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The Debate Surrounding Black Linguistics: An Assessment of the Origins and Growth of African American Vernacular English

Emma Margaret Currie

‘We cannot claim that Black Lives Matter if Black Language does not matter!’
(Baker-Bell, et al, 2020).

This paper provides an assessment of the origins and growth of African American Vernacular English. It presents background on AAVE by discussing its users and its cultural role in the Black community and explores the two main theories in the debate surrounding the subsequent development of the vernacular, with focus on specific linguistic evidence relating to the variable copula absence.

1 Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the debate surrounding the origins of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). To do this, it provides background on AAVE, by highlighting its primary users and geographical usage, as well as its role in the growth of the Black community in America. It then introduces the debate surrounding the subsequent development of the vernacular, and the two main theories relating to this: the Creolist Hypothesis and Anglicist Hypothesis. To effectively analyse these theories and provide a balanced account of the development of AAVE, the paper provides focus on specific linguistic evidence relating to the variable copula absence.

2 Contextualising AAVE

To investigate the origins of AAVE, it is first necessary to define it by explaining who it is used by and where it is used. AAVE, less formally known as ‘Black English’, refers to a variety of English that is often natively used by African Americans.¹ Therefore, it is a key aspect of African American culture, and has contributed to the growth of the

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1 Lisa Green, *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Natalie Schilling-Estes and Walt Wolfram, *American English: dialects and variation* (Malden: Blackwell, 2006).

Black community's cultural identity.² A number of academics, such as Alice Filmer, argue that 'greater appreciation, or at least recognition, of the rich linguistic tradition of the African American vernacular must be cultivated in every domain: social, educational, political, legal, etc.'³ According to John McWhorter, AAVE is largely misunderstood by non-African Americans as is simply regarded as 'a lot of slang and bad grammar'.⁴ Furthermore, it is at times unfairly perceived due to the prejudice that exists towards the Black community in America, with some using slurs such as 'ghetto talk' to refer to the vernacular or using it ironically when discussing the "undesirable' parts of society like poverty, drugs, violence, and gangs'.⁵ In more recent times, AAVE has frequently been used incorrectly by non-Black speakers, 'under the guise of 'Gen Z' language', for comedic effect.⁶ Consequently, racial equality movements have spoken out against such prejudice and cultural appropriation, and affirmed its legitimacy and its ownership to the Black community.⁷ The main linguistic variables that are often associated with this vernacular are: 'consonant cluster reduction, the absence of the copula, invariant or habitual be, time reference markers and multiple negation'.⁸ Examples of these variables include 'firs girl' instead of 'first girl' (consonant cluster reduction), 'he my friend' (the absence of the copula), 'she be telling him that' (invariant or habitual be), 'he been married' (time reference markers), and 'there ain't no way' (multiple negation). AAVE is a legacy of the forced movement of West Africans to anglophone regions of the Americas during the transatlantic slave trade of the 16th through 19th Centuries, which left them 'thrust into a linguistic situation in which they had to learn English'.⁹

2 Kendra Franklin, 'The Rebranding of AAVE: Modern Day Minstrel', in *Reclamation Magazine*, from <<https://reclamationmagazine.com/2021/02/18/the-rebranding-of-aaave-modern-day-minstrel/>> [Accessed 27 February 2022].

3 Alice Filmer, 'African-American Vernacular English: Ethics, ideology, and pedagogy in the conflict between identity and power', in *World Englishes* (2003), 22.3: 267.

4 John McWhorter, *Talking Back, Talking Black: Truths About America's Lingua Franca* (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2016), 1.

5 Taylor Jones, 'What is AAVE?', from *Language Jones*, <https://www.languagejones.com/blog-1/2014/6/8/what-is-aaave> [Accessed 26 February 2022] Eleanor Tremeer, 'Is It Cultural Appropriation To Use Drag Slang And AAVE?', from *Babbel Magazine*, <<https://www.babbel.com/en/magazine/cultural-appropriation-drag-slang-aaave>> [Accessed 26 February 2022].

6 Franklin, 'Rebranding'.

7 *Ibid.*, April Baker-Bell and others, 'This Ain't Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!', *Conference on College Composition and Communication*, July 2020, <<https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/demand-for-black-linguistic-justice>> [Accessed 18 January 2022].

8 Salikoko Mufwene and John Rickford, 'Introduction', in *African-American English: Structure, History and Use*, eds. Guy Bailey, John Baugh, Salikoko Mufwene and John Rickford (Oxon: Routledge, 1998), 1.

