"We labors under a great deal of disadvantiges": Verbal -*s* in Early African American English

James A. Walker
York University
and
Gerard Van Herk
University of Ottawa

1. Introduction

One of the most salient features of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is the nonstandard use of verbal -*s* in the present tense. Unlike modern Standard English, in which only third person singular verbs are marked, AAVE shows variable marking across the grammatical paradigm, as illustrated by the examples in (1).

(1) a. a great many of these that *comes* are my old converts
              (OREAAC/Sion Harris: 154/3/64)[1]
  b. My wife *send* her love to you both
              (OREAAC/Andrew M. Jackson: 159/9/153)
  c. we *Labors* under a great deal of disadvantiges
              (OREAAC/David Hazzard: 158/8/5)
  d. if the money *are* not convenient Send me any thing that money will buy
              (OREAAC/Nelson Hungerford: 159/9/148)
  e. Since my Last, things *has* Takeing quite an other aspect
              (OREAAC/HB Stewart: 157/7/18)

This feature has been ascribed to several different sources: the nonstandard British varieties which served as input to early American English, a putative widespread plantation creole, transfer from West African languages, imperfect second language acquisition, or some combination of these.

---

[1] Examples taken from the Ottawa Repository of African American Correspondence (OREAAC; Van Herk & Poplack, in press) are identified by the writer's name and the American Colonization Society microfilm reel, volume and letter number. Other corpora cited here include Samaná English (SAM; Poplack & Sankoff 1987), the Ex-slave Recordings (ESR; Bailey et al. 1991), African Nova Scotian English, North Preston (NPR) and Guysborough (GYE; Poplack & Tagliamonte 1991, 2001).

Research into earlier varieties of English has shown that verbal *-s* was far more variable across the grammatical paradigm in those varieties than it is the present-day standard, and that its use was subject to regular conditioning from a number of linguistic factors (Poplack & Tagliamonte 2001; Walker 2000). First, as in modern Standard English, *-s* was most common in third person singular, less common in third plural, and least common in non-third person. Second, regardless of grammatical person, verbs conveying habitual aspect were more likely to be *-s*-marked. Finally, the type of subject was also important, with personal pronoun subjects immediately adjacent to the verb favouring zero marking, and all other types of subject favouring *-s*. This combination of subject type and adjacency matches the so-called "Northern Subject Rule", shown in (2).

(2) "plural present-tense verbs take *-s*, unless they are immediately preceded by a personal-pronoun subject, as in *They peel them and boils them* and *Birds sings*" (Ihalainen 1994: 221-2)

The Northern Subject Rule, which operated in third-person plural contexts, is characteristic of varieties of English spoken in northern Britain, and apparently across much of Britain in the nonstandard speech of earlier times (Poplack, Van Herk & Harvie 2002).

Our attempts to reconstruct an earlier stage of African American English address the question of its origins. In this enterprise, diaspora communities of African American English have proven invaluable. These communities, founded by freed African Americans in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, have been investigated in such widely-separated locales as Nova Scotia and the Dominican Republic (Poplack & Sankoff 1987; Poplack & Tagliamonte 1991, 2001). Because of their isolation from other varieties of English, mainstream or otherwise, they have not participated in changes that have taken place in the time since the communities were founded. By adding the notion of *inherent variability* to the comparative method traditionally employed in historical linguistics (Poplack 2000), we investigate the linguistic conditioning of variation in each variety. Since similarities in conditioning across varieties are unlikely to be due to chance, they can only be presumed to have been present in the parent variety — in this case, the language of African Americans at the time of the diaspora.

Table 1, drawn from Poplack and Tagliamonte (2001: 188-90), shows twelve independent variable rule analyses of the linguistic factors constraining -*s*-marking in a number of diaspora varieties of African American English. In this table, the variable-rule program has assigned a numerical value to the probability that each factor contributes to the occurrence of a particular form (the closer the value is to 1, the more it contributes). The relative weighting of factors, known as the hierarchy of conditioning, is important for the comparative method, since it is considered diagnostic of system membership: if we apply this method consistently across varieties, the hierarchy of conditioning allows us to determine whether they spring from a common source.

The most striking feature of Table 1 is that, although these communities have been separated from other varieties of English (and from each other) for over 150 years, the constraints on their speech are remarkably similar. There is a strong tendency for two effects to hold across all varieties: the habitual effect, whereby verbs with habitual aspect are more likely to be marked with -*s*, and the Northern Subject Rule, an effect characteristic of nonstandard British dialects, whereby verbs other than adjacent personal pronouns are more likely to be marked. These similarities across varieties provide strong evidence for the argument that these linguistic constraints were part of the language that the speakers' ancestors brought to these communities. In other words, these diaspora varieties were part of Early African American English.

