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Phonological and Grammatical Features of African American Vernacular English (AAVE)

1.1 Introduction

When the Ebonics controversy broke in December 1996, one of the most frequent requests from the media was for lists or descriptions of AAVE features which showed how it differed from Standard English (SE) and other American dialects, and which the general public could understand.[1] For the lexicon (vocabulary) of AAVE, this was not a problem, since in addition to the two substantive scholarly works by Major (1994) and Smitherman (1994a), there were several shorter, popular AAVE phrase books around, like Anderson (1994) and Stavsky et al. (1995).[2] For the phonology (pronunciation) and grammar of AAVE, however, the aspects which are more systematic and deep-seated, less regionally variable, and more significant from a pedagogical point of view, it was much harder to recommend anything, and that remains true today.

   One of the most complete and accessible (if somewhat technical) descriptions of AAVE phonology and grammar is Fasold and Wolfram's often-cited (1970) article. But besides being outdated both in terminology (it refers to AAVE as "Negro dialect") and coverage (it excludes features like *steady*, preterite *had*, and modal *come* which were not discovered or discussed until more recently), it is simply out of print. This is also true of more general introductions to AAVE like Dillard (1972), Burling (1973), and Baugh (1983), each of which includes a chapter or two on AAVE phonology and grammar. And it is true too of the classic book-length studies of Harlem, Detroit, and Washington DC conducted respectively by Labov et al. (1968), Wolfram (1969) and Fasold (1972), which report on AAVE structure as well as on variation by its users according to social class, age, gender, and style. While there are more recent works on AAVE phonology and grammar, they tend to be either less complete in their coverage (e.g. Dandy 1991), or highly specialized and technical, intended for an audience of linguists or speech pathologists (e.g. Martin 1992, Wolfram 1993, Wolfram 1994, Wolfram and Adger 1993, Dayton 1996, Bailey

and Thomas 1998, Green 1993, 1998, Martin and Wolfram 1998, Mufwene 1998). One exception is the second chapter of Smitherman (1986), which covers many of the key features of AAVE in a language which most non-linguists could understand. However, Smitherman's book was originally written in 1977, and like its predecessors from the 1970s and 1980s, it doesn't cover newer features like *steady*, *come*, and *had*.

The articles, books, and monographs listed in the preceding paragraph still represent most of what we have come to know about AAVE phonology and grammar over the past three decades, and I would recommend them to readers with good library access and/or a background in linguistics. However, this article will hopefully help to fill the need for a brief, up-to-date, relatively complete and relatively non-technical description of AAVE's structural features.[3]

1.2 The Features of AAVE

Table 1.1 identifies the main distinctive phonological features of AAVE, and table 1.2 the main distinctive grammatical features of AAVE. Although it is impossible in a chapter of this length to add all the qualifying details about each

Table 1.1 Distinctive phonological (pronunciation) features of AAVE

1	Reduction of word-final consonant clusters (i.e., sequences of two or more consonants), especially those ending in *t* or *d*, as in *han'* for SE "hand," *des'* for SE "desk," *pos'* for SE "post," and *pass'* for SE "passed" (the *-ed* suffix in "passed" is pronounced as [t]).[4]
2	Deletion of word-final single consonant (especially nasals) after a vowel, as in *ma'* [mæ] for SE "man," *ca'* [kæ] for SE "cat" and ba' [bæ:] for SE "bad." Not as frequent as (1).
3	Devoicing of word-final voiced stops after a vowel, i.e., realization of [b] as [p], [d] as [t], and [g] as [k], as in [bæt] for SE "bad", and [pɪk] for SE "pig." The devoiced consonant may be followed or replaced by a glottal stop, e.g. [bæt?] or [bæ?]. (See Fasold and Wolfram 1970: 53–4, Wolfram et al. 1993: 10, Bailey and Thomas 1998: 89.)
4	Realization of final *ng* as *n* in gerunds, e.g. *walkin'* for SE "walking."[5]
5a	Realization of voiceless *th* [θ] as *t* or *f*, as in *tin* for SE "thin and *baf* for SE "bath."[6]
5b	Realization of voiced *th* [ð] as d or v, as in *den* for SE "then," and *bruvver* for SE "brother."
6	Realization of *thr* sequences as *th*, especially before [u] or [o], as in *thodown* [θodaun] for SE "throwdown." (See Wolfram 1993: 8).

