# THE PRESENT PERFECT IN
# EARLY AFRICAN AMERICAN CORRESPONDENCE

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African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is usually described in terms of how it differs from other Englishes, especially Standard English (StdE). Researchers have noted over fifty distinctions, from wide-ranging morphological and syntactic differences to narrow lexical distinctions like poLICE versus PO-lice. Most of these involve AAVE doing something that StdE does not, or doing more or less of it, or doing it in a different way.

The present perfect, as in example (1), is an exception. Here, the claim is more frequently made that AAVE doesn't use the form, instead preferring simple past forms, marked (2) or bare (3), in contexts that require the present perfect in StdE. Loflin (1970) claims AAVE has no underlying *have* auxiliary, and other authors describe the present perfect as marginal (Labov et al. 1968), not part of the variety (Fasold & Wolfram 1975), or replaced by the preterite (Terry 2001). AAVE thus seems very non-English in this respect, in keeping with a research tradition that traces its roots to creoles or second language acquisition effects.

(1)    I *have Raisd* some hogs since I *have Been* here (OREAAC 159/10/117)[1]
(2)    I *Planted* my Potatoes cassdoes & Rice on my farm (159/10/29)
(3)    Since our arrival we *Raise* a Military Compay (155/4/28)

However, most empirical descriptions of the syntax of non-standard varieties, including AAVE, are based on data drawn from sociolinguistic interviews. To tap into vernacular speech, these interviews elicit narratives of personal experience, and narratives generally have been shown by Dahl (1985) to disfavour present perfect types across a range of languages. This is confirmed for contemporary varieties of English by recent quantitative analyses, as shown in Table 1. These studies show that the present perfect is sensitive to genre, and to discourse effects within genres -- in fact, it is ten to thirty times more frequent in letters than in

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[1] Except where noted, examples are drawn from the *Ottawa Repository of Early African American Correspondence* (OREAAC, Van Herk & Poplack, in press), housed at the University of Ottawa Sociolinguistics Laboratory. Numbers in parentheses indicate American Colonization Society microfilm reel, volume, and letter number.

narratives. Logically, then, the right place to look for the roots of the AAVE present perfect, and its linguistic conditioning, is in letters.

| Table 1: Rates of present perfect use in past temporal reference contexts across genre and discourse type in contemporary varieties of English. | |
|---|---|
| **York English (Lawrence 2000)** | % |
| Sociolinguistic interviews, all | 4.0 |
| Sociolinguistic interviews, narratives | 2.0 |
| **Standard  English (Elsness 1997: 107, 154)** | |
| US novels, narrative | 0.6 |
| UK novels, narrative | 0.0 |
| UK letters, business | **26.9** |
| UK letters, social | **16.8** |

Letters by African Americans of past centuries have not usually been valued as a potential source of Early African American English (AAE) data. Instead, most *historical* evidence is second-hand, based on literary attestations, including observations of foreign travellers and the language of Black characters in early white-authored plays (e.g. Dillard 1972), or transcribed interviews with elderly former slaves (Schneider 1989). *Primary* (recorded) data, on the other hand, are based on relatively recent material. This includes a handful of interviews with former slaves in the US (Bailey et al. 1991), and sociolinguistic interviews with descendants of ex-slaves in the African American diaspora, in communities where limited contact with English appears to preserve18[th]- and 19th-century speech features (Poplack & Tagliamonte 2001).

In this paper, I describe the building and use of a corpus of letters that can be shown to represent earlier African American English, and that, because it is made up of letters, can be used to investigate the roots of the present perfect in AAVE.

This new corpus is the *Ottawa Repository of Early African American Correspondence* (OREAAC) (Van Herk & Poplack in press), a compilation of letters chosen from the 191,000 documents of the American Colonization Society, archived at the Library of Congress. Our research team at the University of Ottawa's Sociolinguistics Lab focussed on the 8,000 letters written from Liberia before the end of the American Civil War, as almost all of these were by African American immigrants, ex-slaves and free Blacks from the US south. We excluded letters by frequent writers and those featuring highly standard language, as in example (4).