Table 1: *Twelve independent variable rule analyses of the contribution of factors to the occurrence of verbal -s in four diaspora varieties of African American English (adapted from Poplack & Tagliamonte 2001: 188-190)*

	3rd Singular				3rd Plural				Non-3rd			
	SAM	ESR	NPR	GYE	SAM	ESR	NPR	GYE	SAM	ESR	NPR	GYE
Total N:	610	34	196	251	699	72	173	244	1261	227	754	1019
Corrected mean:	.414	.500	.370	.551	.260	.064	.114	.068	.122	.031	.014	.010
Preceding segment												
Vowel	**.62**	[.82]	[.51]	[.59]	**.61**	[.75]	[.37]	[.45]	**.56**	[.63]	.34	[.57]
Consonant	.47	[.36]	[.50]	[.48]	.48	[.39]	[.56]	[.52]	.48	[.44]	**.60**	[.48]
Following segment												
Vowel	**.59**	[.65]	**.62**	[.50]	**.56**	**.78**	[.62]	[.57]	[.48]	[.63]	**.65**	[.49]
Consonant	.44	[.39]	.43	[.50]	.47	.38	[.44]	[.47]	[.51]	[.44]	.44	[.51]
Aspect												
Habitual	**.59**	[.57]	[.50]	[.54]	**.57**	[.51]	**.64**	[.50]	**.61**	[.44]	**.84**	**.77**
Continuous	.44	[.39]	[.52]	[.43]	.37	[.47]	.23	[.50]	.51	[.58]	.33	.41
Punctual	.21	—	[.46]	[.48]	—	—	—	—	.30	[.44]	.26	.30
Subject type / adjacency												
Non-adjacent subject	[.50]	[.37]	**.52**	[.52]	**.59**	[.70]	[.41]	**.78**	[.42]	**.89**	[.64]	[.50]
Adjacent pronoun	[.50]	[.71]	.45	[.40]	.47	[.39]	[.56]	.35	[.50]	.48	[.49]	[.50]

[] = not selected as significant

If the constraints differed across varieties, we would be led to one of two interpretations. First, the language of one or more of these communities could have changed, either through contact with another language or through internal motivations. Second, there could have been differences in the input variety: i.e., the language the first settlers of that community brought with them.

As it happens, there is another diaspora community in the west African country of Liberia, settled by African Americans soon after the other diaspora communities. Singler's (1999) analysis of the modern Liberian Settler English of most of the country shows constraints on -*s*-marking similar to those of the other diaspora communities, except in Sinoe County, an isolated community in the south of Liberia. Here he finds that his 15 informants have very low rates of -*s*-marking, and five have none at all. This finding leads him to conclude that there were differences in the input varieties to Sinoe and to the diaspora communities, including the rest of Liberia, that share this conditioning. Since the original Sinoe settlers were largely from the "Deep South" states of Mississippi and Louisiana, he argues, the language of Sinoe represents a distinct variety found in deep south plantations.

Singler's interpretation is consistent with the "creolist" viewpoint of some contributors to the debate over the origins of contemporary AAVE, who argue that its salient features derive from a prior plantation language which was very un-English-like and probably creolized. Under this view, then, the language of the Liberian settlers outside of Sinoe, as well as that of other diaspora communities, would be descended from European-influenced varieties that existed only in marginal agricultural areas of the early United States that had a lower proportion of African American plantation slaves, such as were found in Virginia.

The alternative possibility, of course, is that there are changes which have occurred in or since the diaspora, perhaps due to contact with other language varieties. Under this view, which is consistent with the principles of the comparative method, we would conclude that Sinoe has changed, not that every other variety has changed in parallel ways. Singler dismisses the possibility of contact-induced change (beyond a few discourse markers and calques) because of hostility between the Sinoe settlers and their neighbours, which even led to a war in 1857. However, we can make this argument for just about every other diaspora community, all of which have been socially distant from and often in conflict with their neighbours (cf. Walker 1992). More important, though, is the consideration that, because sociohistorical evidence can be adduced for a variety of linguistic outcomes, arguing for degrees of linguistic distance on the basis of post-hoc sociohistorical analysis can never offer conclusive results. We would naturally prefer to resolve the issue based on linguistic evidence.

2. The Ottawa Repository of Early African American Correspondence

In this paper we present our effort to test these different possibilities by investigating -*s*-marking in a *truly* historical variety of African American English. The Ottawa Repository of Early African American Correspondence (OREAAC) is a collection of 427 transcribed letters written by 220 semi-literate African American settlers in Liberia between 1834 and 1866, housed in the Sociolinguistics Laboratory at the University of Ottawa (Van Herk & Poplack, in press).

