

- Wilbur, Terence  
1988 "Sentence connectives in ancient Germanic texts", in: Daniel G. Calder—T. Craig Christy (eds.), *Germanic: Comparative studies in the old Germanic languages and literatures* (Wolfeboro, NH: Brewer), 85–95.
- Wolf, Norbert R.  
1978 "Satzkonnectoren im Neuhochochdeutschen und Mittelhochdeutschen: Prolegomena zu einer kontrastiven Textsyntax", *Sprachwissenschaft* 3: 16–48.
- 1979 "Textanknüpfung und Textartenkonstitution in hochmittelalterlicher Epik (zugleich ein Beitrag zum 'System' mhd. Partikeln)", in: Dietrich Huschel et al. (eds.), *Medium aevum deutsch: Beiträge zur deutschen Literatur des hohen und späten Mittelalters. Festschrift für Kurt Ruh zum 65. Geburtstag* (Tübingen: Niemeyer), 429–445.

## Grammatical variation and divergence in Vernacular Black English\*

John R. Rickford

**La:**

Internal and external factors in syntactic change / ed. by Marinel Gerritsen ; Dieter Stein. — Berlin ; New York : Mouton de Gruyter, 1992 : 174 - 200p.  
(Trends in linguistics : Studies and monographs ; 61)  
ISBN 3-11-012747-4

### 0. Introduction

The study of linguistic change as it is taking place — particularly if based on natural speech data — provides one of the best opportunities we have for understanding its internal and external constraints. In contrast with the study of changes that have long since been completed, we do not have to depend on written texts, with all their limitations. And we can, with more hope of success, keep collecting data until we have the critical linguistic environments, sociological categories, and subjective attitudes we need to solve the transition, embedding, evaluation, and actuation

\* This is a considerably revised and expanded version of a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Linguistic Society of America in 1987, and at the International Conference on Historical Linguistics Symposium on Internal and External Factors in Syntactic Change held at Rutgers University, New Jersey, August 15–16, 1989. The research was made possible through research grants provided to myself or the students listed in the next paragraph by the following agencies and individuals: the Program in Urban Studies at Stanford, the Irvine Foundation, and Carolyn Lougee, former Dean of Undergraduate Studies at Stanford.

Many individuals contributed to the research reported in this paper. I am indebted to Faye McNair-Knox (research associate), Jawanza Osayimwe and Keith Denning (research assistants), and participants in a 1987 residential summer research seminar at Stanford who helped to transcribe and tabulate data on several of the variables (Renee Blake, Jeannine Carter, Pamela Ellis, Gemine Lentine [graduate supervisor], Diana Loo, Erin Mulligan, Barbara Pearson, Sharon Tu, and Fox Vernon), and the students who were involved in the VARBRUL analysis of the copula data in the summer of 1988 (Arneha Ball, Renee Blake, Raina Jackson, and Nomi Martin). I am especially grateful to my wife Angela Rickford for feedback and encouragement.



problems of linguistic change. (See Weinreich—Labov—Herzog 1968 and Stein and Gerritsen's papers in this volume.)

The one disadvantage which the study of change in progress has over the study of completed changes is that synchronic variability might offer misleading evidence on change in the linguistic system or community norm. Apparent-time data (distributions across different age-groups) which suggest that the system is changing might actually reflect stable age-grading, in which "differences between older and younger speakers ... are repeated in each generation" (Labov 1966: 320). Contrariwise, if older speakers can change their speech in line with innovations introduced by younger ones — which seems to happen more often with syntactic variables — apparent-time data might suggest stability while actually changes in community norms are taking place. These and other problems of interpreting synchronic evidence of change are discussed at length by Labov (1981), who proposed (1981: 103) that the best solution is to combine apparent-time data with evidence of change in real time derived from a trend study, involving random samples of the community at intervals of about ten to forty years.<sup>1</sup>

With this in mind, let us turn now to an issue about diachronic interpretations which is generating considerable controversy in American sociolinguistics and is particularly relevant to this workshop since its primary focus is grammatical variability. The issue is whether US Vernacular Black English is currently diverging from Standard English and local white vernaculars,<sup>2</sup> as Labov—Harris first claimed to be true in a 1983 conference paper (1986: 2): "The English spoken by Black Philadelphians is quite distinct from that of Whites, and the differences appear to us to be increasing." Citing data on the absence of third singular /s/, possessive /s/, and the copula, among other variables, Labov and his colleagues (Ash—Myhill 1986, Myhill—Harris 1986, Graff—Labov—Harris 1986) argued that increasing racial segregation in Philadelphia had produced "a BEV [Black English Vernacular] that is more remote from other dialects than ... reported before" (Labov—Harris 1986: 4). The work of Bailey—Maynor (1987) in the Brazos Valley, Texas, which concentrated on conjugated and invariant *be*, appeared to provide independent support for Labov's divergence hypothesis, and suggested that it might be a general urban pattern.

The divergence hypothesis was discussed in some detail at a symposium in 1985, the proceedings of which were published as Fasold et al. (1987). The primary critique of the hypothesis which was raised there — in Vaughn-Cooke's contribution in particular (Fasold et al. [etc.] 1987: 12—

32) — is that Labov and his colleagues had failed to provide comparison points in either real or apparent time, and that Bailey and Maynor needed an intermediate age group to minimize the possibility of age-grading.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper I will report preliminary results from ongoing research in East Palo Alto, California, which attempts to overcome the limitations of earlier divergence studies by providing comparisons across three age groups (evidence of change in apparent time) as well as comparisons with earlier studies in other cities (approximate evidence of change in real time). Ideally, we should have real-time evidence from East Palo itself, but, like Labov and his colleagues in Philadelphia, we have not (yet) been able to locate or draw on data about local usage from earlier periods. Implicit in Labov and Harris' original claims about divergence, however, was the assumption that urban Vernacular Black English was pretty similar from one city to the next, so that comparisons with earlier studies in other cities could serve as evidence of change in real time.<sup>4</sup> This is by no means an ideal strategy, since the assumption of uniformity might be invalid for specific variables, and the social dynamics of change might be quite different from one city to the next.<sup>5</sup> However, since no major grammatical differences have emerged from the study of Vernacular Black English in Detroit, New York City, Philadelphia, Washington DC, Atlanta, Wilmington, Berkeley, and Los Angeles, it seems reasonable to accept comparisons with earlier studies in other cities as preliminary real-time evidence, and I will accordingly compare synchronic East Palo Alto data with data from New York City and Detroit gathered twenty years ago (Labov et al. 1968, Wolfram 1969).