Table 1.1 Continued

7	Deletion or vocalization (pronunciation as a weak neutral vowel) of *l* after a vowel, as in *he'p* for SE "help," and *toah* for SE "toll." May have the grammatical effect of deleting the "ll" of contracted *will*, as in "He be here tomorrow" for SE "He'll be here tomorrow," especially when the following word begins with labial *b*, *m* or *w* (Fasold and Wolfram 1970: 51–3).
8	Deletion or vocalization of *r* after a vowel, as in *sistuh* for SE "sister" or *fouh* for SE "four." This rule applies more often when the *r* comes at the end of a word and is followed by a word beginning with a consonant (*four posts*) rather than a word beginning with a vowel (*four apples*), but it can also apply when a vowel follows within the same word, as in *Ca'ol* for SE "Carol" or *sto'y* for SE "story." Grammatical effects may include the use of *they* for the SE possessive "their" (Labov et al. 1968: 99–119, Fasold and Wolfram 1970: 51–3).
9	Deletion of initial *d* and *g* in certain tense-aspect auxiliaries, as in "ah *'on* know" for SE "I *don't* know" and "ah'm *'a* do it" for SE "I'm *gonna* do it" (see Labov et al. 1968: 252); the distinctive AAVE use of *ain't* for "didn't" (ibid.: 255) probably derives historically from this rule too. Note parallels in Gullah/ Caribbean Creole English tense-aspect markers: *da* ~ *a*, *does* ~ *oes*, *ben* ~ *men* ~ *en*, *mos bii* ~ *mosii*, and *go* ~ *o* (Rickford 1974: 108).
10	Deletion of unstressed initial and medial syllables, as in *'fraid* for SE "afraid" and *sec't'ry* for SE "secretary." Strongly age-graded. According to Vaughn-Cooke (1987: 22), the unstressed syllable deletion rate for speakers over 60 years old in her Mississippi sample was 85 percent, for speakers aged 40–59 it was 70 percent, and for speakers 8–20 years old, it was 52 percent.
11	Metathesis or transposition of adjacent consonants, as in *aks* for SE "ask" (one of the biggest shibboleths of AAVE, often referred to by teachers, personnel officers, and other gatekeepers in the course of putting down the variety), and *waps* for SE "wasp."
12	Realization of SE *v* and *z* (voiced fricatives) as *d* and *z* respectively (voiced stops), especially in word-medial position before a nasal, as in *seben* for SE "seven" and *idn'* for SE "isn't" (phonetically, [ɪznt]). (See Wolfram 1993: 9, Bailey and Thomas 1998: 89).
13	Realization of syllable-initial *str* as *skr*, especially before high front vowels like "ee" [i], as in *skreet* for SE "street" and *deskroy* for "destroy" (see Dandy 1991: 44).
14	Monophthongal pronunciations of *ay* and *oy*, as in *ah* for SE "I" and *boah* for SE "boy."[7]
15	Neutralization/merger of [ɪ] and [ɛ] before nasals, as in [pɪn] for SE "pin" and "pen." (See Labov et al. 1968: 119–20.)
16	Realization of "ing" as "ang" and "ink" as "ank" in some words, as in *thang* for SE "thing," *sang* for SE "sing," and *drank* for SE "drink." (See Smitherman 1986: 18, Dandy 1991: 46).
17	Stress on first rather than second syllable, as in *pólice* instead of SE *políce*, and *hótel* instead of SE *hotél*.[8]
18	More varied intonation, with "higher pitch range and more rising and level final contours" than other American English varieties (Wolfram et al. 1993: 12; see also Rickford 1977: 205).