Two aspects of the OREAAC make it particularly suited to dealing with the issue discussed above. Most important is the fact that the OREAAC represents a *direct* view of the input to the Liberian communities. The OREAAC writers are not just the descendants of the Liberian settlers, they actually are the settlers. In fact, some of them may be the ancestors of Singler's informants. As such, the OREAAC provides an unparalleled opportunity to compare both input and contemporary forms of a diaspora variety.

In addition, the records of the settlement of Liberia give us information about the actual writers of most of the letters. This is important because we can demonstrate that most of them shared demographic characteristics with what's known about African Americans in the same time period. Van Herk (this volume) shows that most OREAAC correspondents, like most African Americans, were described as illiterate. Here, we point out other parallels. First, like most African Americans of that time, most OREAAC correspondents had been slaves before going to Liberia. Over 60% of the informants for whom we have information were slaves who had been freed by their masters, or who had purchased their own freedom. Second, almost all (90%) were from the slave states of the south, including large numbers from the Deep South states sometimes claimed to have produced the most divergent African American English. Finally, as far as we can determine by extrapolating from the slave status of OREAAC writers and the occupations of slave and free Liberians, most had been agricultural labourers in the United States. But we can make further use of this information. Because we know the state of origin of these correspondents, we can actually test claims that the language of the Deep South was different from that of other states. In this paper, we test that claim with respect to -*s*-marking.

3. Methods

We began by extracting all tokens of verbs which referred to present time from those OREAAC letters which exhibited variability in -*s*-marking. We therefore automatically excluded any verbs which either clearly had past temporal

reference, and might therefore be subject to competing variable processes of zero-marking in the past, as in (3a), as well as temporally ambiguous forms, as in (3b).

(3) a. af [<if] you dont thar will be bot a few liv [<alive] that *com* To Cap Mount   (OREAAC/Gomer McKay: 157/7/238)

b. as i have always write letters to you for old man in time Past and he *Seames* to hav Been very famillair with You.
                    (OREAAC/George Jones: 159/10.1/14)

This protocol resulted in a total dataset of 2,124 tokens. However, more than half of these tokens (1,235) consisted of the irregular verbs *be*, *have* and *do*. Since these verbs mark differences in the simple present in ways other than by just adding an –*s*, they were excluded from the present study (though we plan on examining them in future work).

This left us with 883 tokens, consisting of all simple present regular verbs. Each token was coded for whether or not it was marked with -*s*, as well as for a number of factors hypothesized to affect the variable use of verbal -*s* in previous studies. The linguistic factors we investigated were the type of subject and its adjacency to the verb (which tests for the effect of the Northern Subject Rule), the aspect conveyed by the verb and the preceding and following phonological context. The social factors investigated were the writer's reported literacy, their state of origin, their slave status and the area of Liberia in which they settled. All of these factors were analyzed individually and together with the help of GoldVarb, a variable rule program for the Macintosh (Rand & Sankoff 1990).

4. Analysis and results

Since different linguistic constraints have been shown to apply in different grammatical persons, we divided our data into three contexts. In third person singular, Standard English always requires -*s*-marking. In third person plural, Standard English requires no marking, but in nonstandard British English the Northern Subject Rule calls for -*s*-marking with all subjects except adjacent personal pronouns. In non-third contexts, both standard and nonstandard varieties agree in requiring no marking. The effect of habitual aspect applies across all grammatical person-number contexts.

Table 2: Linguistic factors contributing to the occurrence of verbal -s in the OREAAC letters, by grammatical person/number (regular verbs only).

	3rd sg.	3rd pl.	non-3rd
Total N:	147	214	522
Corrected mean:	.652	.323	.069
Subject Type + Adjacency			
Adjacent Pronoun	[.62]	.28	[.49]
Other Subject	[.47]	**.65**	[.55]
Aspect			
Habitual	[.60]	[.53]	**.74**
Nonhabitual	[.45]	[.48]	.46
Preceding Segment			
Consonant	.44	[.49]	**.57**
Vowel	**.65**	[.53]	.20
Following Segment			
Consonant	[.52]	[.50]	.47
Vowel	[.45]	[.52]	**.62**

[] = not selected as significant

Table 2 displays the results of a variable rule analysis of verbal -s in all regular verbs. A first finding is that the overall rate of -s-marking descends in a regular pattern throughout the grammatical paradigm: most in third person singular, less in third person plural and least in non-third person. As the middle column of the table shows, only the subject type and adjacency factor group was selected as significant in third person plural, *exactly* the context in which the Northern Subject Rule applies in nonstandard British varieties. In non-third person contexts, the expected absence of such a constraint has allowed aspectual and phonological factors to be selected as significant, including the favouring effect of habitual contexts that was reported by Singler for modern Liberian Settler English. In all respects, then, the linguistic constraints on verbal -s in the OREAAC letters match those of the majority of spoken diaspora corpora, validating both the authenticity of those corpora and the speech-like nature of the OREAAC letters.

