than nonpunctual verbs. This may well be due to the presence of a small proportion unmarked Historical Presents in this category, which occur in precisely the environment for punctual verbs, i.e., in iconically ordered narrative clauses.

Further evidence that grammatical constraints outweigh phonological ones in creole past-tense usage is adduced by Bickerton (1975:156) from interspeaker regularity in showing more morphological marking in participials than in finite verbs, more in finite verbs with punctual than nonpunctual reference, and more in verbs with nonpunctual reference than in verbs in temporal clauses, reflecting their order of acquisition.¹⁸

Figure 1, which compares the Samaná and Guyanese Creole data across the grammatical contexts, shows that neither the environment most favorable for marking in Guyanese Creole (participials) nor the least favorable one (temporal clauses) can be distinguished according to marking rate in Samaná English.

DISCUSSION

The independent evidence from narrative analysis, phonological analysis, and grammatical analysis we have presented here all militates in favor of our contention that Samaná English features the category of past tense. Study of the genre of performed narrative, in which reference time is preestablished, enabled us to demonstrate not only the existence of a tense marker identical in surface form to that of Standard English, but also its use in contexts and functions documented for SAE. Moreover, we have established the existence of a narrative Historical Present in our materials, which remarkably enough, appears in proportions

TABLE 10. *Comparative rates of past-tense morphological marking on punctual and nonpunctual verbs*

Group studied	[+punctual]		[-punctual]	
	%	n	%	n
Guyanese Creole ^a Mesolect → Acrolect	38.5	597	12.1	428
Liberian English ^b				
>10 years education	91.8	134	37.8	29
4-9 years education	96.7	152	47.8	23
0-3 years education	33.2	843	3.2	443
Samaná	51.4	638	56.7	74

Sources: ^aBickerton 1975:154; ^bSingler 1984:1985 (Singler's data include irregular verbs only, explaining the apparently high rates of past-tense expression; the other figures are based on all verbs).

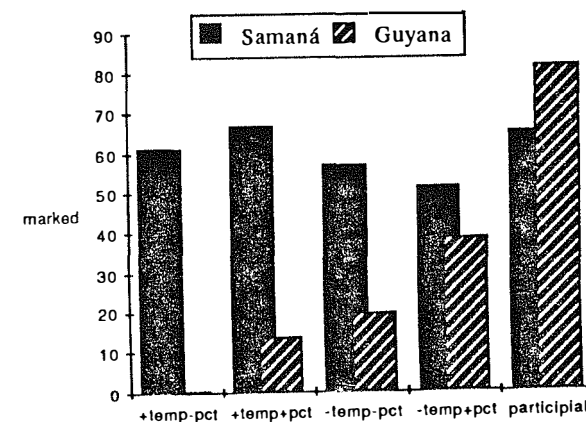


FIGURE 1: Hierarchy of past-tense marking (percent).

patterns of alternation with the Past nearly identical to those associated with middle-class white American narrators.

Of course, not all of the verbs with past (or present) temporal reference carry an overt morphological mark. Examination of the segmental conditioning of past-tense expression showed a phonological effect on final consonant realization, not unlike those attested for other varieties of English systematically studied. Equally revealing is the strong functional constraint, whereby regular verbs on which the final consonant represents the only morphological mark of Past resist simplification far more than contexts where it fulfills no such function. This is particularly noteworthy in view of the fact that these are precisely the verbs to which past-tense marking applies last in decreolizing varieties, and which consequently show the lowest rate of marker presence.

In response to Bickerton's caveat that distributional patterns such as the ones attested in modern BEV may be masking the primordial grammatical factors conditioning past-tense acquisition, we systematically examined the Samaná materials in terms of the trajectory he hypothesized for decreolization. We found no trace of a prior creole system, insofar as this can be inferred from synchronic differences in marking of [+syllabic] verbs or punctuals or participials. Instead, we provided clear evidence that both the Standard English form and the Standard English function of Past are firmly ensconced in the Samaná English verbal system, with variable surface realizations conditioned by phonological and functional factors. In addition, this tense alternates with the Historical Present following the same discourse considerations operative in SAE, although the exact conditions for present-tense inflection are still under investigation (Poplack & Tagliamonte, in press).¹⁹

Obviously, it could be claimed that the tense-marking behavior just described is not entirely inconsistent with what might be found at an acrolectal level of a creole continuum. At that stage, according to Bickerton, the major differences between the creole and standard English are merely distributional: "the underlying representation of the verbal system in the minds of acrolectal Guyanese Creole speakers may be regarded as substantively identical with that of metropolitan speakers of English" (1975:162). But given the absence in the Dominican Republic of a dominant variety of English toward which Samaná English could have decreolized, and only sporadic contacts with other standardizing (or creolizing) influences over the last century and a half (Poplack & Sankoff 1987), we must conclude that any presumed decreolization (if in fact there existed a widespread black creole in the United States) must have occurred *before* the settlers left there for Samaná, that is, by the early 1800s.

We have presented historical evidence suggesting that Samaná English constitutes a precursor of early BEV which, due to its particular sociolinguistic circumstances of use, has remained relatively unaffected by externally motivated linguistic change. This variety, which we assume to reflect an earlier stage of the language, exhibits striking linguistic similarities with both contemporary BEV

and SAE, and differs consistently from English-based creoles. Our analysis shows that an active SAE tense system was already in place at that stage. Significantly, this system featured a Historical Present tense, systematic use of which is thus far unattested in BEV (Labov 1972:47; Wolfram 1987:47).²⁰ Thus in addition to its intrinsic interest, analysis of Samaná English may contribute sorely needed (Rickford 1987; Spears 1987; Wolfram 1987) real-time dimensions against which controversial claims about the continuing divergence of modern BEV may be assessed.