East Palo Alto is a low-income, newly incorporated city just east of Stanford University and Palo Alto, with a population of 18,000, over 60% of whom are black. Our data on vernacular-language use there come primarily from highly naturalistic spontaneous interviews and interactions recorded by insiders to the community, principally Faye McNair-Knox, a research associate on the project who is herself black and who grew up in East Palo Alto from the age of twelve.<sup>6</sup>

The primary data I shall discuss — shown in table 1 — are from six black East Palo Altans from working-class backgrounds, although I shall also draw on a larger sample of thirty-three black speakers when discussing the copula. The six core speakers are evenly divided into old (76 years and over), middle-aged (38–42 years), and young/teenager (14–15 years) age-groups, permitting inter-generational comparisons and inferences about change in apparent time.<sup>7</sup> The features considered are classic ones in the study of Vernacular Black English. They include:<sup>8</sup>



- (a) The use of invariant *be* to mark habitual or durative aspect, as in *He be studyin all the time* 'He studies/is studying all the time.'  
 (b) Absence of inflected *is* and *are* in copulative and auxiliary constructions, as in: *You Ø sick* and *She Ø workin right now*.<sup>9</sup>  
 (c) Absence of possessive *-s* in Noun – Noun possessive constructions, as in: *JohnØ hat, the ladyØ house*.  
 (d) Absence of third-person *-s* on present-tense singular verb forms, as in *The man walkØ there every morning*.  
 (e) Absence of the regular plural *-s* suffix on semantically plural nouns, as in: *four dogØ, many houseØ*.  
 (f) Absence of past-tense marking (by suffixation of *ed*, stem change, and other inflections) on semantically past verbs, as in: *he walkØ there yesterday, he tellØ me so before*.

Table 1. Six Vernacular Black English variables as used by six Black East Palo Altans, grouped by age

Speaker, age, tape #	Invar. <i>be</i>	<i>is, are</i> absence	poss. <i>-s</i> absence	3rd sg. <i>-s</i> absence	plur. <i>-s</i> absence	unmarked past tense
O John						
L Carbon, 88	1	19% (123)	0% (5)	63% (117)	12% (112)	20% (245)
D EPA 1, 2						
F Penelope						
O Johnson, 76	0	15% (55)	13% (23)	57% (75)	10% (242)	14% (372)
L EPA 5, 6						
K						
M Doty						
I Boston, 42	1	18% (77)	0% (2)	54% (65)	3% (124)	10% (69)
D EPA 24–26						
A Paula						
G Gates, 38	0*	35% (115)	36% (11)	44% (34)	1% (145)	12% (135)
E EPA 14						
T Tinky						
E Gates, 15	50	81% (256)	53% (15)	96% (56)	11% (167)	11% (132)
E EPA 12, 13						
N						
A Foxy						
G Boston, 14	146	90% (154)	86% (22)	97% (69)	13% (107)	9% (147)
E EPA 7, 8						
R						

The first four variables are ones examined in articles on the divergence hypothesis by Labov, Bailey, and their colleagues, and as it turns out two of these provide support for the hypothesis. The other two variables have not been considered in discussions of the divergence hypothesis, and do not appear to support it. I will now discuss each feature in turn.

### 1. Invariant habitual *be*

The data on invariant habitual *be* – probably the best-known feature of Vernacular Black English – provide the strongest local support for the divergence hypothesis, because the difference between the teenagers and the older generations is qualitative (the adults virtually never use the form), and because the frequency with which the teenagers use *be* outstrips anything reported in the literature to date.<sup>10</sup> In some parts of her interview, for instance, Foxy uses *be* in almost every sentence:

- (1) "Shoot, I know I do, cause I *be* waking' up and I *be* slurping'  
 an' I *be* goin', "DANG, THA'S SERIOUS!" (Foxy B., East  
 Palo Alto 7: 686 ff.)

The one hundred and forty-six tokens which she produced in an interview lasting less than two hours exceeds the total of ninety-eight which Labov et al. (1968: 236) recorded from the eighteen members of the New York City Thunderbirds street gang in all individual and group sessions, and the total of ninety-four which Wolfram (1969) recorded in interviews with a Detroit sample of forty-eight people. Since this feature is markedly absent from white vernacular varieties, except for occasional use among very old "folk speakers" in the South (Bailey – Bassett 1986), its frequent use by young black speakers certainly has the effect of making the black vernacular more distinctive.

One factor which might make us hesitate to accept high frequencies of invariant *be* among teenagers as evidence of change in progress, however, is the fact that, in the 1960s and early 1970s, Labov et al. (1968: 235), Wolfram (1969: 201) and Fasold (1972: 212–214) all found this feature to be commoner in the speech of pre-adolescents and teenagers than in the speech of adults, suggesting that it might represent a stable pattern of age-grading within the community. Both Vaughn-Cooke (1987: 20) and Wolfram (1987: 45–46) draw attention to this possibility, the latter proposing (1987: 46) to:



examine middle-aged [Vernacular] Black] English speakers in communities where twenty years ago we found habitual *be* to be more frequent among children than adults ... If current speakers between 30 and 40 show persistent high levels of habitual *be* + *ing*, then Bailey and Maynor are probably correct in proposing habitual *be* + *ing* as a relatively recent change; if not, *be* + *ing* is probably genuinely age-graded.

While the data which Wolfram proposes to gather in Washington CD will undoubtedly be valuable, it should be noted that the "high levels" of invariant *be* use reported for adolescents in eastern cities two decades ago were much lower than those recorded for the East Palo Alto teenagers today. Wolfram (1969: 201) reported an average of 12.8 occurrences of invariant *be* per individual for lower working-class teenagers in Detroit, and 4.8 per individual for upper working-class teenagers.

Bailey—Maynor (1987: 458; 1989: 13–14) argue that intergenerational differences in the use of invariant *be* are not only quantitative, but qualitative — young black speakers in Texas are changing the grammar of *be* by using it primarily as an auxiliary, before Verb + *ing*, while older black speakers use it more often as a copula, before adjectives and locatives — and that they are therefore less likely to represent age-grading. The linguistic and logical inferences that follow from the evidence itself are not that straightforward, as Butters (1989: 6–32) notes in an extended critique, but the intergenerational differences with respect to following syntactic environment are themselves very robust, attested in other cities and data sets, including our own (Bailey—Maynor 1987: 461–463; Viereck 1988: 295, summarized in Fasold 1989: 28; Rickford 1989). Although the East Palo Alto data are uninformative with respect to adult usage, local teenagers show the marked preference for the use of invariant *be* as an auxiliary, before Verb + *ing*, which Bailey—Maynor (1987) report for young urban Texans: 76% of Foxy's invariant *be* tokens and 94% of Tinky's occur in this environment (Rickford—McNair-Knox 1987).

Because it accords so well with the theme of this volume, I will now summarize Bailey—Maynor's (1987: 463–496) account of the internal and external factors which seem to them to have facilitated the concentrated rise in the frequency of invariant *be* before Verb + *ing*. On the one hand, this is portrayed (1987: 463–466) as due to internal factors — the unusually wide range of meanings of the English progressive (limited duration, future, extended duration and habituality), coupled with the apparently unsystematic variation between *be*, zero, and inflected *is* and *are* in adult grammars. In making *be* the almost exclusive marker

of extended duration and habituality, the children are seen as effecting a syntactic reanalysis of the form in line with Langacker's (1977: 110) principle of "perceptual optimality", in particular, "transparency", the notion that "the ideal or optimal linguistic code, other things being equal, will be one in which every surface unit will have associated with it a clear, salient and reasonably consistent meaning or function, and every semantic element in a sentence will be associated with a distinct and recognizable surface form". In turn, this internally motivated reanalysis — or at least its spread — is attributed by Bailey—Maynor (1987: 466–469) to an external factor, the increasing segregation of Black and White populations which followed the post-World-War I "Great Migration" of Blacks from the rural South to the urban West and North, and the accompanying "White flight" to the suburbs. With less pressure from Standard English and white vernacular varieties, young black-vernacular speakers were freer to reanalyze invariant *be* and use it to minimize the semantic ambiguities of the English progressive.