Table 1.2 Distinctive grammatical (morphological and syntactic) features of AAVE

19 Pre-verbal markers of tense, mood, and aspect

19a Absence of copula/auxiliary *is* and *are* for present tense states and actions, as in "He Ø tall" for SE "He's tall" or "They Ø running" for SE "They *are* running."[9] (See Labov 1969 and Rickford et al. 1988, reprinted in this volume.)

19b Use of invariant *be* (sometimes *bees*) for habitual aspect, as in "He *be* walkin" (usually, regularly, versus "He Ø walkin" right now) for SE "He is usually walking/usually walks." Used with auxiliary *do* in questions, negatives, and tag questions, as in "*Do* he *be* walking every day?" or "She *don't be* sick, *do* she?" (Fasold 1972: 150–84, Dayton 1996, Green 1998).

19c Use of invariant *be* for future "will be," as in "He *be* here tomorrow." This is essentially a result of the phonological rule deleting the contracted '*ll* of *will* (see #7 above).

19d Use of *steady* as an intensified continuative marker, usually after invariant habitual *be*, but before a progressive verb, for actions that occur consistently or persistently, as in "Ricky Bell be *steady* steppin in them number nines." (Baugh 1983: 86).

19e Use of unstressed *been* or *bin* for SE "has/have been" (present perfects), as in "He *been* sick" for "He has been sick." Unlike stressed BIN (see 19e), unstressed *been* can co-occur with time adverbials (e.g. "since last week"), and does not connote remoteness (Rickford 1975).

19f Use of stressed *BIN* to mark remote phase (that the action happened or the state came into being long ago) as in "She *BIN* married" for SE "She has been married for a long time (and still is)," or "He *BIN* ate it" for SE "He ate it a long time ago" (Rickford 1975, Baugh 1983: 80–2).

19g Use of *done* to emphasize the completed nature of an action, as in "He *done did* it" for SE "He's already done it." *Done* can co-occur with *been*, as in "By the time I got there, he *been done* gone" or, in the reverse order, "They done been sitting there an hour." (See Labov 1972c: 53–7, Baugh 1983: 74–7, Smitherman 1986: 24, Dayton 1996, Green 1998).

19h Use of *be done* for resultatives or the future/conditional perfect, as in "She *be done had* her baby" for SE "She *will have had* her baby." (Baugh 1983: 77–80, Dayton 1996, Green 1998).

19i Use of *finna* (sometimes *fitna*, derived from "fixin' to") to mark the immediate future, as in "He *finna* go" for SE "He's about to go."[10]

19j Use of *come* to express the speaker's indignation about an action or event, as in "He *come* walkin in here like he owned the damn place" (Spears 1982: 852).

19k Use of *had* to mark the simple past (primarily among preadolescents) as in "then we *had* went outside" for SE "then we went outside" (Rickford and Théberge-Rafal 1989).

19l Use of double modals,[11] as in *may can*, *might can*, and *might could* (common in Southern White vernaculars) for SE "might be able to" or *must don't* (more unique to AAVE) for SE "must not." (See Labov et al. 1968: 260–3, Labov 1972c: 57–9).

Table 1.2 Continued

19m Use of quasi modals *liketa* and *poseta*, as in "I *liketa* drowned" for SE "I nearly drowned" and "You don't *poseta* do it that way" for SE "You're not supposed to do it that way." (Labov 1972: 56, 59, Wolfram 1993: 13).

20 Other aspects of verbal tense marking

20a Absence of third person singular present tense -*s*, as in "He walkØ" for SE "He walks." The use of *don't* instead of "doesn't" as in "He *don't* sing" or *have* instead of "has," as in "She *have* it" is related, since "doesn't and "hasn't" include 3rd singular -*s* (Fasold 1972: 121–49).