Table 3: Social factors contributing to the occurrence of verbal -s in the OREAAC letters, by grammatical person/number (regular verbs only).

	3rd sg.	3rd pl.	non-3rd
Total N:	147	214	522
Corrected mean:	.646	.346	.088
Region of Origin			
Deep South States	[.43]	[.52]	[.56]
Other States	[.55]	[.48]	[.43]
Region of Settlement			
Sinoe County	[.54]	[.54]	[.49]
Other	[.47]	[.46]	[.51]
Slave Status			
Slave	[.54]	[.52]	[.54]
Freeborn	[.45]	[.48]	[.45]

[] = not selected as significant

The analysis of social factors was complicated by interaction between two factor groups: the reported literacy of the writer and their slave status. When we cross-tabulated each factor group against the other, it turned out that only free African Americans had been willing to acknowledge their literacy to record keepers of the time. (Given that teaching slaves to read and write was a crime, this is hardly surprising.) We therefore excluded literacy from the variable rule analysis of social factors, which is shown in Table 3. Note that not one of the factor groups were selected as significant. In other words, there are no statistically significant differences in rates of verbal *-s* between slaves and freemen, between deep-*s*outherners and other states, or between settlers in Sinoe County and settlers in other areas of Liberia.

Table 4: ***Factors contributing to the occurrence of verbal -s in 3rd plural contexts in the OREAAC letters, by state of origin.***[2]

	Deep South	**Other States**
Total N:	91	93
Corrected mean:	.373	.235
Subject Type + Adjacency		
Adjacent Pronoun	.31	.20
Other Subject	**.61**	**.76**
Aspect		
Habitual	[.48]	[.59]
Nonhabitual	[.51]	[.39]
Preceding Segment		
Consonant	[.50]	[.52]
Vowel	[.51]	[.45]
Following Segment		
Consonant	[.50]	[.50]
Vowel	[.50]	[.48]

[] = not selected as significant

However, the important consideration in comparative variationist analysis is not the overall rate of occurrence between groups, which can fluctuate for a number of non-linguistic reasons, but rather whether the linguistic conditioning is shared by different varieties or different social groups. As we said above, the Northern Subject Rule, which is diagnostic of transfer from nonstandard English, operates only in third person plural. We now focus only on this grammatical context. According to Singler's argumentation, the relevant social distinction is whether the writers come from the Deep South states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina or from other states, such as Tennessee, Kentucky, North Carolina, the free states, and Virginia. We divided our data according to this distinction and re-ran the analysis of linguistic factors for each group. The results of this cross-variety comparison are shown in Table 4. The only

---

[2] The figures for Deep South and Other States do not add up to the totals in previous tables because we do not have demographic data on all the OREAAC writers.

factor group which is selected as significant, in the writers from both the Deep South states and from other states, is subject type and adjacency, with subjects other than adjacent personal pronouns favouring -*s*. Thus, the Northern Subject Rule is the primary constraint on -*s*-marking in third plural contexts, regardless of the writer's state of origin.

6. Discussion and conclusion

These findings strongly suggest a number of conclusions. First, the Northern Subject Rule was clearly in effect in the language of African Americans during the era of slavery, regardless of where in the United States they came from. Thus, if there were regional distinctions in Early African American English, they are not evident in the system of present tense marking, a system which is considered one of the salient features of modern AAVE. Second, and more importantly, the Northern Subject Rule was also clearly present in the varieties of African American English which served as input to the diaspora communities in Liberia. How then can we explain the modern diaspora findings for Sinoe County, where -*s*-marking barely exists? Recall that the important consideration in determining system membership across varieties is not the overall rate of occurrence but rather the linguistic conditioning, as revealed by the hierarchy of factor constraints. The most likely explanation for the decrease of -*s*-marking in Sinoe County is that the Northern Subject Rule was in effect in the input, but that its workings became obscured over time by a reduction in the overall rate of -*s*-marking across contexts.