(4) let a few of Columbia's expanding-hearted sons environ it, and it is borne aloft at once...Benedic anima mea Domino! et noli oblivisei omnes ejus beneficientia. (H.W. Ellis, Wiley 1980:228)

The remaining letters were copied from microfilm of the original manuscript documents, and transcribed, corrected and computerized according to a rigorous protocol developed in the construction of other corpora. The result is a corpus of 427 transcribed letters by 220 writers from all areas of Liberia, consisting of 135,743 words.

A common objection to the use of such letters to investigate Early AAE speech is the widely-held assumption that almost all slavery-era African Americans were illiterate, and that those few who could read and write would have their language strongly influenced by the standard. Given that teaching slaves to read was illegal through much of the antebellum South, we will probably never know how many African Americans of the time were literate, or how exactly they learned. Current historical thought is that the typical literacy experience took place within the black community, in secret, as described in example (5).

(5) No child, white people never teach colored people nothin, but to be good to dey massa en mittie, what learning dey would get in dem days dey been get it at night; taught themselves. (Ex-Slave Louisa Gause, in Anderson 1988:17)

In the case of the OREAAC, we are fortunate that the record keeping associated with the Liberian settlement experience tells us much about the letter writers (Table 2). The great majority were people who were considered illiterate or semi-literate at the time, as were the majority of African Americans. The OREAAC correspondents also matched the majority of African Americans on other demographic axes, including slave status, occupation, and region of origin (Van Herk & Poplack in press; Walker & Van Herk, this volume).

| *Table 2: Ascribed degree of literacy of OREAAC correspondents (adapted from Van Herk & Poplack, in press).* | |
| --- | --- |
| *Ascribed degree of literacy:* | *N* |
| unknown | 81 |
| spells | 2 |
| reads | 16 |
| writes | 2 |
| reads and writes | 13 |
| good education | 2 |
| Total correspondents identified in documents | 116 |

Sources: Liberian roll and 1843 census (Shick 1971, Brown 1975)

Van Herk & Poplack (in press) also deals with concerns about validity related to the actual act of letter writing, summarized briefly here.

*Authorship*: Were these letters actually written by these semiliterate African American settlers, or written for them by people who spoke a different language variety? In the case of the OREAAC, handwriting and textual clues let us attribute virtually all letters to the people who signed them, and the rest to other African American settlers. The writers themselves refer to the physical act of writing, haste, or a lack of skill (6). A few letters explicitly name an amanuensis, as in (7), and these are clearly also community members.

(6)    a. I am now Scoller WhatEver tharfor you will Excuse the bad Spelling & Writeng (158/8/147)
b. at that time I was taken sick so that I could not write (155/5/122)
c. I Have Riten this in quite a hurry, I hope you will Parden all Mistakes (157/7/19)

(7)    a. this is my son James hand writing (158/8/8)
b. i have heartofor wrote all the letters that he wish me to wrot you (159/10.1/14)
c. i cannot rite well anouf myself to rite my letters i told the yong lad to State to you… (155/5/163)

*Formulas*: Did the typical formulaic written *salutations* of the era, as in (8), which reveal little about a writer's real language features, distort the transmission of speech features? It appears not; note that the same correspondent who wrote (8) also used non-standard constructions like bare possessives and unmarked participles in the main body of the letter (9). Formulaic uses that are obviously copied, such as Biblical passages, were naturally excluded from analysis.

(8)    i now sit down to write you these few lines hoping that they may find you and family well as it leaves me at this present (155/5/53)

(9)    i am now become a member of **christ** mistacle {<mystical} body and was **Baptize** (155/5/53)

*Style shifting*: Did the tendency of writers to use their most formal language hide features of their spoken language? In the OREAAC letters, the writers' focus on form is reduced by their friendly relationships with the recipients, and the personal nature or emotional intensity of many of their letters. And, of course, their limited literacy means that even their more formal styles are highly non-standard.

The linguistic evidence of the survival of speech features into writing is quite striking. The letters are densely packed with non-standard forms, including both highly phonetic orthography and the grammatical forms exemplified in (10) to (19).

(10)   I have **not** recieved **no** answer as yet (160/12/96)
(11)   we **[0]** punish with honger a mouft
       'We are punished with hungry mouths' (157/7/238)
(12)   evry Scinc I left New orlens an grad up I **bin** want to write you (158/9/42)
(13)   tell them, that I **wants** to here from them very bad (159/10.1/40)
(14)   you **was** my Fathers & husband friend (158/8/132)
(15)   they **done** everything in their power (154/3/118)
(16)   when i **arrive** at the cape i was invited to Preach (156/6/72)
(17)   My **GandFather name** was Gipson Harris (156/6/12)
(18)   two **packet** of whale bone (154/3/129)
(19)   I **aint** got my house built as yet (155/4/113)

All these features are also found in the speech of African American diaspora communities, and all of them have been cited as characteristic of contemporary AAVE. Their presence in these letters is further evidence that many contemporary features were already in place at least 150 years ago.

Not only are non-standard features attested in the OREAAC, but some occur at high enough rates to permit quantitative analysis, parallelling work done on the diaspora varieties.

Van Herk & Poplack (in press) shows that the linguistic factors conditioning the use of bare forms in past temporal reference, a mainstay of AAVE research, match those of the spoken language. In the OREAAC, as in the spoken diaspora

corpora, bare forms are favoured in weak verbs by preceding consonants, and in strong verbs by lexical factors, in the same direction as in spoken diaspora corpora.

Thus the OREAAC unquestionably dates from the era of American slavery, is written by people who are fairly representative of the African American population of the time, is large enough to permit quantitative analysis, and is full of non-standard features behaving as they do in speech. But it is also made up of *letters,* which normally contain many present perfects. In fact, as Table 3 shows, present perfects make up a full one-third of all past temporal reference verbs in the OREAAC, a rate of occurrence twenty to thirty times that found in the interviews making up the spoken Samaná diaspora corpus and the Ex-Slave Recordings. So the genre and discourse constraints on the present perfect found in Early African American English match those of contemporary English, and, as seen in the bottom two rows of the table, mainstream American English of roughly the same period.

**Table 3: Percentage of past temporal reference context occupied by all present perfects (PP) across genres representing $18^{th}$ and $19^{th}$ century varieties.**

| Genre and date | % | Total N |
|---|---|---|
| Liberian OREAAC letters, 1834-1866 | **33.0** | **4961** |
| Samaná sociolinguistic interviews representing c. 1824 (Tagliamonte 1991) | 1.6 | 8046 |
| Ex-Slave Recordings representing c. 1860 (Tagliamonte 1991) | 0.9 | 1791 |
| US letters,1750-1800 (Elsness 1997:274) | **27.7** | **177** |
| US novels, narrative, 1750-1800 (Elsness 1997:274) | 0.6 | 169 |

Includes all present perfect types (*have come, is come, have been come*).

That this is a genre and discourse effect, rather than a simple distinction between writing and speech, is shown in Table 4, where we see strong discourse distinctions within the OREAAC itself. In the complicating action clauses of narratives -- basically, the story part -- present perfects are almost entirely absent. There are a few in the setup and evaluation part of narratives, and far more in non-narrative contexts.

| *Table 4: OREAAC present perfect vs. preterite forms by discourse type.* | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *% perfect* | *N* | *Total N* | *% of data* |
| Narrative complicating action | 0.4 | 1 | 283 | 7.7 |
| Narrative non-complicating action | 9.6 | 6 | 63 | 1.7 |
| Non-narratives | 38.0 | 1267 | 3334 | 90.6 |
| Total | 34.0 | 1274 | 3680 | 100.0 |

It happens that Tagliamonte (1991), on spoken Early AAE, had in effect predicted this outcome, by suggesting that the shortage of present perfects in her data was due to the shortage of present perfect contexts. That work showed that the few present perfects that *did* occur in Samaná English and the Ex-Slave Recordings clustered in contexts where StdE is said to permit or require the form.