9 Schilling-Estes and Wolfram, *American English*; Green, *African American English*, 8.

2.1 Debate over the subsequent development of AAVE

There has been much debate over the origins and subsequent development of this vernacular. Partly due to its inherent questioning of AAVE's legitimacy and ownership, this debate is rather emotive and surrounded by ambiguity, meaning it is often deemed controversial.¹⁰ One of the main theories on the development of AAVE from African slaves is the Creolist Hypothesis, which argues that the vernacular is a creole language created as a result of early contact between English and African languages.¹¹ A creole language is one which develops as a result of contact between two different languages.¹² Therefore, in the case of AAVE, this refers to when the African languages of slaves came into contact with the English being spoken by the colonials and settlers in the plantations, creating a new language which looks very different to both the original English and the African languages. Through time, this distinct language has become more like English.¹³

On the other hand, the Anglicist Hypothesis asserts that AAVE developed from the British dialects brought by British settlers to North America.¹⁴ This hypothesis argues that because individuals were taken from their native countries, they were forced into learning the language of their captors and thus learned those English dialect forms. Furthermore, the Anglicist Hypothesis argues that as the generations went on, the slaves began developing their own variety of English.¹⁵ For that reason, this forms a particularly emotive angle of the debate, as it argues that as well as having their families, homes, and freedom taken from them, their ownership of their language was removed.

3 Exploring the subsequent development of AAVE: The absence of the copula

To effectively explore the subsequent development of the vernacular and the robustness of both hypotheses, it is vital to look at the linguistic evidence. In the case of this paper, this refers to the aforementioned linguistic variable: the absence

10 Schilling-Estes and Wolfram, *American English*.

11 Ibid, Green, *African American English*.

12 Gillian Sankoff, 'Derek Bickerton, Dynamics of a creole system', in *Journal of Linguistics* (2008), 13.2.

13 Schilling-Estes and Wolfram, *American English*.

14 Green, *African American English*.

15 Schilling-Estes and Wolfram, *American English*.

of the copula (i.e. the omission of the copula verb or the auxiliary verb 'be' from a clause).¹⁶ Examples of this include, 'he a real one' and 'she cool'. However, this variable is not arbitrary; it has systematic patterns of use.¹⁷ For example, some forms that cannot be deleted include: past tense *was* and *were*, the form *be*, and first-person present tense *am*.¹⁸ Therefore, the following sections explore the variables patterns of use by assessing how it appears in the vernacular in comparison to Standard English and other creoles. This feature of AAVE has been thoroughly researched over several decades, as it can be used as a key argument to support the Creolist Hypothesis.¹⁹ This is because of the fact that it is present in AAVE, and creole, but not in mainstream English or American English, and thus, according to Creolists, 'cannot be identified as a legacy of English.'²⁰

3.1 Creolist findings

One of the earliest Creolist studies on the absence of the copula in AAVE and its implications on the subsequent development of the vernacular was carried out by Beryl Bailey, who compared the grammatical rules of Standard English, Jamaican Creole and AAVE.²¹ In this study, Bailey articulated that despite 'the surface resemblances to other dialects of English', there is a 'deep structural relationship' between the three.²² Although there are clear similarities between Jamaican Creole and AAVE, as both feature absence of copula, Bailey noted that there has 'not been an identical development of the systems', as there are differences in the rules associated with the variable.²³ She outlines that while in AAVE nominal predicates are spoken without the use of copula, the Jamaican Creole's rules are more complex 'with zero [copulas] before adjectives, an obligatory a before nominals, and a de which is

16 Ibid, Miriam Meyerhoff, *Introducing Sociolinguistics* (Oxon: Routledge, 2011).

17 William Labov, 'Contraction, deletion, and inherent variability of the English copula', in *Language* (1969), 45.4.

18 Ibid, Green, *African American English*.

19 Tyler Kendall, 'Data in the Study of Variation and Change', in *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change*, eds. Chambers and Schilling-Estes (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), Walt Wolfram, 'Ethnic Varieties', in *The Routledge Companion to Sociolinguistics*, eds. Llamas, Mullany, and Stockwell (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006).

20 Schilling-Estes and Wolfram, *American English*, Alexander Kautzsch, *The Historical Evolution of Earlier African American English: An Empirical Comparison of Early Source* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 89.