I discuss Bailey—Maynor's (1987) analysis in more detail elsewhere (Rickford 1989; see also Butters 1989: 6–32), and, since *be* is only one of several features which I want to examine in this paper, I will comment on it only briefly here. Their interpretation of the internal and external factors which triggered the increased use of *be* is quite persuasive, but clearly cannot represent the whole story. With respect to the external factor, for instance, it ignores evidence that even in small communities where Blacks and Whites live together their grammars can remain distinct in fundamental respects because of attitudinal factors and limits on the frequency and quality of their verbal interactions (Rickford 1986). In short, conditions favorable to syntactic reanalysis might have existed within Black communities long before the urban migrations of the twentieth century. With respect to the internal factors, a neglected point is the virtually complementary distributions of invariant *be* and zero realizations of inflected *is* and *are* in terms of following syntactic environment. Such zero forms are in fact commonest before Verb + *ing* (excluding *gonna* — before which invariant *be* does not occur) and have been for at least a century, on the evidence of ex-slave narrative data in Bailey (1987: 35); the sharp rise in invariant *be* forms before Verb + *ing* could thus reflect a structural filling of this hole or vacuum in the paradigm, as much as a response to the ambiguities of the English progressive. Another factor which Bailey—Maynor neglect is the relationship between invariant *be* Verb + *ing* and present tense Verb (+*s*) (compare Wolfram 1969: 196–197 and Myhill 1989). As invariant *be* spreads, it displaces present-



tense forms as well as inflected and zero forms of *is* and *are*, and until present-tense forms are included in the set of potential environments, an accurate picture of the embedding of this innovation in linguistic structure (Weinreich – Labov – Herzog 1968: 145) cannot be achieved. Moreover, the older black folk-speakers in Bailey – Maynor’s study show a more systematic restriction of invariant *be* to habitual contexts than the authors give them credit for, weakening the authors’ claim (1987: 464) that the use of *be* as a marker of habituality and duration is due entirely to the youngest generation.<sup>11</sup> Finally, it should be noted that mesolectal Caribbean-creole grammars show the same preference for explicit preverbal habitual marking which is found with young American black speakers. While these additional factors indicate a need for us to examine other data sets and consider other interpretations before accepting Bailey – Maynor’s (1987) analysis of the rise of invariant *be* as an auxiliary in Vernacular Black English, they also reveal the potential richness of this feature for linguists interested in internal and external constraints on syntactic change.

## 2. Zero copula and auxiliary *is*, *are*

The table-1 data on zero realizations of copula and auxiliary *is* and *are* provide relatively strong support for the divergence hypothesis, since three of the four adults omit these forms less than 20% of the time, while the teenagers are at the other end of the spectrum, omitting them 82% and 90% of the time.<sup>12</sup> As noted above, we have no local real-time data from an earlier period, but *is/are*-absence frequencies for black teenagers (14–17 years old) in Detroit twenty years ago (Wolfram 1969: 179) are lower (30.3% for upper working-class and 67.7% for lower working-class youths), suggesting that the vernacular of our East Palo Alto youth really may be more non-standard, assuming that the stylistic levels of these data sets are comparable. By contrast, adult East Palo Alto copula absence is on the whole lower (15%–35%) than the means reported by Wolfram (1969) for black Detroit adults twenty years ago (27.4% and 38.4% frequencies for upper working-class and lower working-class speakers 30–55 years old), suggesting that the trend towards increasing vernacularization in this area of the grammar is limited to East Palo Alto teenagers and may therefore be fairly recent.

Furthermore, if we separate the figures for zero *is* and zero *are*, as in table 2, Paula Gates’ intermediate table-1 status is seen to derive from her *are*-absence data; with respect to *is* absence, she is as conservative as the older folk, and as distinct from the teenagers.<sup>13</sup> The data of table 2 also permit comparisons with Labov et al.’s (1968) study of copula absence in New York City, which examined *is*-absence only. The *is*-absence means for the four working-class peer groups in New York City (computed from table 3.14 in Labov et al. 1968: 202) are all lower than those of our East Palo teenagers: 28% (57/202) for the 15–18 year old Oscar Brothers, 36% (169/471) for the 9–13 year old Cobras, 43% (200/460) for the 12–16 year old Jets, and 55% (127/232) for the 11–17 year old Cobras. Labov et al.’s (1968: 292) average *is*-absence figure for New York City adults (about half of them aged 20–39 years, the rest over 40 years old) is lower still – 14% (69/506), and in comparison with this the East Palo adults again appear unchanged or closer to the standard.<sup>14</sup>

Table 2. Details of *is* and *are* absence for speakers in table 1

OLD FOLK		MIDDLE-AGED		TEENAGERS	
John Carbon	Penelope Johnson	Dotsy Boston	Paula Gates	Tinky Gates	Foxy Boston
0 <i>is</i> 11% (54)	5% (39)	0% (45)	8% (48)	67% (129)	79% (72)
0 <i>are</i> 25% (69)	38% (16)	44% (32)	54% (67)	96% (127)	99% (82)

So far we have isolated two constraints on the absence of *is* and *are*: the internal effect of which form is absent (*are* favoring deletion more than *is*) and the external effect of age (teenagers favoring deletion more than older groups). Table 3 provides a more sophisticated perspective on the behavior of this variable in East Palo Alto, for it draws on data from thirty-three speakers (the six in our core sample plus many more young people), takes into account six potential constraints, and estimates constraint effects in terms of variable-rule probabilities instead of frequencies. In interpreting these probabilities, it should be borne in mind that factors with values greater than .5 favor deletion, those with values less than .5 disfavor deletion, and those just around .5 have little effect either way. The table presents two alternative computations of *is/are* deletion, but I will concentrate on the straight-deletion figures in the column to the far right, since this exploits the higher number of tokens (1424 vs. 1119) and makes fewer a-priori assumptions about the nature of the Vernacular Black-English grammar and its relation to Standard English. (See Rickford et al. 1988 for discussion.)