20b Generalization of *is* and *was* to use with plural and second person subjects (i.e., instead of *are* and *were*) as in "They *is* some crazy folk" for SE "They are crazy folk" or "We *was* there" for SE "We were there" (Wolfram 1993: 14).

20c Use of past tense or preterite form (V-ed) as past participle (V-en), as in "He had *bit*" for SE "He had bitten," or "She has *ran*" for SE "She has run." (See Fasold and Wolfram 1970: 62, Rickford and Théberge: 1996: 232–3, reprinted in this volume).

20d Use of past participle form (V-en) as past tense or preterite form (V-ed), as in "She *seen* him yesterday" for SE "She saw him yesterday" (Wolfram 1993: 12).

20e Use of verb stem (V) as past tense or preterite form (V-ed), as in "He *come* down here yesterday" for SE "He came down here yesterday."[12] (Wolfram 1993: 12).

20f Reduplication of a past tense or past participle suffix (also referred to sometimes as "double tense marking"), as in *likeded* [laɪktɪd] for SE "liked" and *light-skinded* for SE "light skinned." Only applies to a small set of verbs (including *liked*, *looked*, *skinned*), and more common in adolescent speech (see Wolfram 1993: 14).

21 Nouns and pronouns

21a Absence of possessive -*s*, as in "JohnØ house" for SE "John's house."

21b Absence of plural -*s* (much less frequent than 20a or 21a), as in "two boyØ" for SE "two boys."

21c Use of *and (th)em* or *nem*, usually after a proper name, to mark associative plurals, as in *Felicia an' (th)em* or *Felician nem* for "Felician and her friends or family or associates." (See Mufwene 1998: 73, who finds this more similar to English creoles than to other varieties of English, although southern white varieties use it too).

21d Appositive or pleonastic pronouns, as in "That teacher, *she* yell at the kids" for SE "That teacher Ø yells at the kids." (Fasold and Wolfram 1970: 81).

21e Use of *y'all* and *they* to mark second person plural and third plural possessive, respectively, as in "It's *y'all* ball" for SE "It's your ball" and "It's *they* house" for SE "It's their house" (Wolfram et al. 1993: 16).

Table 1.2   Continued

21f Use of object pronouns (*me*, *him*, and so on) after a verb as personal datives (=“(*for*) *myself*,” “*(for) himself*” and so on) as in “Ahma git *me* a gig” for SE “I'm going to get myself some support” (Gumperz 1982b: 31, Wolfram 1993: 16).

21g Absence of relative pronoun (*who*, *which*, *what* or *that*) as in “That's the man Ø come here” for SE “That's the man who came here.” Note that the omitted form is a subject relative pronoun (*who*). Many varieties of English allow for the omission of object relative pronouns, e.g. “That's the man (whom) I saw,” but the omission of subject relatives is rarer, and more unique to AAVE (Mufwene 1998: 77).

22 Negation

22a Use of *ain'(t)* as a general preverbal negator, for SE “am not,” “isn't,” “aren't,” “hasn't,” “haven't” and “didn't,” as in “He *ain'* here” for SE “He isn't here,” or “He *ain'* do it” for SE “He didn't do it.”

22b Multiple negation or negative concord (that is, negating the auxiliary verb and all indefinite pronouns in the sentence), as in “He *don'* do *nothin*” for SE “He doesn't do anything” (Labov 1972a, 1972c; 130–96).

22c Negative inversion (inversion of the auxiliary and indefinite pronoun subject), as in “*Can't nobody* say nothin” (inverted from “Nobody can't say nothin”) for SE “Nobody can say anything” or “*Ain't nobody* home” (from “Nobody ain't home” for SE “Nobody is home” (Sells, Rickford and Wasow 1996a, b).