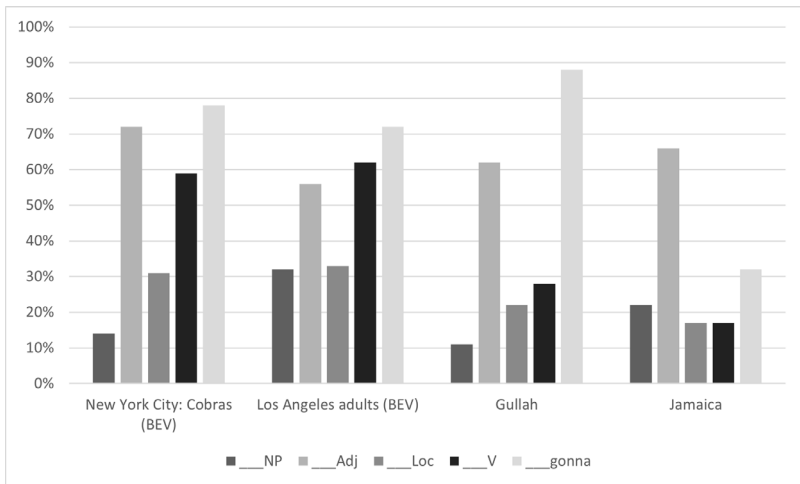
21 Beryl Bailey, 'Toward a New Perspective in Negro English Dialectology', *American Speech*, 40.3 (1965).

22 Ibid, 172.

23 Ibid, 175.

often deleted before locatives.²⁴ However, it is notable that studies have since found Bailey’s assertion regarding the rules on the absence of the copula in AAVE to be an ‘idealisation.’²⁵ Despite this, it is a key study relating to the use of copula absence within AAVE, as it provides the foundations for how the variable can be used to explore the subsequent development of the vernacular.

This is developed by John Holm’s study, which provides a more substantial analysis of the relationship between AAVE and creole with regards to copula absence, by examining the Gullah Creole as well as Jamaican Creole.²⁶ By drawing evidence from both his own findings and previous studies, Holm asserts that the fact copula absence occurs in both AAVE and creole (see Graph 1) is evidence of creole underpinnings.²⁷



Graph 1: Percentage Deletion of ‘is’ for Four Black Dialects.²⁸

24 Ibid, 174.

25 Ibid, John Rickford, ‘The Creole Origins of African-American Vernacular English: Evidence From Copula Absence’, in *African-American English: Structure, History and Use*, eds. Guy Bailey, John Baugh, Salikoko Mufwene and John Rickford (Oxon: Routledge, 1998), 173.

26 John Holm, ‘Variability of the Copula in Black English and its Creole Kin’, in *American Speech*, 59.4 (1984).

27 Ibid.

28 Adapted from: Holm, ‘Variability of the Copula’, 301.

However, like Bailey, Holm notes the differences in rules and context surrounding the use of the variable.²⁹ For instance, he states that the absence of copula occurs most often in both creole languages when there is a following adjective, whereas in AAVE, this is where it is less likely to take place. Nevertheless, he justifies the differences in rules between AAVE and creole by postulating that they are down to ‘external influence’, such as differing ‘geographical and historical’ context, or as a result of a ‘blurred [process of] decreolisation’.³⁰ He further suggests that these differences can also arise from the continuum of use that features in AAVE, Gullah and Jamaican Creole, which means that use of copula absence is on a sliding scale, with some speakers frequently using the variable more than others and vice versa.³¹

Perhaps one of the most prominent linguists in the Creolist debate is John R. Rickford, who has carried out numerous studies relating to the topic of the development of AAVE. In his 1998 study, he further delves into how copula absence can be used as evidence for the Creolist Hypothesis. By synthesising the findings of other academics, he states that although he feels that there will never be an absolute decision on the subsequent development of AAVE, there is enough evidence to affirm that AAVE has creole foundations.³² This can be seen in the evidence on past tense copula absence in ex-slave speech, as although ‘it does occur in Caribbean creoles’, it does not occur in modern AAVE, which suggests creolist roots.³³ He also finds that the frequency of use of copula absence in present-day AAVE coincides with creoles and greatly differs from other varieties of English which can be seen in table 1. Therefore, this can be seen to directly contradict the Anglicist Hypothesis, as it shows clear differences between creoles and the development of dialects which developed from English dialects.

29 Ibid, Bailey, ‘New Perspective’

30 Holm, ‘Variability of the Copula’, 298, 292, 295.

31 Ibid.

32 John Rickford, ‘The Creole Origins of African-American Vernacular English: Evidence From Copula Absence’, in *African-American English: Structure, History and Use*, eds. Guy Bailey, John Baugh, Salikoko Mufwene and John Rickford (Oxon: Routledge, 1998)

33 Ibid, 165.

Dataset	Order of predicate contexts (lowest to highest rate of zero copula)					
A AAVE	NP	<	Loc	<	Adj	< V-ing < gonna
B Creole	NP	<	Loc	<	Adj	< V-ing < gonna
C Indian English (Indo-Aryan L1s)	gonna	<	Adj	<	NP	< Loc < V-ing
D South African Indian English (Mesthrie 1992, Indo-Aryan L1s)	Loc	<	Adj	<	NP	< V-ing
E South African Indian English (Mesthrie 1992, Dravidian L1s)	Loc	<	Adj	<	V-ing	< NP
F Singapore English (Platt 1979, Malay-medium)	V-ing	=	NP	<	Adj	< Loc
G Singapore English (Platt 1979, Chinese-medium)	V-ing	=	NP	=	Loc	< Adj
H Singapore English (Platt 1979, English-medium)	Loc	=	NP	<	V-ing	< Adj
I Singapore English (Ho 1986, Chinese L1)	Loc	=	NP	<	Adj	= V-ing
J Spanish Learner of English (Butterworth & Hatch 1978)	NP	=	Adj	=	Loc	< V-ing
K Spanish Learners of English (Shapira 1978)					PredP	< V-ing

Table 1: *Frequency of Copula Absence by Following Environment in Creoles, AAVE, and Various Studies of the Acquisition of English by Speakers of Other Languages.*³⁴

Additionally, he asserts that the findings reflect that ‘copula absence is widespread in AAVE, but not in White Englishes outside of the American South’ (i.e. varieties of English used by White speakers outside of the South of America).³⁵ Therefore, this does ‘suggest that at least some of the predecessors of modern AAVE arose from a restructuring process similar to that which produced the English-based creoles.’³⁶

3.2 Anglicist Findings

Although the findings which suggest that copula absence is evidence of creole foundations in AAVE are persuasive, there are a number of studies that have been put forward by other linguists to challenge the Creole Hypothesis. Salikoko S. Mufwene argues that, although there is evidence that suggests AAVE has creole underpinnings, with some English dialects (in this case, white American non-standard English (WANSE) varieties) the situation is more complex.³⁷ This is because of the fact

³⁴ Devyani Sharma and John Rickford, ‘AAVE/creole copula absence: A critique of the imperfect learning hypothesis’, in *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages* (2006), 24.1: 76.

³⁵ Rickford, ‘Creole Origins’, 189.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Salikoko Mufwene, ‘Ideology and Facts on African American English’, from *International Pragmatics Association* (1992), 2.2.

that copula contraction occurs in both AAVE and WANSE, when a linking verb is contracted: for example, 'she's my sister' rather than 'she is my sister'.³⁸ Therefore, this could suggest that the absence of copula which occurs in AAVE may simply be an extension of copula contraction in WANSE varieties. However, Mufwene himself questions the cogency of the Anglicist position by stating that it 'fails particularly to account for [the] features (especially structural) that cannot be traced to either colonial English nor any non-standard variety of British English.'³⁹ Despite this, he states that the Creolist assertion that decreolisation is responsible for the differences in rules and context between AAVE and other creoles regarding absence of copula is a 'failed account'.⁴⁰

The argument that the absence of copula in AAVE may simply be an extension of copula contraction in Standard English rather than a creole origin is also expounded by Shana Poplack and David Sankoff.⁴¹ In their study, the main linguistic features and variables of Samaná English - a variety of English language which is spoken by descendants of the African Americans who emigrated to the Samaná Peninsula throughout the early 19th Century - are analysed.⁴² The theorists argue that if both 'Samaná English and AAVE were creole-like, we would expect Samaná English to evidence patterns of copula deletion quantitatively more advanced than those of present-day AAVE', as Samaná English is older than AAVE.⁴³ However, after studying the copula in both AAVE and Samaná English, the authors concluded that Samaná English is 'no more creolized than modern AAVE, at least insofar as its copula usage is concerned'; moreover, they state that the use of the variable in Samaná English, 'bore no more resemblance to English-based West Indian creoles than modern AAVE, and indeed, less'.⁴⁴ Rather, they state that the findings 'suggest that copula absence or deletion is simply an extension of the Standard English contraction process' (see Graph 2).⁴⁵ Therefore, this rebuts the Creolist Hypothesis argument surrounding copula absence, as AAVE 'would have no underlying copula in some environments,

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid, 158.

40 Ibid.

41 Shana Poplack and David Sankoff, 'The Philadelphia Story in the Spanish Caribbean', in *American Speech* (1987), 62.4.

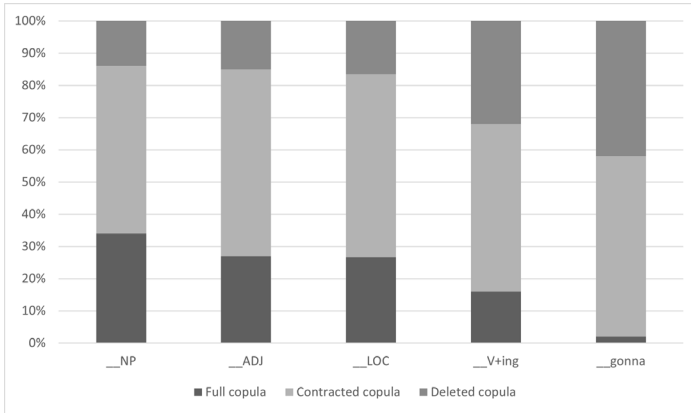
42 Ibid.

43 Ibid, 297

44 Ibid, 310.

45 Ibid, 299

or a copula system otherwise very different from that of Standard English.’⁴⁶



Graph 2: *Frequency of Contraction and Deletion of the Copula According to Following Grammatical Environment.*⁴⁷

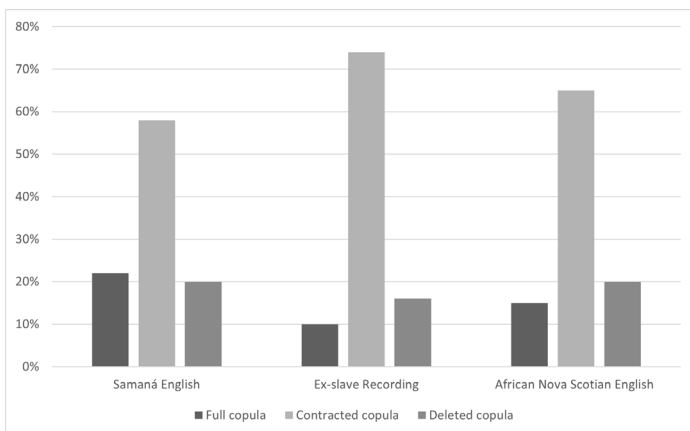
This is further expanded upon in Poplack’s study with Tagliamonte, which investigates African Nova Scotian English (ANSE) - the variety of English language which is spoken by the descendants of African Americans who emigrated to Nova Scotia throughout the 18th and 19th Centuries.⁴⁸ Similarly to Samaná English, the authors argue that ANSE has featured little Creole influence, and again ‘parallels the order for white English contraction’ (see Graph 3).⁴⁹ This compounds the Anglicist contradiction of the key argument of copula absence in AAVE which is used to support the Creolist Hypothesis.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Adapted from: Poplack and Sankoff, ‘The Philadelphia Story’, 305.

⁴⁸ Shana Poplack and Sali Tagliamonte, ‘African American English in the diaspora: Evidence from old-line Nova Scotians’, in *Language Variation and Change* (1991), 3.3.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 320.



Graph 3: Contribution of factors selected as significant to the probability of copula contraction in Samaná English, the Ex-slave Recordings, and African Nova Scotian English.⁵⁰

4 Concluding remarks

This paper has provided a contextual understanding of African American Vernacular English, by highlighting its primary users and geographical usage, as well as its role in the growth of the Black community and has assessed the debate surrounding the origins of AAVE by exploring the use of copula absence within the vernacular. It has investigated sociolinguistic studies by the linguists Bailey, Holm, Rickford, and Singler who argue in support of the Creolist Hypothesis by claiming that the use of copula absence suggests a structural relationship between AAVE and creole. Furthermore, the paper has provided the findings of studies by the linguists Mufwene, Poplack, Sankoff, and Tagliamonte, who claim that the Anglicist Hypothesis provides the best explanation and state that the variable is simply an extension of copula contraction rather than of creole origin.

To conclude, due to the vast size of the debate and persuasive nature of the findings on both sides, as stated by Rickford, there may never be a clear assessment on the origins AAVE. However, it is vital to recognise the ambiguity surrounding the debate, in the sense that it also relates to the vernacular's legitimacy and ownership, as it questions whether it is its own creole language or an English dialect and explores

⁵⁰ Adapted from: Poplack and Tagliamonte, 'African American English in the diaspora', 319.

who is responsible for its creation. Therefore, when exploring the origins of AAVE, it is essential to state that although there is prevalent debate, AAVE is legitimate and is not simply poorly spoken English, and that, regardless of origins, it belongs to the Black community. If they fail to do so, linguistics risk not recognising the culturally significant features of AAVE and reinforcing the systemic issues that the Black community are faced with.

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