The OREAAC's far greater number of present perfect tokens allows a more fine-grained analysis of how the form shares the past temporal reference context with the preterite in Early AAE. Given the absence or infrequency of the form in other Early AAE corpora, we must consider the possibility that vernacular Early AAE, like many creoles, really did have no present perfect form. In that case, the tokens found here would be intrusions from StdE – the OREAAC writers would be (over)using unfamiliar forms, influenced by their perception of the requirements of formal letter writing. If so, the linguistic factors conditioning these tokens should be very different from those of English, especially given the OREAAC correspondents' documented divergences from StdE past marking, which presumably they tried equally hard to approximate. Perhaps we might even find faint traces of creole effects of anteriority or stativity, transferred from speech.

The other possibility is that the present perfect was fully functional and productive in Early AAE, acquired at the same time as other features of English, but infrequent in some corpora solely due to genre and discourse constraints. In this case, present perfects in the OREAAC should behave as they do in English. Fortunately, the large-scale quantitative analysis of the present perfect in historical and contemporary mainstream English undertaken by Elsness (1997) suggests many factors favouring its use: temporal relation between actions, temporal remoteness, negation, stativity, clause type, adverbial type, and new vs. given information.

These are exactly the kind of competing hypotheses that lend themselves to testing in a variationist framework. After eliminating contexts where neither potential variant occurs, removing tokens like *had gone, was going,* and *didn't go,* I coded the remaining tokens for surface form, either a variant of the present perfect

(*have come, is come*) or the preterite (*came, comed, come*), as well as for a range of linguistic constraints derived from the literature on historical, dialect, and creole varieties. A quantitative analysis performed with the help of the Goldvarb variable rule programme (Rand & Sankoff 1990) then determined which constraints made a statistically significant contribution to the choice of variants when they were all considered together.

As Table 5 indicates, all the factor groups considered were selected as significant by the variable rule programme. Factor weights closer to 1.00 favour the form; those closer to 0.0 disfavour. In this table, factors that in StdE favour the form are boxed; those that in StdE disfavour are shaded. Note that all the factors that favour the present perfect in StdE also favour it here: continuing or ambiguous temporal location; *since,* deictic, or absent adverbials; ambiguous temporal relation between the described state or action and some other state or action; new information, operationalized here as NP objects; and negation. As well, all the factors that disfavour the form in StdE disfavour it here. These are factors that set the described action or state at some fairly specific point in the past, relative to speech time or to some other action or state. They include any specific temporal location; *after,* lexical, and *when* adverbials; *after* and *when* clauses; given information, operationalized here as pronominal objects; and, to a tiny degree, affirmative sentences. Note under temporal location that the disfavouring contexts are actually perfectly graded by how far in the past they are, from immediate past through recent, distant, and remote pasts. The disfavouring effects of statives, and of anteriors under temporal relation, run counter to the marking tendencies in English-based creoles, though it is unclear whether such effects should really be expected to surface in this context.

**Table 5: Factors selected as significant to the probability of present perfect vs. preterite in the OREAAC.**

Corrected mean: 0.316

Total N: 3680

| TEMPORAL LOCATION | | % | N | CLAUSE TYPE | | % | N | OBJECT/INFORMATION TYPE | | % | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Continuing | **.98** | 97 | 677 | *Since* | **.79** | 59 | 111 | NP (new) | **.56** | 45 | 959 |
| Ambiguous, unclear | **.92** | 74 | 118 | Main | **.54** | 38 | 2398 | Intransitive, other | .49 | 31 | 2578 |
| Immediate past | .43 | 31 | 122 | Subordinate | .46 | 28 | 1040 | Pronoun (given) | .35 | 27 | 143 |
| Recent past | .31 | 20 | 1889 | *After* | .27 | 9 | 22 | *RANGE* | 21 | | |
| Distant past | .24 | 14 | 690 | *When* | .06 | 3 | 109 | | | | |
| Remote past | .04 | 2 | 184 | RANGE | 73 | | | NEGATION | | | |
| *RANGE* | 94 | | | | | | | Negative | **.69** | 65 | 262 |
| | | | | TEMPORAL RELATION | | | | Affirmative | .49 | 32 | 3418 |
| ADVERBIAL TYPE | | | | Ambiguous | .58 | 40 | 2522 | *RANGE* | 20 | | |
| *Since* + event | **.95** | 91 | 117 | Anterior | .47 | 27 | 241 | | | | |
| *While* + event | **.63** | 56 | 80 | Posterior | .32 | 23 | 823 | STATIVITY | | | |
| Deictic (from speech) | **.56** | 40 | 90 | Co-occurring | .20 | 9 | 94 | Non-stative | **.55** | 35 | 2448 |
| No adverbial | **.54** | 34 | 2978 | *RANGE* | 38 | | | Stative | .40 | 33 | 1232 |
| *After* + event | .26 | 5 | 56 | | | | | *RANGE* | 15 | | |
| *Always/never* type* | .21 | 47 | 96 | | | | | | | | |
| Lexical time | .05 | 1 | 98 | | | | | | | | |
| *When* + event | .03 | 1 | 110 | | | | | | | | |
| *RANGE* | 92 | | | | | | | | | | |

All factors selected as significant. Bolded factor weights represent favouring factors in OREAAC. Boxed factor weights represent favouring factors, and shaded disfavouring factors, in Standard English (Elsness 1997).

* = interaction between *always/never* adverbials and temporal location

The main finding demonstrated in the table is that the factors conditioning the use of the present perfect in the OREAAC match almost perfectly those found for StdE. There are two slight mismatches: the effect of *since* adverbials is categorical in StdE, but simply strongly favouring in the OREAAC, and the favouring effect of *since* clause types in the OREAAC no longer holds in StdE. In both cases, though, the OREAAC's behaviour matches that of English circa 1800, which differed slightly from the standard of today. In other words, both the OREAAC correspondents and earlier English speakers produced sentences like *I have raised some hogs since I **have been** here* and *I **raised** some hogs since I arrived here.*

To summarize, we see that the present perfect in the OREAAC, as in other corpora of letters, is far more frequent than in spoken corpora generally, and that its behaviour is strongly constrained. The present perfect is clearly part of the core grammar of the authors of these letters, and the direction and magnitude of conditioning effects suggest an English-like system. These findings are all the more surprising considering suggestions in the literature that the present perfect was not even part of the core AAE grammar. This earlier conclusion was based partly on the evidence of non-standard participials like *have went,* which have a long history in English dialects, but largely on the overall rarity of present perfects in existing corpora. The findings presented here show that the rarity of present perfect forms elsewhere results from present perfect *contexts* being rare elsewhere due to genre and discourse factors. The focus of letters on recent events seems to provide many more present perfect contexts than do sociolinguistic interviews, which focus on past-oriented narratives. The shared focus of those interviews provides strong inter-study reliability, but care must be taken when comparing quantitative results from a marked genre (the sociolinguistic interview) with qualitative or anecdotal evidence from other varieties, or with native speaker intuitions. This is especially true when claiming the absence of a particular form, standard or not, when such absences are sensitive to changes of genre, style, or interlocutor. A sounder methodology is to compare factors conditioning the use of a particular form across varieties or genres. In the case of the present perfect, that conditioning appears to be shared by early AAE and earlier English, a finding made possible through the collection and analysis of reliable, valid historical data in a genre that favours the use of the form.

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