Table 3. Variable rule probabilities for Labov deletion and straight deletion, *is* and *are*, combined, East Palo Alto

Factor group	constraints	<i>is/are</i> Labov deletion	<i>is/are</i> straight deletion
Following Grammatical	<i>goma</i> verb-ing locative adjective noun phrase miscellaneous	.77 .66 .42 .47 .29 .37	.83 .67 .47 .45 .27 .29
Subject	personal pronoun other pronouns noun phrase	(.51) (.44) (.54)	.62 .46 .42
Person/ number	2nd person, plural 3rd singular	.67 .33	.64 .36
Following phon. envir.	consonant __ vowel	(.48) (.52)	(.48) (.52)
Preceding phon. envir.	consonant vowel __	.59 .41	(.47) (.53)
Age	old middle young	.22 .42 .83	.23 .42 .82
Data on each run	Overall frequency (n's in parentheses):	67% (1119)	53% (1424)
Input probability		.62	.35
Formulae:		$\frac{D}{C+D}$	$\frac{D}{F+C+D}$

The first observation we might make about table 3 is that age is still clearly the single most significant constraint on deletion (the young people associated with a strongly favoring probability value of 0.82 while the middle and old groups are progressively more disfavoring), and that the person/number category of the form is also significant (second person plural *are* more favorable to deletion than third singular *is*). This much, of course, we had already known from tables 1 and 2, although the supporting data base is now much stronger. But the straight-deletion

probabilities in table 3 also provide evidence on other internal constraints which we have not yet considered. The parentheses around the consonant and vowel values in the preceding and following phonological environment indicate that these phonological factor groups did not have a significant effect on *is/are* absence – contrary to what Labov (1969) had found for the Cobras and Jets (for preceding phonological environment) – but were in line with a system in which conjugated *be* is underlyingly absent, and inserted by grammatical rule. The other two internal-factor groups – subject and following grammatical category – are significant, and pretty much along the lines which Labov and other Vernacular Black-English researchers (like Baugh 1979) have found: a personal-pronoun subject favors *is/are* absence more than a full noun phrase or any other kind of pronoun; and *goma* and Verb + *ing* are the following syntactic environments most favorable to *is/are* absence, with a following noun phrase least favorable. I will not attempt to explore here why these varied internal constraints work as they do (see Rickford et al. 1988), but it is clear that *is/are* absence is a complex variable, affected by several internal constraints plus the external effect of age.

### 3. Absence of attributive possessive -s

The table-1 data on the absence of attributive possessive -s at first seem to provide some support for the divergence hypothesis too, insofar as the adults rarely, if ever, omit this morpheme (Paula Gates is again somewhat an exception) while the teenagers often do (53% and 86% of the time). However, the quantitative data on this feature are less reliable than those on the other features, because possessive -s simply does not occur frequently in everyday speech, and the samples on which the percentages are based are small, ranging from two to twenty-three tokens.

Earlier studies of this variable in other cities also suffer from limited data,<sup>15</sup> and the evidence they provide of change in real time is, in any case, mixed. The frequencies of possessive -s absence which Wolfram (1969: 150) reported for Black teenagers in Detroit (36.6% and 19.2% for upper-working and lower-working class speakers respectively) are lower than those of today's East Palo Alto teenagers, while the frequencies which Labov et al. (1968: 169) reported for New York City peer-groups (72% and 57% in single and group style, respectively) are about the same. In the article in which the divergence issue was first broached,



Labov—Harris (1986: 11–12) report even higher possessive *-s* absence frequencies (75%–100%) for the core group of young Vernacular Black-English speakers in Philadelphia who have little contact with whites. Of the two East Palo Alto teenagers, Foxy is more similar to these core speakers, but it is not clear (especially with the low *n*'s) that Foxy and the Philadelphia core speakers represent a fundamental shift away from the New York city peer-group usage of twenty years ago, which led Labov et al. (1968: 170) to conclude even then that “there is no underlying *-s* in the attributive possessive form”. Tentatively, on the combined evidence of our apparent-time and real-time data, we might conclude that absence of possessive *-s* is an age-graded feature, but not one which shows significant recent or ongoing change in community norms.

We have not investigated internal constraints on this variable. Its relatively low frequency of occurrence makes such investigation difficult for all researchers, and in any case, earlier studies of this variable report no significant internal effects.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. Absence of third singular, present tense *-s*

When we turn to the absence of third singular present tense *-s*, the East Palo Alto teenagers are decidedly in line with the Philadelphia “core vernacular” pattern of 75–100% third singular *-s*-absence reported by Labov—Harris (1986: 8–12), since they both show virtual categorical absence of this form (96–97%). Note, however (see table 1), that while there is still an appreciable gap between the teenagers and the adults in East Palo Alto, the adults show higher frequencies for this Vernacular Black English feature (44–63%) than they do for zero copula or possessive *-s*-absence.

The evidence of this variable from studies done in Detroit and New York City two decades ago is somewhat ambiguous. Black working-class teenagers in Detroit in the late 1960s (Wolfram 1969: 150) omitted third singular *-s* 56.4% to 76.5% of the time (upper and lower working-class groups, respectively), while the mean omission rate for the New York City peer-groups from the same period (compiled from statistics in Labov et al. 1968: 161) was 68% (*n* = 592/876).<sup>17</sup> While these figures reveal that the tendency to omit this marker more often than not has been manifest for some time, and Labov et al. (1968: 164) had concluded that third singular *-s* was not an underlying part of the grammar of Vernacular

Black English, it seems appropriate to characterize at least some of the speakers in these early studies as having the variable third singular *-s*-insertion rule which Fasold (1972: 134, 146) found appropriate for Washington DC speakers in the 30–70% *-s*-absence range. By contrast, Tinky and Foxy's extreme *-s*-absence statistics make them more similar to Fasold's Washington DC speakers in the 80%–90% *-s*-absence range, the ones he characterized (Fasold 1972: 146) as having “no concord rule for verbal *-s*”. However, at least some of the individuals in the early New York City and Detroit studies must have displayed similar near-categorical frequencies of third singular *-s* absence, so we cannot conclude that Foxy's and Tinky's statistics, dramatic though they seem, represent a fundamental shift in community norms. If further research indicates that most working class East Palo Alto teenagers display the almost categorical *-s* absence which Foxy and Tinky do, this would provide clearer evidence of divergence.

We have so far found no significant internal conditioning on this variable, except for verb type (compare Labov et al. 1968: 246–248): *have* and *don't* occur without third-singular inflections (i.e., *has*, *doesn't*) more frequently (67% and 77% of the time, respectively) than regular verbs do (54%), while zero forms of *say* occur less often (29%).<sup>18</sup> Like Poplack—Tagliamonte (1989: 74) we found no significant effect of subject type (personal pronoun versus full NP versus indefinite).<sup>19</sup> We have so far not tabulated our data on potential phonological constraints, which show inconsistent and/or minimal effects in most Vernacular Black English studies. But we have looked specifically for the two novel features which Myhill—Harris (1986) reported for core Vernacular Black English speakers in Philadelphia: the use of *-s* as a marker of narrative past, and the tendency to insert *-s* on the first but not the second member of conjoined verb phrases, as in “she TAKES your clothes out, and LEND (them) to people”. However, neither of these features occurs in our corpus,<sup>20</sup> and their absence cannot be attributed to formal interview style or high-status interviewer effects, as Myhill—Harris (1986) suggest may have been the case with studies prior to theirs. Tinky and Foxy, surrounded by peers and community insiders, relate many excited narratives, but the use of *-s* as a narrative past or historical present is absent from them all, as it is in this extract:

#### (2)

This one day, Nita came over to that girl house. We were standin' — they were standin' outside, an' Shanti, she came up to that school that day, as this girl just kep' pickin' — pick —



pick—pick—pick. As she had box me three days. Two days she had hit me from — an ah wouldn't hit that girl back. Ah would not hit her back. An Nita say, "why you fightin' wid my — you know? Why you messin' wid her?" You know, Anita was lookin at her all crazy, "Why you messin' wid her?" An' she sai, "Cause I beat her up." An' ah *looked* at her like this, ah was — ah was sick o' that girl then. Ah say, "YOU BEAT WHO, WHAT, WHEN?!! YOU MEAN YOU BEAT ME UP?!!" Ah *looked* at her like dis, ah *start* laughin' — honestly, ah *did*, ah *asked* her, ah say, "YOU BEAT ME UP?!!" Ah *ran* through that house like Rambo, a tookin' off earrings an', throwin' things everywhere. Ah *came* out that house, ah — ah was Ah was BEATIN' her up ... (Tinky G., East Palo Alto 12, 597—608)

## 5. Absence of plural -s and past-tense marking

When we turn to the last two variables in table 1, variables not examined in recent discussions of the divergence hypothesis, we find that they provide no evidence that Vernacular Black English has become more divergent or non-standard over time. With respect to the absence of plural -s on regular verbs, the East Palo Alto teenagers and old people show the same low relative frequency (10%—13% -s absence), while the intermediate age group is lower still (1%—3%). Wolfram (1969: 150) had reported comparable frequencies of plural -s absence in Detroit: 3.4% and 7.4% for upper working and lower working-class Black teenagers, and 5.0% and 8.6% for upper working and lower working-class Black adults. Labov et al.'s (1968: 161) report of 8% (n = 132/1707) plural -s absence for New York City peer groups two decades ago suggests similarly that no appreciable change has occurred in the interim. We are still tabulating our data on possible internal constraints, but preliminary indications are that a following vowel does inhibit plural -s absence, as Labov et al. (1968) also found to be true.<sup>21</sup>

With respect to zero past-tense marking (including the presence of -ed on regular verbs and stem changing and other inflections on irregular or strong verbs) the picture is similar, except that the tendency, if anything, is towards less nonstandard usage as one descends the age hierarchy. Certainly Mr. Carbon, leaving one in five past-reference verbs unmarked, is more non-standard with respect to this feature than anyone else in our

core sample. As is evident from extract (2) above, the tendency of Tinky and most young vernacular speakers in East Palo Alto is to mark most of their past-reference verbs with Standard English past-tense forms, especially in the case of irregular or strong verbs. This is pretty much as Labov et al. (1969: 250) reported for black speakers in New York City, and as Fasold (1972: 39) found for black speakers in Washington DC.

The only significant internal constraint on zero past marking which we have located to date is verb type. In the combined data for the six core speakers, zero past marking is highest (31%, n = 156) on weak verbs ending in a consonant not adding a syllable in the past tense, which would yield consonant clusters on suffixation (e.g., /pɪkt/ 'picked'), and on the verb *say* (25%, n = 222). It is equally low (6%) in irregular or strong verbs (n = 622) and on weak verbs like *agree* which end on a vowel (n = 51), and is lowest (2%, n = 49) on weak verbs with syllable-adding -ed like *start* in which the past tense suffix (*start-ed*) is therefore most salient.<sup>22</sup>

## 6. Conclusion: Interpreting the evidence for divergence and convergence

On the basis of the apparent and real-time data we have examined in this paper, particularly for the first two variables in table 1, Vernacular Black English in East Palo Alto seems to show some evidence of ongoing change away from the patterns of standard and Vernacular White English, in line with trends reported for other urban areas. Having said this much, however, several qualifications must be made. In the first place, both our apparent-time and real-time data need to be improved, and we are attempting in our ongoing research to do precisely this — enriching the apparent-time data by increasing the sample size, and trying to locate comparable linguistic data or observations for East Palo Alto ten years or more ago to strengthen our real-time evidence. In the second place, apparent divergence with respect to invariant *be* and the zero copula is matched by stability and/or convergence of other features, particularly with respect to plural and past marking, as shown above, and with respect to the pronunciation of the unstressed syllable in *happy*, *fifty*, and so on as higher, fronted, tenser (more like [i] than [ɪ]) — as shown by Denning (1989), drawing on data from our project in East Palo Alto.



The coexistence of convergent and divergent changes which we find locally is similar to what Anshen (1969) found for Hillsboro, North Carolina,<sup>23</sup> and should of course be no more surprising than the finding that Vernacular Black English is changing. The alternative assumption, that it is standing still, and has been for the past century or longer, would be unwarranted. But the sociolinguistic challenge then becomes, as both Vaughn-Cooke (1987) and Denning (1989) have noted, to explain why some features show evidence of divergence while others remain stable or appear to be converging with Standard English and Vernacular White English.

One external factor that strikes me as very relevant to divergence but one that has been neglected in discussions of it to date, is the differences in attitudes towards black identity and culture, including vernacular language use, between successive black generations. Black teenagers are less assimilationist than their parents and especially their grandparents, and more assertive about their rights to talk and act in their "natural way". By contrast, black adults, affected by the demands of the workplace, seem to be impelled away from distinctively black patterns of language and behavior.<sup>24</sup> Consider, for instance, the following response of Penelope Johnson, a former domestic, to the question of whether one's speech makes a difference:

- (3) I do think it's — it makes a difference, because in our day an time, if you don't use your English as near right, people kinda look at you as if, "Oh, I don't want her in — on my job, to speakin' dis way or in my kitchen, around my childrens, you know, so I think it does make a difference how you speak ... (What do you think of your own speech?)  
Oh, it's terrible, sometime.  
(Have you ever tried to change it?)  
Yeah — I'm — I — I have to try, you know, I guess. I — I tries to put the words right, the verbs and things, I try my best to — take my time if I — especially if I'm — speakin' to someone tha's — is — uh — educated, you know. I try to, you know, place my words as near right as I possibly can. Sometimes I slip up.  
(Do you think everyone needs to speak standard English?)  
I think so. Would be better on us [black people]. (Laughs.) It would be much better on us. (East Palo Alto 6A: 445–478)

Not only do black working-class teenagers from East Palo Alto and surrounding areas not express this kind of insecurity about their own speech,<sup>25</sup> they are also outspoken in their criticism of black peers who act white in speech or any other aspect of social behavior. Consider, for instance, Tinky G.'s scathing comments on a cousin who falls into this category:

- (4) Then it's these wh — these Black girls jus' like — ack lak White girl(s). Ah say, "You wanna be White, go change yo' sk — color. Shut up!" Ah — mah cou' — they ack stupid. Ah got — ah got a cousin, R[...], an' she got this Black girl, her name is C[...], an' she ack so white, po' he'p her. Ah tell her — ah say she love Boy George [a white British rock star]. Ah tell 'er, ah say, "You know what, C[...], why'on'choo go live wi' Boy George?" Say, "He not doin anything for you." (East Palo Alto 12: 241–245)

Compare, too, the comments of Reggie, a black teenager from neighboring Redwood City who goes to the same high school as many East Palo Alans, on the taunts that can stick with you for talking white:

- (5) Over at my school, if they — first time they catch you talkin' white, they'll never let it go. Even if you just quit talkin like that, they'll never let it go! (Reggie, East Palo Alto 50: A530–532)

And consider, finally, the staunch objections voiced by Fabiola, a black teenager from East Palo Alto, to "Oreos" (like the cookie, black on the outside, white on the inside) who try to correct her vernacular usage:

- (6) It pisses me off when the Oreos — they be tryin to correct your language, and I be like, "Get away from me! Did I ask you to — correct me? No! No! No, I didn't! Nuh-uh!" (East Palo Alto 50: A254–258)

For these teenagers, Vernacular Black English is an important means of asserting their Black identity, in accord with the "Acts of Identity" model of Le Page–Tabouret-Keller (1985).<sup>26</sup>

But even if we used the differential orientation of teenagers and old folks to explain the teenagers' increased use of zero copula, how can we explain the fact that they are not doing the same with the absence of plural -s or past marking? At present, neither an external (social identity) explanation nor an internal one (for instance, pressures to simplify the



system by reducing redundant markings) is capable of discriminating among all the variables of table 1 and accounting for their varied distributions in apparent and real time.

There do seem to be some valid reasons, however, why invariant habitual *be* should represent the leading edge of the features apparently undergoing change. In the first place, it is now very salient as a distinctively black form, one which in this respect has become the focus of public comment and use by black entertainers and other public figures,<sup>27</sup> and which is frequently included by whites discussing or imitating black speech (see Butters 1989: 15). One reason for the rapid dissemination of this form among black youth and for its attracting the notice of others is that although it functions as a grammatical marker — as a counter in a set of tense-aspect oppositions marked in the verb phrase — *be* is an invariant lexical item, which can be consciously adopted and rapidly spread like slang terms and other lexical items.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, as a preverbal (semi-) auxiliary marking tense, aspect, or mood, it occupies a syntactic and semantic slot in which the distinctiveness of Vernacular Black English has always been marked, perhaps even more noticeably so over the past two decades. Compare recent discussions of stressed *BI/V* (Rickford 1975), *steady* (Baugh 1984), *be done* (Baugh 1983: 77–80), *come* (Spears 1982), and *had* (Theberge–Rickford 1989). One can almost bet, as a linguist, that genuine qualitative and quantitative innovations in Vernacular Black English are likely to show up in the auxiliary (proximate future *finna*, from *fixing to* [Ching 1987], seems to be increasing in frequency now as a black vernacular marker), and the young native speakers of Vernacular Black English who are leading in the creation and adoption of such innovations may well be aware of the dynamic and salient nature of this grammatical category too.

Ultimately, despite our best efforts to interpret existing apparent- and real-time evidence, only the future will tell whether the heavy adolescent *be*-users and copula non-users of East Palo Alto today will adopt their parents' and grandparents' more conservative linguistic behaviors as they grow older, or whether they really represent the vanguard of a fundamental change in community norms. We intend to re-record and follow the linguistic development of Foxy, Tinky, and other individuals in our current sample and combine this with fresh samples of the community to minimize the ambiguities of each kind of real-time evidence (Labov 1986). Regardless of the direction future events take, it is clear that we would be in a much weaker position to interpret them and to untangle internal and external constraints on the grammatical variables discussed

in this paper if we did not have the detailed quantitative and attitudinal data for this point in time which we have presented above and are continuing to collect.<sup>29</sup>

### Notes

1. These figures are derived from Labov's (1981: 177) observation that the span between comparison points must be "large enough to allow for significant changes but small enough to rule out the possibility of reversals and retrograde movements: ... from a minimum of a half generation to a maximum of two".
2. In this paper, our focus will be on divergence from Standard English norms rather than local white vernaculars, partly because we have so far been able to locate and interview only a few whites in East Palo Alto (few non-transient working-class whites live in the central residential sections of the city), and because the data we have tabulated from those interviews so far (for copula absence and invariant *be* — neither of which the whites in our sample use) is identical with Standard English norms. For a number of phonological and other variables not examined in this paper, local White Vernacular English does differ from Standard English, however, and it is important to draw the distinction (see Fasold et al. 1987: 68; Butters 1989: 194).
3. For even more recent and comprehensive discussions of the controversy, see Bailey–Maynor (1989) and Butters (1989).
4. Bailey–Harris (1986: 5) made this assumption and methodological strategy almost explicit, in noting that, "The extreme character of the core Philadelphia [Black] [English] [Vernacular] will be evident if the data we present here is compared to that reported for the Jets and the Cobras in New York City in the late 1960's (Labov 1972)." Labov (in Fasold et al. 1987: 65) was even more explicit: "We have no earlier records in Philadelphia. Our best comparison will be with the work done in New York in 1965–1968." But quantitative comparisons with that earlier work were not provided.
5. As Bailey–Maynor (1986) show, urban and rural black dialects in Texas differ in relation to the expression of habitual aspect, so we at least have to take this demographic difference into account when comparing the data from one black working-class community with another.
6. Since the primary interviewers of black peer-group and core vernacular speakers in Labov et al. (1968) and Labov–Harris (1986) were also black (John Lewis in New York City, Wendell Harris in Philadelphia), comparisons between these studies and ours should be particularly pertinent. A neglected issue in current discussions of the divergence issue is the importance of having data sets which are comparable with respect to interviewer characteristics and stylistic level. On this point see Wolfram (1987: 42–44).



7. John Carbon (a pseudonym, like the others) is a retired coal-miner, auto-worker, and construction worker who also earned a living for a while playing in local baseball games. Penelope Johnson is a retired farm-worker, domestic and nurse's assistant. Doty Boston is a machinist, and the mother of Foxy Boston (whose father is a construction worker). Paula Gates is a teacher's aide, and the mother of Tinky Gates. Unlike the 1960s studies of Vernacular Black English, we have fairly extensive data on each individual, and more females in our sample than males. Teenage girls in East Palo Alto use the vernacular as vigorously as the male street gangs in New York City in the 1960s did, and in some cases, even more so.
8. For convenience of reference and because such comparisons are basic to the divergence issue, these Vernacular Black English features are described in terms of comparisons with Standard English ("use of invariant *be*", "zero copula"), but it is of course possible to describe them in their own terms, as DeBose-Faracías (1988) do.
9. Although this variable includes, strictly speaking, both auxiliary (pre-Verb + *ing*) and copula (pre-locative, nominal and adjectival) tokens, we will sometimes refer to it more loosely as "zero copula", following the tradition of the literature on Vernacular Black English.
10. Absolute and relative frequencies for this feature and others in table 1 are subject to modification as untabulated data from other tape recordings in our corpus is added. For instance, in a subsequent interview, Paula Gates uses four instances of invariant *be* when talking about "signifying" and other speech events in which she used to engage when she was in school. (Labov et al. 1968: 235 note similarly that New York City adults tend to shift towards *be* use when discussing childhood experiences, and suggests that this may be evidence of age-grading.)
11. What appears to be true from Bailey-Maynor's data (1987: 460, table 6) is that, in the auxiliary environment (before Verb + *ing*), *be* has become almost the exclusive marker of extended and habitual meaning for the children but not for the folk speakers, who use zero *is/are* for habituals much more frequently than *be* (73% vs. 6%). However, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Rickford 1989), since auxiliary tokens account for only 12% (4/31) of the folk speakers' tokens of *be*, but for 63% (62/96) of the children's, this kind of comparison can be misleading. See Butters (1989: 27) for a similar point.
12. In common with virtually all previous studies of the copula, these figures omit tokens which were indeterminate (e.g., contracted *is* followed by a sibilant, as in, "He's sick") or invariant (e.g., clause-final tokens, as in "Yes, he is", never contracted or deleted). See Rickford et al. (1988) for further details.
13. Table 2 also reveals that Doty follows the majority Mississippi white pattern reported by Wolfram (1974), allowing some *are* absence, but not *is* absence.
14. Labov et al.'s (1968: 202) mean *is*-absence figure for white Inwood teenagers is 0% (0/218), the same as reported by McElhinny (1988) for whites in Palo