NOTES

1. Some of the results reported here were first presented at the Workshop on Creoles in Tinian Space, and Society, held during the 1986 Linguistic Society of America Institute. The lively reaction to that presentation contributed much to our thinking on the issues discussed here. We are particularly grateful to Lawrence Carrington, John Singler, Bill Stewart, and José Vigo for stimulating discussion, though we doubt whether any of them would subscribe fully to our views. Portions of this article were also read at the VI Biennial Conference of the Society for Caribbean Linguistics (1987) and at NWAVE XV (1986). The final version of the manuscript benefited greatly from the insightful comments of Bill Labov, Dell Hymes, David Sankoff, Ronald Butters, Suzanne Fleischman, S. koko Mufwene, and Glenn Gilbert.
2. Our use of the terms BEV and SAE below is contrastive only; we do not imply thereby that they constitute homogeneous entities, or that they have resisted normal processes of linguistic evolution. Specific varieties will be referred to where pertinent.
3. The irregular verb *sen* was also considered ambiguous, since we cannot recover whether *-t* or *-d* was deleted. Another fourteen verbs are inherently ambiguous with regard to past- or present-tense marking, because their surface manifestations are identical (e.g., *put*, *sweat*, *beat*).
4. Full details of sample constitution and data base are provided in Poplack and Sankoff (1987). The ten informants studied here were interviewed in 1981 and 1982, ranged in age from 70 to 100, had little or no formal education, and with one exception, lived under the conditions of poverty characteristic of rural Dominicans.
5. Verbal forms contained in direct quotes were not included in the calculations which follow.
6. Reiteration of material referring to the same narrative event (as in clauses (g), (m), and (i)), or a common internal evaluation device, does not invalidate the principle of iconic sequencing underlying the definition of a narrative clause.
7. Given the large number of discourse options for internal evaluation, and the fact that these may occur throughout the narrative, only external evaluation was counted in the category *evaluation* in the quantitative analysis. Other narrative functions were given precedence when they cooccurred with internal evaluative devices.
8. The interpretation of temporal reference follows Smith (1981).
9. Silva-Corvalán (1983) also reports that Historical Presents make up 32.7 percent of the verb forms found in the complicating action clauses of the Spanish narratives she studied.
10. If tense distribution were perfectly random, the expected chances of one Historical Present following another would be 42 percent, since Historical Presents constitute 42 percent of all non-ambiguous verbs in complicating action clauses (Table 1). However, 56 percent actually occur in environment of another Historical Present, showing a tendency to cluster. Similarly, the chance Past following Past are estimated at 58 percent; again the observed rate is higher: 64 percent.
11. Many others occur in the immediate environment of another ambiguous verb, but use of this information in the present context would be circular.
12. Although Singler refers to Liberian English as an "extended pidgin" (xviii), he shows that basilectal variety conforms closely to the creole prototype.
13. Since each of the authors divides the consonant-vowel continuum differently, we follow Labov et al. (1968) in contrasting following vowels with all other segments for ease of comparison. Wolfram's figures for [+vocalic] actually include following vowel and pause, which behave similarly in his data.

14. Although the magnitude of the phonological effect depicted in Table 5 appears reduced in comparison to the BEV materials (paralleling in this regard that for both Guyanese Creole and SAE), this may be due to the fact that the contribution of *preceding* phonological environment is obscured here: see fn. 17.
15. Bickerton has analyzed the presence of past-tense markers in Guyanese creole as resulting from *insertion*, raising the question of why an element foreign to a system should be subject to the parallel phonological conditioning apparent in Table 5. In support of his contention, he cites the findings that no Guyanese speaker marks irregular forms consistently, some never mark past tense morphologically at all, and most pertinent to the present discussion, that the rate of marker presence is very low overall (1975:153).
16. Bickerton (1975) does not provide comparable data on Guyanese creole.
17. The presentation of the data in Table 9 obscures the strength of the phonological effect on *-t, d* retention. When we separate consonant-final from vowel-final [-syllabic] regular verbs, as in (1), we find that the former show analogous rates of *-t, d* presence to the irregular [+inflected] verbs. The relatively conservative behavior of irregular verbs vis-à-vis their regular (consonant-final) counterparts persists. Regular vowel-final verbs, on the other hand, show marking rates far in excess of those for all others, a finding which is, in fact, the opposite of what was attested for Guyanese Creole.

(1) Proportion of past-tense marker presence by verb type

Irregular		Regular	
[+infl]	[-syll, -C#]	[+syll]	[-syll, -V#]
(kept)	(walked)	(wanted)	(died)
26.2%	37.7%	55.2%	77.7%

18. Temporal clauses promote deletion of aspectual markers, and this tendency may generalize to tense markers in like environments.
19. It is already clear, however, that 3rd singular *-s* is not used as a narrative present, as attested by Myhill and Harris (1986) for a contemporary Philadelphia variety of BEV. Focusing only on 3rd person singular (where, in contrast to the Philadelphia data, the majority of the inflections occur in Samaná English), 58 percent of the *-s* inflections in the Philadelphia corpus were found in narrative clauses, as opposed to 8 percent in nonnarrative clauses. Our proportions, as abstracted from Table 14, are just the reverse: .8 percent and 52.3 percent, respectively. (Poplack & Tagliamonte, in press:30).
20. In this context, the contemporary BEV 'narrative *-s*' reported by Myhill and Harris (1986) to fulfill the function of Historical Present may indeed be viewed as an innovation (cf. Labov 1985 and Wolfram 1987).

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