We have no way of determining why this decrease occurred. Although (*post hoc*) social and historical explanations are possible, they are not falsifiable without collaborating linguistic evidence. The decrease of -*s*-marking in Sinoe may have been due to contact with surrounding speakers of Liberian Pidgin English, or to language-internal changes which, for some reason, did not obtain in the other diaspora communities. It may be that the strong tendency towards CV structure in the Liberian Settler English of Sinoe, wherever that tendency came from, resulted in a higher rate of word-final consonant-cluster deletion, which would have had the effect of eliminating verbal -*s*.

This scenario is supported by a closer examination of Singler's findings for the nine Sinoe speakers who do make use of verbal -*s*. While Singler did not investigate adjacency, he did test for the type of subject. As Table 5 shows, "the Sinoe Nine" show a strong subject-type effect. The parallels between our findings for the input settlers and Singler's for their descendants show that, despite the differing rates of use, the linguistic conditioning remains constant. Thus, rates are

not diagnostic of the grammar that generates forms, but rather the linguistic factors conditioning the use of those forms.

Table 5: Linguistic factors contributing to the occurrence of verbal -s in "the Sinoe Nine" (adapted from Singler 1999: 5-6).		
Total N:		1169
Corrected mean:		.010
Subject Type		*%*
Pronoun	.47	2
NP	**.70**	15
Aspect		
Habitual	**.68**	6
Nonhabitual	.43	1

Factor groups not selected as significant: preceding and following phonological segment, grammatical person.

Factor groups selected as significant but not shown: type of verb, topic, definiteness of subject.

These findings remind us of a central tenet of the comparative method: namely, that similarities across varieties tell us more than differences (cf. Tagliamonte 2002). In this case, similar linguistic conditioning across widely-separated diaspora corpora is matched in the letters of writers from across the south of the United States. As in traditional historical linguistics, we cannot interpret the absence of shared conditioning in widely separated or differently constituted varieties as proof that the varieties were never the same, although we can rarely provide the kind of diachronic confirmation the OREAAC gives us.

In conclusion, we hope that this analysis has demonstrated the value of explicitly comparing modern diaspora varieties with their direct linguistic ancestors, as well as the utility of early written material in determining the most likely path followed by divergent diaspora communities. This work follows a recent tradition of supplementing spoken modern data from spoken diaspora corpora with historical written materials (cf. Van Herk 2002; Van Herk & Poplack, in press). The remarkable parallels across corpora support the use of the variationist method in determining system membership, as well as the reconstructive validity of diaspora materials, and the remarkably speech-like nature of letters by semiliterate authors.

References

Bailey, Guy, Maynor, Natalie & Cukor-Avila, Patricia (eds.). 1991. *The Emergence of Black English: Texts and Commentary*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Benjamins.

Ihalainen, Ossi. 1994. 'The dialects of England since 1776', in Robert Burchfield (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the English Language, Volume V*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 197-274.

Poplack, Shana. 2000. 'Introduction', in Shana Poplack (ed.), *The English History of African American English*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1-32.

Poplack, Shana and Sankoff, David. 1987. 'The Philadelphia story in the Spanish Caribbean', *American Speech,* 64, 291-314.

Poplack, Shana and Tagliamonte, Sali. 1991. 'African American English in the diaspora: The case of old-line Nova Scotians', *Language Variation and Change* 3, 301-39.

Poplack, Shana & Tagliamonte, Sali. 2001. *African American English in the Diaspora: Tense and Aspect*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Poplack, Shana, Van Herk, Gerard & Harvie, Dawn. 2002. '"Deformed in the dialects": An alternative history of non-standard English', in Peter Trudgill and Dominic Watts (eds.), *Alternative Histories of English*, London: Routledge, 87-110.

Rand, David & Sankoff, David. 1990. *GoldVarb: A Variable Rule Application for the Macintosh*. Version 2.1. Centre de recherches mathématiques, Université de Montréal.

Singler, John V. 1999. 'Passing verbal -*s* from Northern British Vernacular to the Liberian Settler English of Sinoe: Transfer interrupted!', paper presented at the special session on Accountability in Reconstructing Verbal -*s*, Methods X, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Tagliamonte, Sali. 2002. 'Comparative sociolinguistics', in J.K. Chambers, Peter Trudgill & Natalie Schilling-Estes (eds.), *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change*, Oxford: Blackwell, 729-763.

Van Herk, Gerard. 2002. *A Message from the Past: Past Temporal Reference in Early African American English Letters*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Ottawa.

Van Herk, Gerard and Poplack, Shana. in press. 'Rewriting the past: Bare verbs in the Ottawa Repository of Early African American Correspondence', *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages*.

Walker, James A. 2000. *Present Accounted For: Prosody and Aspect in Early African American English*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Ottawa.

Walker, James W. St. G. 1992. *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.