- Alto and East Palo Alto. For this grammatical variable, as for absence of third singular and attributive possessive *-s* (see Ash-Myhill 1986: 37, figure 2), divergence from Standard English norms is pretty much the same as divergence from white vernacular usage.
15. Labov et al. (1968: 161) report a total of 85 tokens for 44 or more members of the T-birds, Cobras, Jets, Aces, and Oscar Brothers; and Wolfram (1969: 143) reports 38 instances of potential -Z possessive for the 24 members of his working-class groups. In both cases, the mean sample size of two or three tokens per individual is considerably lower than in our data. Labov-Harris (1986) provide percentages, but no n's, so we cannot compare their sample size (nor perform chi-square or other significance tests on their data).
16. Wolfram (1969: 143) reported a slight favoring effect of a preceding consonant (especially /n/) over a preceding vowel: 34.6% to 27.8% *-s* absence respectively. Labov et al. (1968: 169) did not have enough data to determine phonological effects.
17. These figures combine statistics for the Thunderbirds, Aces, Cobras, Jets, and Oscar Bros across all styles and phonological contexts.
18. These distributions are based on the data of the middle-aged and old speakers only, since the teenagers are, as noted above, virtually categorical in excluding third-person *-s*. Here are the relevant statistics on third-singular *-s* absence for the adults (n's in parentheses: *have* = 67% (21), *do* = 44% (9), *don't* = 77% (35), *say* = 29% (7), regular verbs = 54% (222).
19. Relevant statistics – again for adults only – for absence of third person singular *-s*: personal pronoun subjects = 56% (174), full NP subjects = 61% (92), indefinite subjects = 58% (24).
20. Overall, *-s* occurs on semantically past verbs only 1% of the time (16 out of 1100 cases) in our corpus, and never in the speech of the teenagers. Ten of the 16 *-s* tokens occur in the speech of Paula Gates, and they are all tokens of *say's*.
21. Combined statistics, for John Carbon and Foxy Boston only: # Consonant = 12% (85), # Vowel = 6% (51), # Pause = 17% (83). Note that Poplack-Tagliamonte (1989: 64–65) also find the same ordering of consonant, vowel, and pause with respect to absence of third singular *-s* in Samaná, and that, as they remind us, Gray (1980: 28) had also found a following pause most favorable for *-t*, *-d* deletion in contemporary Vernacular Black English.
22. On this point, compare Bickerton (1975: 142 ff.), and Poplack-Tagliamonte (1989: 64).
23. Anshen's finding – that /r/-lessness diminished with decreasing age while the pronunciation of /θ/ as [t] or [f] increased – is discussed by Vaughan-Cooke (1987: 29), who proposes a two-part hypothesis about Vernacular Black English change: "The majority of features undergoing change in Black English are converging toward standard English; powerful social and linguistic counterforces can reverse the expected direction of a change."



24. Latice, a ninth grader, perceptively commented (East Palo Alto 50: A067-069) that adults use less Vernacular Black English than children because "when they're in work, they got to try to be like the White people wan' em to be".
25. "I'm not really out to impress anybody," the speaker of (5) observed, "I talk the way I want to!" (East Palo Alto 50: A478-479).
26. Note, however, that contrary to the impression sometimes given by proponents of the Acts of Identity model, speakers are still (subconsciously) controlled by applicable internal constraints.
27. Arsenio Hall, the Black late-night talk-show host, has even incorporated it into his slogan/theme: "Arsenio Hall - we be havin a ball!" And Arthur Ashe deprecates its use by one of his children's teachers in a recent *Reader's Digest* article. Butters (1989: 15-16) cites other recent examples of public figures using invariant *be*.
28. Quite independently, Butters (1989: 20ff.) makes the same point. However, I do not agree with his additional characterization of invariant *be* as a "relatively superficial change" (1989: 24).
29. Note that written attestations of invariant *be* are few and far between. If we had to document current developments in the use of this feature in Vernacular Black English from written records, we would be almost totally at a loss, and this is probably true for most vernacular features undergoing change.

## References

- Anshen, Frank  
1969 Speech variation among Negroes in a small Southern community [unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, New York University].
- Ash, Sharon - John Myhill  
1986 "Linguistic correlates of inter-ethnic contact", in: David Sankoff (ed.), 33-42.
- Bailey, Guy  
1987 "Are Black and White vernaculars diverging?", in: Ralph W. Fasold et al., 32-40.
- Bailey, Guy - Marvin Bassett  
1986 "Invariant *be* in the Lower South", in: Michael Montgomery and Guy Bailey (eds.), 158-179.
- Bailey, Guy - Natalie Maynor  
1987 "Decreolization?", *Language in Society* 16: 449-473.
- 1989 "The divergence controversy", *American Speech* 64: 12-39.
- Baugh, John  
1979 Linguistic style-shifting in Black English [unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania].
- 1983 *Black street speech: its history, structure and survival* (Austin: University of Texas Press).
- 1984 "Steady: Progressive aspect in Black Vernacular English", *American Speech* 59: 3-12.
- Bickerton, Derek  
1975 *Dynamics of a creole system* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Butters, Ronald  
1989 *The death of Black English: Divergence and convergence in black and white vernaculars* (Bamberger Beiträge zur englischen Sprachwissenschaft, 25) (Frankfurt: Peter Lang).
- Ching, Marvin K. L.  
1987 "How fixed is *fixin' to*?", *American Speech* 62: 332-345.
- DeBose, Charles E. - Nicholas Faracias  
1988 "An Africanist approach to the linguistic study of Black English: Getting to the African roots of the tense/aspect/modality and copula systems in Afro-American" [paper presented at the International Round Table on Africanisms in Afro-American Language Varieties, University of Georgia, Athens].
- Denning, Keith  
1989 "A sound change in Vernacular Black English", *Language Variation and Change* 1: 145-167.
- Denning, Keith M. - Sharon Inkelaar - Faye C. McNair-Knox - John R. Rickford (eds.)  
1986 *Variation in language: NWAVE-XV at Stanford* (Stanford: Department of Linguistics, Stanford University).
- Fasold, Ralph W.  
1972 *Tense marking in Black English: A linguistic and social analysis* (Urban Language Series 8) (Arlington, Virginia: Center for Applied Linguistics).
- Fasold, Ralph W. - Roger W. Shuy (eds.)  
1975 *Analyzing variation in language* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press).
- Fasold, Ralph W. - William Labov - Fay Boyd Vaughn-Cooke - Guy Bailey - Walt Wolfram - Arthur K. Spears - John R. Rickford  
1987 "Are Black and White vernaculars diverging? Papers from the NVAWE-XVI panel discussion", *American Speech* 62.1: 3-80.
- Graft, David - William Labov - Wendell Harris  
1986 "Testing listeners' reactions to markers of ethnic identity: A new method for sociolinguistic research", in: David Sankoff (ed.), 45-58.
- Guy, Gregory R.  
1980 "Variation in the group and the individual: The case of final stop deletion", in: William Labov (ed.), 1-35.
- Vernacular Black English 197