22d Use of *ain't but* and *don't but* for “only,” as in “He ain't but fourteen years old” for SE “He's only fourteen years old” or “They didn't take but three dollars” for “They only took three dollars” (Wolfram et al. 1993: 14).

23 Questions

23a Formation of direct questions without inversion of the subject and auxiliary verb, usually with rising intonation, as in “Why *I can't* play?” for SE “Why can't I play?” and “*They didn't* take it?” for SE “Didn't they take it?” (Labov et al. 1968: 291–6, Martin and Wolfram 1998: 29).

23b Auxiliary verb inversion in embedded questions (without *if* or *whether*), as in “I asked him *could he* go with me” for SE “I asked him if he could go with me” (Labov et al. 1968: 296–300).

24 Existential and locative constructions

24a Use of existential *it* (*is*, *'s*, *was*, *ain't*) instead of *there* (*is*, *'s*, *was*, *isn't*) as in “*It's* a school up there” for SE “There's a school up there” (Labov et al. 1968: 301–3).

24b Use of existential *they got* as a plural equivalent of singular *it is*, instead of *there are*, as in “*They got* some hungry women here” (line from a Nina Simone song) for “There are some hungry women here” (Labov et al. 1968: 303).

24c Use of *here go* as a static locative or presentational form, as in “*Here go* my own” (said by a 12-year-old girl from East Palo Alto, California as she showed me her artwork) for SE “Here is my own.” (See Labov et al. 1968: 303.)

25 Complementizer/quotative *say*

25a Use of *say* to introduce a quotation or a verb complement, as in “They told me *say* they couldn't go.” Although superficially similar to the SE use of “say” to introduce quotations, note its use with verbs like *believe* and *know* (which have nothing to do with speaking) in Gullah and Caribbean creoles, and its parallels with and possible origins in the Akan complementizer *se* (Rickford 1977: 212).

feature which one would like to (but see the accompanying footnotes and references), two general comments should be made, one about the frequency with which these features occur among African American speakers, and the other about their distinctiveness vis-à-vis the colloquial or vernacular English of other Americans.

1.3   Variation in AAVE Feature Use by Social Class, Age, Gender, and Style

Not every African American speaks AAVE, and no one uses all of the features in tables 1.1 and 1.2 100 percent of the time. Although it is often said that 80 percent of African Americans speak AAVE (Dillard 1972: 229), this is a guesstimate rather than a systematic empirical finding. In general, the phonological and grammatical features depicted in tables 1.1 and 1.2 are used most often by younger lower- and working-class speakers in urban areas and in informal styles, but the extent to which this is true, and how often the features are used varies from one feature to another.

Wolfram's (1969) study of Detroit – although now 30 years old – remains one of our most comprehensive sources of information on class stratification in AAVE,[13] and table 1.3 summarizes some of the systematic class effects it revealed for several features. Note that the lower working-class (LWC) speakers' usage of these features ranged from a high of 84 percent for consonant cluster reduction to a low of 6 percent for plural -*s* absence. Note also that while

Table 1.3 Use of selected AAVE features in Detroit, by social class

FEATURE	LWC	UWC	LMC	UMC
Consonant cluster simplification NOT in past tense (60)	84%	79%	66%	51%
Voiceless th [θ] → f, t or Ø (84)	71%	59%	17%	12%
Multiple negation (156)	78%	55%	12%	8%
Absence of copula/auxiliary *is, are* (169)	57%	37%	11%	5%
Absence of third person present tense *-s* (136)	71%	57%	10%	1%
Absence of possessive *-s* (141)	27%	25%	6%	0%
Absence of plural *-s* (143)	6%	4%	1%	0%

Notes: LWC = lower working-class (e.g. laborers and other unskilled workers), UWC = upper working-class (e.g. carpenters and other skilled workers), LMC = lower middle-class (e.g. high school teachers and many white collar workers), UMC = upper middle-class (e.g. lawyers and doctors).[14] Numbers represent mean percentages of use in recordings with 12 individuals from each class.

Source: Wolfram 1969 (original page references in brackets)

the middle-class speakers used consonant cluster reduction at least half of the time, so that the distinction between them and the working-class speakers with respect to this feature was not very pronounced – Wolfram (pp. 120–1) called this "gradient stratification" – they used the other features like multiple negation and possessive *-s* absence very infrequently, so that the distinction between them and the working-class speakers with respect to these features was very pronounced – Wolfram (ibid.) called this "sharp stratification."

Investigations of AAVE also show systematic effects of style, age, gender, and linguistic environment. For instance, Foxy Boston, a teenager from East Palo Alto, deleted *is* and *are* 70 percent of the time in one interview with an African American with whom she was familiar, but only 40 percent of the time in another interview with a European American whom she had not met before (Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994: 247, reprinted in this volume). The members of the Cobras street gang in New York City, like most other AAVE speakers, deleted *is* more often when it had a pronoun subject (e.g. *He*) than when it had a noun phrase subject (e.g. *The man*), and more often when recorded with their peer group than when interviewed individually (Labov 1972c: 84). Wolfram (1969: 179) reported that the 14–17-year-old subjects in his Detroit sample deleted *is* and *are* 68 percent of the time, while the adults did so only 38 percent of the time; in my sample from East Palo Alto, California, 15-year-old Tinky Gates deleted *is* and *are* 81 percent of the time, while her 38-year-old mother, Paula Gates, did so 35 percent of the time, and 76-year-old Penelope Johnson did so only 15 percent of the time.

Finally, males are generally reported as using AAVE features more often than females, but this may be partly because the interviewers in most studies are male. For instance, Wolfram (1969: 136) reports that the lower working-class males in Detroit deleted third present *-s* 74 percent of the time compared to 69 percent for lower working-class females. But Foxy Boston and Tinky Gates, in interviews conducted in East Palo Alto by a female fieldworker (Faye McNair Knox), showed even higher rates of third present *-s* absence – 97 percent and 96 percent respectively (Rickford 1992).

1.4   The Distinctiveness of AAVE, vis-à-vis Other American Varieties

The features of AAVE that appear to be distinctive to this variety (or nearly so) are primarily grammatical. Wolfram (1991: 108) lists eight such features, and six of them (including stressed *BIN*, invariant *be*, and *is* absence) are grammatical. Many of the phonological features of AAVE (e.g. consonant cluster reduction and the deletion or vocalization of *l* and *r*), and some of its grammatical features too (e.g. multiple negation and absence of third person singular present tense *-s*) also occur in the colloquial English of Americans from other ethnic groups, especially those from the working class. Others (like the monophthongal pronunciations of *ay* and *oy*, the merger of "pin" and "pen," or the use of *done* and double modals) are characteristic of southern white vernacular speech in general (see Feagin 1979, Bailey and Thomas 1998, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998.). But most of the time, the features which AAVE shares with southern and other American vernaculars occur more frequently in AAVE and/or in a wider range of linguistic environments. For instance, consonant cluster simplification appears to be more common in the AAVE of working-class African Americans than in white working-class speech, and it occurs in AAVE even when the next word begins with a vowel (e.g. *pos' office*), a position in which many other dialects retain the final consonant (Wolfram 1991: 109).[15] For some AAVE speakers, words like *des'* do not have an underlying final *k*, and the plural form is *desses* according to the same rule that applies to words ending in a final sibilant (e.g., *rose-roses, boss-bosses, church-churches*).

1.5   Concluding Remarks

While lists of vernacular, non-standard, or non-mainstream features like those in tables 1.1 and 1.2 are useful, they can also give the impression that their standard or mainstream equivalents are not characteristic of AAVE usage at all,

so that if an African American speaker pronounced *past* without reducing the final *st* or used existential *there* instead of *it* ("There's a hole in the bucket") that speaker might have to be classified as speaking or switching to SE. But in practice, as Labov (1972e: 189) pointed out, a speaker might alternate between vernacular and mainstream variants many times in the course of even a brief conversation, and we have to recognize that AAVE, like most language variet-ies, includes a certain amount of inherent variability. That variability in turn can be adjusted in one direction or another to mark the kinds of social and stylistic distinctions discussed above, and the dynamic, shifting relationships among the interlocutors.

Finally, AAVE use, even at its most vernacular, does not consist simply of stringing together features like those in tables 1.1 and 1.2. What these lists fail to convey is the way skilled AAVE speakers use those features, together with distinctive AAVE words, prosodies and rhetorical/expressive styles, to inform, persuade, attract, praise, celebrate, chastise, entertain, educate, get over, set apart, mark identity, reflect, refute, brag, and do all the varied things for which human beings use language. It is because AAVE serves those purposes and serves them well that it continues to exist despite all the condemnations it receives from the larger society. For the preachers, novelists, storytellers, poets, playwrights, actors and actresses, street corner hustlers, church-going grandparents, working mothers and fathers and schoolyard children, rappers, singers, barber-shop and beauty-salon clients who draw on it daily, AAVE is not simply a compendium of features, but the integral whole which Claude Brown evocatively called "Spoken Soul."[16]

Notes

1   This is a considerably revised and expanded excerpt from Rickford 1996a, includ-ing a new introduction and conclusion, numerous additional references, and more than twice as many AAVE features.

2   One problem with the popular phrase books or glossaries is that they focus almost entirely on slang, the newest and most transient part of the AAVE lexicon, and the part most familiar to adolescents and teenagers. This reinforces the mistaken impression that AAVE is nothing more than slang, and that it is not known and used by adult African Americans.

3   It is difficult to provide a truly complete description in the space available, however, and difficult to avoid technical terms altogether, especially in the de-scription of the phonology. My hope is that my description will remain relatively accessible to the educated layperson while remaining accurate and useful for the linguist or speech pathologist.

4   The systematic nature of AAVE is shown by the fact that this rule operates only when both members of the consonant cluster are either voiceless, involving no vibration of the vocal cords (as in "po*st*," "a*sk*" and "a*pt*"), or voiced, with the vocal

cords vibrating (as in "po*sed*" [*zd*], "ha*nd*" and "o*ld*"). When one member of the cluster is voiceless and the other voiced (as in "ju*mp*" or "tha*nk*") the cluster cannot be simplified, except in negative forms like *ain'* and *don'*. See Fasold and Wolfram (1970: 43–6) and Labov et al. (1968: 123–57) for further discussion.

5   This is popularly known as "dropping your g's," but it doesn't actually involve any *g-* dropping at all. What actually happens, in phonetic terms, is that one kind of nasal (an alveolar nasal – with the tongue touching the alveolar ridge right behind the top teeth) is substituted for another one (á velar nasal – with the tongue touching the velar or upper back region of the roof of the mouth). See Labov et al. (1968: 120–3).

6   As Fasold and Wolfram (1970: 49–51) point out, voiceless *th* is more often realized as *t* at the beginnings of words, and as *f* in the middle or at the ends of words. Similarly, *d* realizations of voiced *dh* are more common word-initially and *v* realizations are more common word-medially and word-finally. See also Labov et al. (1968: 92–9).

7   As Fasold and Wolfram (1970: 56) point out, this feature is common among both Blacks and Whites in the South, and occurs much more frequently before voiced sounds or pause (as in "side," "I") than before voiceless sounds (as in "site").

8   According to Fasold and Wolfram (1970: 57), this affects only a small subset of words, such as *pólice*, *hótel*, and *July*.

9   In the grammatical examples, Ø is used to mark the point at which a grammatical form or inflection would occur in equivalent SE examples. This is comparable to the use of an apostrophe in phonological examples (e.g. *he'p*) to mark the point at which a consonant or vowel occurs in equivalent SE forms.

10 There is no published discussion of the use of *finna* in AAVE, but see Ching (1987) for a discussion of its probable source – *fixin to* – in the South.

11 Modals are auxiliary verbs like *can, might, must* which express the speaker's mood, or attitude towards what he/she is saying, e.g. whether it is possible, likely, obligatory, and so on.

12 In general, the past tense category is well established in AAVE, as is shown by the past that most irregular or strong verbs (which undergo a stem change to mark the past) are past-marked most of the time; Fasold (1972: 39) reports that 98 percent of the 833 past tense strong verbs he examined in his Washington DC corpus were past marked. Unmarked pasts tend to come either from regular or weak verbs (like *walked*) in which the final consonant is deleted by phonological rule, or from the small set of irregular verbs (including *come, say, run, give,* and *eat,* among others) which sometimes occur without past inflection (see Wolfram et al. 1993: 12).

13 Wolfram's sample included 12 representatives of each socioeconomic class. The classes themselves were differentiated using an adapted version of Hollingshead and Redlich's (1958) scale, combining scales of education, occupation, and resi-dency (Wolfram 1969: 32ff.). Since most African Americans in Detroit at that time were working class, Wolfram suggested (p. 36) that the speech patterns described for the LWC and UWC in his study would be characteristic of the "vast majority" of African Americans in Detroit.

14 Although illustrative occupations are given for each class to give readers a rough idea of who they designate, it should be emphasized that Wolfram's social class membership was determined in Wolfram's study (and in the parent study by Shuy,

Wolfram and Riley 1967 from which it evolved) by a combination of occupational status (weighted most heavily), education, and residency type. See Wolfram (1969: 32–41) for more details.

15   In other words, speakers of such dialects will say *pos' five letters*, deleting final t before a consonant, but *post office*, retaining the final *t* before a vowel. Similarly, some AAVE speakers delete or vocalize post-vocalic *r* before a vowel, even within the same word (so that "Carol" sounds like *Ca'ol*), but speakers of white vernaculars do not (Labov 1972c: 40).

16   In a book with this very title, Rickford and Rickford (to appear) will document the expressive use of AAVE by individuals, representing many of the categories listed in this closing sentence (writers, singers, preachers, ordinary people), in an effort to refute the widespread misimpression left by the Ebonics controversy that AAVE is not appreciated or used within the African American community.

2

Carrying the New Wave into Syntax: The Case of Black English BÍN

2.1   Introduction

Ever since the first conference on New Ways of Analyzing Variation in English was held in 1972, the abbreviated title – NWAVE – has become something of a rallying cry ("The New Wave") to those interested in the study of linguistic variation. The enthusiasm is doubtless justified. Uneasiness with categorical frameworks has been growing for some time, and the remarks made by C. -J. N. Bailey in the introduction to the papers from NWAVE I (Bailey and Shuy 1973) would probably be endorsed by a great many (though by no means all) linguists today:

> I am happy to be rid of static homogeneous models and to be rid of the fudges represented by 'my dialect', 'performance component', 'optional', and the rest. (xiv)

However, as we move beyond initial revolutionary fervour, and begin a more sober stock-taking, certain weaknesses in our line of attack become increasingly clear. One salient limitation is the extent to which we have become preoccupied with morphophonemic and phonological variation to the exclusion of everything else. Syntax and semantics, for instance, have come to represent lone islands far out at sea, increasingly untouched by any waves – old or new.

The problem is particularly acute for those "variationists" whose data consists of large samples of tape-recorded speech, covering as wide a range of stylistic contexts as possible (cf. Labov 1966, Bickerton 1973a). While the advantages of this method in terms of "accountability" etc. should be clear to most of us by now, it has a built-in limitation in providing large masses of data only on those phenomena which show up with high frequency in natural speech. In most cases, these are phonological variables; hence the disproportionate number of variation studies in phonology.