- Labov, William  
1966 *The social stratification of English in New York City* (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics).
- 1972 *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black Vernacular* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).
- 1981 "What can be learned about change in progress from synchronic descriptions?", in: David Sankoff—Henrietta Cedergren (eds.), 177–199.
- Labov, William (ed.)  
1980 *Locating language in time and space* (New York: Academic Press).
- Labov, William—Paul Cohen—Clarence Robins—John Lewis  
1968 *A study of the non-standard English of Negro and Puerto-Rican speakers in New York City* (Philadelphia: US Regional Survey).
- Labov, William—Wendell A. Harris  
1986 "De facto segregation of Black and White vernaculars", in: David Sankoff (ed.), 1–25.
- Langacker, Ronald W.  
1977 "Syntactic reanalysis", in: Charles Li (ed.), *Mechanisms of syntactic change* (Austin: University of Texas Press), 57–139.
- Le Page, Robert B.—Andrée Tabouret-Keller  
1985 *Acts of Identity: Creole-based approaches to language and ethnicity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Lehmann, Winfred P.—Yakov Malkiel (eds.)  
1968 *Directions for historical linguistics* (Austin: University of Texas Press).
- McElhinny, Bonnie  
1988 "Contraction of auxiliaries in White English." [paper presented at the 17th Annual Conference on New Ways of Analyzing Variation (NWAVE-XVII), University of Montreal, Quebec].
- Montgomery, Michael—Guy Bailey (eds.)  
1986 *Language variety in the South* (University: University of Alabama Press).
- Myhill, John  
1989 "The rise of *be* as an aspect marker in Black English Vernacular", *American Speech* 63: 304–326.
- Myhill, John—Wendell A. Harris  
1986 "The use of verbal -s inflection in BEV", in: David Sankoff (ed.), 25–32.
- Poplack, Shana—Sali Tagliamonte  
1989 "There's no tense like the present: Verbal -s inflection in early Black English", *Language Variation and Change* 1: 47–84.
- Rickford, John R.  
1975 "Carrying the new wave into syntax: The case of Black English BIN", in: Ralph W. Fasold—Roger W. Shuy (eds.), 162–183.
- 1985 "Ethnicity as a sociolinguistic boundary", *American Speech* 60: 99–125.
- 1987 "Past marking in the Guyanese mesolect: A close look at Bonnetic", in: Keith Denning et al. (eds.), 379–394.
- 1989 "Continuity and innovation in the development of BEV *be* 2" [paper presented at the eighteenth annual conference on New Ways of Analyzing Variation (NWAVE-XVIII), Duke University, Durham].
- Rickford, John R.—Faye McNair-Knox  
1987 "Conjugated and invariant *be* in VBE: A West Coast perspective" [paper presented at the sixteenth annual conference on New Ways of Analyzing Variation (NWAVE-XVI), University of Texas, Austin].
- Rickford, John R.—Arnetta Ball—Renee Blake—Raina Jackson—Norm Martin  
1988 "Rapport on the copula coffin: Theoretical and methodological issues in the variable analysis of BEV contracted and deleted *be*" [paper presented at the 17th Annual Conference on New Ways of Analyzing Variation (NWAVE-XVII), University of Montreal, Quebec].
- Sankoff, David (ed.)  
1986 *Diversity and diachrony* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Benjamins).
- Sankoff, David—Henrietta Cedergren (eds.)  
1981 *Variation Omnibus* (Carbondale—Edmonton: Linguistic Research, Inc.).
- Spears, Arthur  
1982 "The semi-auxiliary *come* in Black English Vernacular", *Language* 58: 850–872.
- Tagliamonte, Sali—Shana Poplack  
1988 "How Black English *past* got to the present: Evidence from Samaná", *Language in Society* 17: 513–533.
- Theberge, Christine—John R. Rickford  
1989 "Preterit *had* in the BEV of elementary school children" [paper presented at the eighteenth annual conference on New Ways of Analyzing Variation (NWAVE-XVIII), Duke University].
- Vaughn-Cooke, Fay Boyd  
1987 "Are Black and White vernaculars diverging?", in: Ralph W. Fasold et al., 12–32.
- Viereck, Wolfgang  
1988 "Invariant *be* in an unnoticed source of American Early Black English", *American Speech* 63: 291–303.
- Weinreich, Uriel—William Labov—Marvin I. Herzog  
1968 "Empirical foundations for a theory of language change", in: Winfred Lehmann—Yakov Malkiel (eds.), 95–189.
- Wolfram, Walt  
1969 *A sociolinguistic description of Detroit Negro English* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics).



- 1974 "The relationship of White Southern speech to Vernacular Black English", *Language* 50: 498–527.  
 1987 "Are Black and White Vernaculars diverging?" in: Ralph W. Fasold et al., 40–48.

## Internal and external factors in syntactic change in an historical speech community

Robert Peter Ebert

### 1. Special problems of historical data

#### 1.0 Introduction

This paper deals with problems and findings from the investigation of internal (linguistic) and external (social and stylistic) factors involved in four syntactic changes in progress in a German city from the late fourteenth through the sixteenth century. Since work of this type and scope is virtually unique for an historical speech community, I will devote a good deal of space to special problems posed by historical data before discussing the effects of specific linguistic and social/stylistic factors and their interaction in the observable syntactic changes.

#### 1.1 Problems of documentation

In the 1960s and 1970s a rich set of analytical techniques was developed for the study of socially and stylistically conditioned variation in language. When we turn to the question of employing such techniques in the investigation of syntactic change in real, "historical" time, we find that the surviving documentation of the European languages provides us with relatively few opportunities for the detailed investigation of social and stylistic factors. The German language, for example, has been documented for over 1,200 years, but it is not until the second half of this period that the prerequisites for such an investigation begin to be met: autograph manuscripts or faithful copies of texts by numerous identifiable authors from one locale about whom sufficient biographical facts are known to allow for at least a rudimentary social classification. We are, however, fortunate in a few cases. As a result of bureaucratic efficiency and the interest in family and local history among the newly prosperous German burgher class, for a few cities of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries we