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The English origins of African American Vernacular English

What Edgar W. Schneider has taught us

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This chapter shows how the English-origins hypothesis on the emergence of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) seems to prevail against the creole-origins alternative. My arguments are embedded in the socioeconomic history of contacts between African slaves and European colonists (mostly farmers and indentured servants) on the tobacco and cotton plantations of the American Southeast, where Southern English emerged before the institutionalized race segregation in the late 19th century. I submit that Jim Crow fostered AAVE indirectly in triggering the Great Migration of African Americans to segregated northern and western cities, where they relocated in separate ethnic ghettos, and their otherwise regional vernacular was ethnicized. I make allowance for African and creole substrate influence, which I distinguish from the creole-origins hypothesis.

Keywords: African American Vernacular English (AAVE); Gullah; West African Pidgin English (WAPE); Atlantic English creoles (AEC); American Southern English; American White Southern English (AWSE); English origins; creole origins; segregation; Jim Crow

1. Background

Accounts of the origins of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) have been polarized by two dominant kinds of arguments: (1) what J. L. Dillard (1992) characterized as the “Anglicist” approach, which favors the English origins of most of its structural features and denies or downplays the significance of the African element in its system, and (2) the creole-origins approach, which traces its origins to a Gullah-like creole that putatively was spoken on plantations of the southeastern United States, commonly referred to as the (American) South.

According to the earliest variant of the latter hypothesis, championed especially by J.L. Dillard (1972, 1985, 1992, 2000) and William Stewart (1965, 1967, 1969, 1974), AAVE emerged by “decreolization” as the shedding off of “creole features” from the ancestor system, as had been conjectured much earlier by Schuchardt (1914).¹ The African element would thus not have been retained directly from African languages but from its putative West-African Pidgin English (WAPE) ancestor that formed the immediate substrate of Atlantic English creoles (AEC). Though pidgins are assumed to be “broken language varieties”, the WAPE ancestor would putatively have borne substrate influence from the languages of the Africans who produced it.

The above characterization is not exactly what transpires from modern variants of the hypothesis, as proponents such as Sutcliffe (1998) and Rickford (1998) allude to substrate influence in the putative creole ancestor of AAVE. Nonetheless, one may ask whether (some of) the features that AAVE shares with AECs and distinguish them from standard English varieties, with which they have usually been compared, may not have nonstandard English origins. In the same vein, one may also ask whether debasilectalization is the only explanation for structural differences between, on the one hand, AAVE and, on the other, Gullah and other AECs, for instance, regarding the syntactic distribution of the copula, plural marking, the syntax of direct (*yes/no*) questions, and the syntax of negation.

The Anglicist position, on which this contribution is focused, dates from the 1920s, with for instance Krapp (1924), endorsed later by McDavid (1950) and McDavid & McDavid (1951), who argue that AAVE is as American as any other American English dialect, only that it is allegedly more conservative (Krapp 1924). Its grammar putatively shows little evidence of influence from African substrate languages, which is to be found in a few lexical items such as *goober*, *gumbo*, *okra*, and *tote*. We must note, however, that this extreme position, which made no allowance for influence even by congruence, was a reaction to a position largely associated with Ambrose Gonzales (especially Gonzales 1922), according to which African slaves had been unable to learn English and had misshaped it beyond recognition, especially those who produced Gullah.

The extreme substratist and creole-origins hypothesis developed by Stewart (1965ff.) and Dillard (1972ff.) was really a reaction to this other extreme position and was driven by the otherwise sensible assumption that a language appropriated by a population that did not have it as part of their cultural heritage was likely to bear influence from the population’s previous communicative habits and their current communicative needs (Mufwene 2009). It was also informed by the dominant hypothesis of the time about the emergence of creoles, viz., that they had started from pidgin ancestors.

1. Since Mufwene (1994), I have preferred to characterize this process as “debasilectalization”, arguing that since there are really no structural features that are typical of creoles alone, the term ‘decreolization’ is inadequate. The other related reason is that, since a creole cannot be defined by its features alone and is identified as such largely because of the sociohistorical conditions of its emergence (Mufwene 2000), a creole remains a creole even after debasilectaling.

This position has increasingly been disputed over the past decades, by myself among others. In Mufwene (2014), I show that the history of trade between Africans and Europeans was very much on the model of modern days' globalized trade networks through intermediaries, which do not foster pidgins. Since there were no bazaar-style slave markets in Africa, trade between Africans and Europeans on the coast (as elsewhere in Asia and the Pacific) relied heavily on intermediaries (who also acted as interpreters), with Portuguese dominating as the primary trade language until the late 18th or early 19th century. It may thus be surmised that pidgins developed later than creoles or just concurrently, if any had emerged by the early 18th century. In any case, Stewart and Dillard represented the state of art, which had not changed much since the late 19th century, in claiming that AAVE had its ultimate ancestry in a pidgin.

2. The English origins of AAVE

2.1 Justifications for the English-origins hypothesis

There is a sense in which the above section heading, a modification of the title of Poplack (ed. 2000), *The English History of African American English*, states the obvious. From a genetic linguistics perspective, AAVE's vocabulary is as English as that of any North American English variety; it is not more divergent from Standard American English than, say, Appalachian, Ozark, or Amish English. Its phonology and grammar are very similar to those of American White Southern English (AWSE) varieties and to some extent different from those of Gullah and other AECs, despite partial similarities pointed out regarding the syntactic distribution of the copula (see Rickford 1998 for an important summary of the issues) and lack of subject-verb agreement in the present tense. The structure of its noun phrase is very much like that of English (Mufwene 1998), especially regarding the position of the determiner, the dominant use of {-Z} for plural (even in combination with pronominal *dem*), the use of the "Saxon genitive" on the possessor noun phrase and of the possessive pronoun *his*, *her*, or *its* instead of a gender-neutral and invariant pronoun *he* (as in Gullah) or *im* (as in other AECs), and the use of *that* to introduce relative clauses. It resembles other English dialects by the overall use of *that* as a complementizer that also introduces verb complement clauses, by the introduction of some subjectless non-finite clauses with *to* rather than with *fu* / *fi*, and by marking some complement verbs with the gerundial or participial *-ing* suffix, unlike in English creoles. Also, AAVE is unlike AECs in not allowing the use of bare nominals in the morphological singular for generic reference, such as in *Daag no nyam daag* 'a dog-GENERIC doesn't eat dog (meat)-MASS' in Jamaican Creole (Mufwene 1984) or *Clint always go to Charleston because uman-NONINDIVIDUATED deh* 'Clint always goes/went to Charleston because women-GENERIC are there' in Gullah (Mufwene 1986).

The omission of the possessive {-Z} and the plural marker {-Z}, just like of the subject-verb agreement marker in the third person singular, are a matter of statistics, often conditioned by the phonological environment, compared to other nonstandard English varieties. Capitalizing on the fact that AAVE also uses the associative plural as in *Billy dem* or *Billy nem* (< *Billy and dem*) (Rickford 1977) to underscore its closer affinity to AECs would be tantamount to overlooking a great deal about its genetic kinship with and typological affinity to other North American nonstandard English varieties. Even the “remote phase *bin*” (Rickford 1974), as in *I bin six* ‘I have been six (for quite some time)’ is also attested in some other nonstandard varieties, as in *your breakfast’s been ready* ‘your breakfast has been ready for quite some time’ (relatively speaking). The stress on *bin* may be the carrier of the REMOTE meaning that is added to an otherwise regular PERFECT construction with *have been*, with *have* omitted as a consequence of advanced grammaticization.

AAVE’s negation pattern, especially regarding negative concord, differs from the patterns attested both in AECs and in other English dialects, especially when negative inversion is also involved, as in *Didn’t nobody tell me he was behind me* and *Ain’t nobody here don’t talk like that*. It also has “camouflaged” constructions such as *He come screaming at everybody like he own this damn place* and *She steady dating James though she was told not to* (as discussed especially by Spears 1982 and Baugh 1983). Such structural patterns, among others discussed by Green (1998, 2002), defy the hypothesis that AAVE evolved from some putative creole ancestor by debasilectalization. This observation does not of course reject offhand the possibility of some creole influence on the formation of AAVE, more likely by congruence than otherwise, in case slaves imported from the Caribbean (who were a small minority in the 18th century) influenced the local emergence of American southern English varieties.²

One should not ignore the above features and many others that make AAVE so similar to AWSE, both in phonology and morphosyntax, notwithstanding some differences such as in the use of the consuetudinal *be* and perhaps the remote phase *bin*. Phonological features underscoring commonalities between these varieties include the following among others: words such as *pen* and *four* are pronounced the same way in both varieties, [pɪ:n] and [fo:], up to the merger of *pin* and *pen* [pɪ:n], *poor* and *pour* [po:], and *sure* and *shore* [ʃo:]. In addition, the words *police* and *umbrella* bear stress on the initial syllable, with *police* produced with an [o^w] rather than a schwa in the first syllable. In syntax, the third person singular *does* alternates with *do* and *doesn’t* with *don’t*. The past tense *was* alternates with *were* in the plural, *ain’t* is commonly used for ‘be not’ and ‘have not’ (followed by a verb in the past participle in the latter case), and relative clauses are often introduced by *what* (as *everything what she said*).

2. As becomes evident below, I subscribe to the position that Jim Crow fostered AAVE as a separate variety from American Southern English.

We must bear in mind that the sociohistorical context in which writers such as William Faulkner and Mark Twain contrasted AAVE with AWSE, using eye-dialect notations that exaggerated differences between these dialects, fostered a distortion of reality. Social biases of the time sought to underscore what was allegedly the mental or linguistic inferiority of former slaves in order to justify their socioeconomic subordination to European Americans. This is also true of Ambrose Gonzales' representations of a "quaint" Gullah in the 20th century (in contrast to his more accurate representation of the vernacular in the late 19th century) and of Joel Chandler Harris' *Uncle Remus Stories* (1934), *pace* Troike's (2010) incorrect assessment of his rendition as true Gullah.³ Bailey & Thomas (1998) show convincingly, as do contributions to Poplack (ed. 2000) and much of the earlier work by Edgar Schneider and his associates (e.g., Schneider 1983a, 1989; Ewers 1995; Kautzsch 2002), that most structural features of AAVE have English origins, which, as noted above, does not necessarily preclude congruent influence from substrate languages in some cases, including Caribbean English creoles.

Since these findings may lead some to invoke the Black nanny hypothesis as a possible explanation for this state of affairs, let me point out that, according to some historians, only 5–10% of White southerners could afford a Black nanny before the abolition of slavery (Coleman 1978: 39), certainly fewer of them after Abolition. It is striking that linguists have hardly questioned such myths in developing their hypotheses about the origins of AAVE. What is appalling is, more generally, how little of the socioeconomic history of colonization we have cared to know, although it bears so much on language evolution. Economic activities impose or just influence the kind of population structure in which people evolve, as I show briefly below but have explained in Mufwene (2001a, 2005a, 2008) and other works. I also show below how Edgar W. Schneider has contributed to our understanding of the sociohistorical ecology of the emergence of AAVE.

Other myths include the assumption that all White Americans speak Standard English – otherwise, why have structures of AAVE and English creoles typically been compared to those of Standard English, as if it had been their lexifier? This one too, Edgar W. Schneider has contributed to debunking it. Another is the assumption of a homogeneous plantation population structure throughout the American Southeast, which would support the initial creole-origins hypothesis, as formulated by J. L. Dillard and W. Stewart. Even the alternative assumption that the creole ancestor must or may be a Caribbean variety is questionable, as it is not consistent with the history of the importation of slaves to English North America. In the 18th century, the period that matters the most (because of the success of the plantation economy and the rapidly increasing number of slaves), only 10–15% of slaves were imported from the Caribbean (Rawley 1991). This raises the question of whether the slaves imported straight from

3. I discuss this topic in Mufwene (to appear), pointing out inaccuracies in the particular ways that both Harris and Troike attribute nonstandard features to Gullah.

Africa learned English only from those who had come from the Caribbean, notwithstanding the issue of whether, in the first place, Caribbean English creoles (as we know them today) were already formed by the early 18th century.⁴

2.2 Archival and other evidence for the English-origins hypothesis

The above details articulate the intellectual atmosphere in which Edgar W. Schneider joined the scholarship on the emergence of AAVE. He immediately drew linguists' attention to the nonstandard nature of the English lexifier (e.g., Schneider 1983a, 1983b, 1985, 1989), which until then had remained elusive, as comparisons intended to show the extent to which AAVE had diverged from the English varieties spoken by White Americans in the north had typically involved American Standard English! Schneider used his findings to dispute Dillard's (1972ff) claims of the African origins of some of these features, a position summed up in Schneider (1989), which has also been championed by, e.g., Poplack & Tagliamonte (2001), as they argue that, for instance, patterns of nominal number and tense marking are very similar to those found in White nonstandard Englishes today and in some earlier stages of English.

The copula has remained very controversial, because, as shown by Rickford (1998), there are striking parallels with AECs in the distribution of its absence, in contrast to the syntactic environments in which it is present in full or contracted form. This in itself is not (partial) evidence for the creole-origins hypothesis, for there is also the possibility of homologous evolution once it has been established that the substrate languages were structurally similar in both the case of AECs and that of AAVE, as is generally assumed in the literature (though this assumption itself may be questioned). In addition, one must not overlook the fact the PROGRESSIVE-aspect environment, with the verb inflected as *V-ing*, may be considered the counterpart of the durative environment in AECs, in which the verb is delimited by the free DURATIVE morpheme

4. The hypothesis has also downplayed, if not overlooked, the possibility that a proportion of those slaves imported from the Caribbean had just transited there and had not had enough time to learn the local creole, if one had emerged already. This is actually evident from Candy's testimony in the Salem Witch Trials' transcripts (discussed below). More generally, while the colony of South Carolina was settled in 1670 from Barbados and the first settlers included a minority of slaves from that Island (at a time when it is not evident that creole had emerged there already), we must bear in mind that by the 18th century Caribbean colonists or those who imported slaves for them sold to North America those that they could not use locally. Such slaves would not have been among those that already knew how to do the chores on the plantation or the farm, as it cost more to train new workers than to continue using the older, Creole or seasoned ones. Very few Creole or seasoned slaves must have been transferred to North America, as it would have been economically counterproductive. From the North American perspective, Caribbean Creole and seasoned slaves would also have been too expensive. On the other hand, there is no reason why Caribbean Creole or seasoned slaves would not have adjusted their putative "creole patterns" to the emergent communicative norms of their new contact ecologies in English North America.

a or *de* which precedes it. As this marker need not be analyzed as a copula in AECs' systems, the copula may thus be said to be missing here for reasons that are primarily phonological but not syntactic, unlike its behavior before predicative adjectives and prepositions, the environments in which it is similar to AECs.

A similar account can be extended to FUTURE constructions with *gon*, which may be interpreted as an invariant FUTURE marker that no longer requires a copula, unlike *going to* or *gonna*, from which it has evolved. This behavior would just be the result of a more advanced stage of grammaticalization. As this account makes *gon* the counterpart of *gwain* or *a go* + V in Jamaican Creole and *ga* [gə] in Gullah, one might claim that no underlying copula need be posited and that in the few cases when the copula is used this is only a consequence of what Mufwene (1992) characterizes as "non-monolithic grammar" and Labov (1998) as "coexistent systems". That is, depending on whether the speaker is using an English-dialect system or one structurally (but not necessarily genetically) akin to that AECs, he / she may or may not use the copula. These considerations about the absence of the copula before verbs inflected in the progressive *-ing* and before *gon* V, the two syntactic environments where its statistics are the highest, take away a large chunk of the evidence that has been adduced to support the creole-origins hypothesis. Mufwene (2005b) also shows that there is a lot in the behavior of the copula in English that would have lent itself to congruence with substrate influence without a creole transition, such as when it is omitted in headlines, telegraphic speech, and participial clauses. Examples include: *John found Susan [Ø] smart*; *The police wanted the criminal [Ø] in jail*; *Larry [Ø] buried here* (picture caption); and *Prince [Ø] Driven Out Of Power*.

The scholarship on AAVE has definitely benefitted from Edgar W. Schneider's documentation of evidence in archival records to address issues on the ultimate origins of its structural features. Among the latest of such efforts is his collaboration with Michael Montgomery to study the grammatical characteristics of letters of White overseers on some plantations. The evidence highlights such features as the absence of the copula, of tense marking, and of number marking on nouns co-occurring with a quantifier, as well as uses of non-possessive personal pronouns where a possessive form would be expected, which actually is more typical of AECs than of AAVE. The following examples from Schneider & Montgomery (2001: 407) illustrate the features:

- (1) a. and we [Ø] Not half Ready [Doyal 3]
- b. the Ballance [Ø] too wet [Doyal 9]
- c. Henry arrive here on yesterday [Meadow 19] (no tense marking!)⁵
- d. tooke Seven day to cut [Carter 70] (no number marking with a numeral)
- e. gave to my brother Wilson to give to **you** brother James [Meadow 5] (non-possessive pronoun in lieu of the possessive one).

5. The comments between the parentheses have been added by the present author.

This is the kind of evidence that shows that substrate linguistic influence, which can be attributed especially to Kwa but not to Bantu languages, is not solely responsible for these features that have been treated as benchmarks of AAVE. Selective congruence of inheritance and substrate influence would be a more convincing explanation. Other features that can be adduced to support the position that AAVE has retained more grammatical characteristics from its common ancestor with White American nonstandard English than some of us would like to admit, include the following which I cite from *Tarheel Talk* (Eliason 1956):⁶

- (2) a. Lew is Charlotte child dide Last Saturday [...] (*TT* 43: no possessive marker; contact relative clause – 1820s).
- b. I cant heer from him no plase as yet [...] (*TT* 44: double negation – 1850s)
- c. The hands is all got Better [...] (*TT* 44: subject-verb disagreement – 1850s)
- d. [...] these wee man [women] neds cloth for shimeys (*TT* 44: subject-verb disagreement – 1850s)
- e. The Wingate Negro reported himself here newyersday and I give order for not to bring one drop of licer abut the plantation if he did I lash him (*TT* 44: no tense concord, nonstandard *for-to* complementizer – 1850s)
- f. the Teacher is a going home and ant a Comeing back (*TT* 242-243: *a*-prefixing in progressive, *aint* for *isn't* – 1790)
- g. I hant seen none shortly (*TT* 245: *ain't* for *haven't*, “h”-insertion; double negation – 1803)
- h. I might could & should enjoy myself (*TT* 245: double modal – 1859).

This kind of evidence prompts us to be more critical of literary productions in which the African slaves have typically been caricatured as speaking more divergent English than White colonists. A closer examination of archival records shows that the English competence of this population was quite variable, as is also evident from court transcriptions of the Salem Witch Trials in 1692, in which it appears that, population-wise, the non-White defendants' English is as variable as that of the White colonists they lived with. African persons of interest included not only Candy (5), whose speech is not as creole as Cassidy (1986) claims, but also a Mary Black (4), whose transcribed speech is as English as that of the competent White colonists, as selectively illustrated in (3):⁷

6. *TT* between parentheses stands for *Tarheel Talk*, followed by the page number; the last number between square brackets stands for the year of attestation.

7. The transcripts of the court proceedings can be found at the following website: <http://salem.lib.virginia.edu/texts/tei/BoySalCombined?div_id=n15>.

- (3) a. she choake him (Deliverance Hobbs: no tense marker, or no person / number marking)
 b. Where was you then? (D. Hobbs's prosecutor: no subject-verb agreement)
 c. you are become a tormentor (D. Hobbs's prosecutor: auxiliary *be* instead of *have*)
 d. Where be those images, at your house? (D. Hobbs's prosecutor: "invariant *be*" or some sort of subjunctive used for the conditional?)
 e. we eate nothing but drunk (Mary Lacy: *eat* for *ate* and *drunk* for *drank*)
 f. how maney year (M. Lacy's prosecutor: no plural marker with a quantifier)
 g. was you not at Mr Ballards house on thanksgiving day at night (M. Lacy's prosecutor: subject-verb disagreement)
 h. you say ye Mother was hurt this Spring at e Village (M. Lacy's prosecutor: Gullah-like uses of possessive *ye* 'your' and *e* 'his/her')
 i. toothak'r wife & Daughter was at the Village Meeting of Witches (Mary Lacy: no possessive marker with *toothak'r* and subject-verb disagreement)
 j. how maney was there (M. Lacy's prosecutor: subject-verb disagreement)

The following statements associated with Mary Black in the court transcriptions do not appear to diverge from those of the White colonists in the same archives:

- (4) a. I hurt no body.
 b. I do not know.
 c. No, I pin my neck cloth.

The following sentences, by Candy, are not particularly creole either, despite the absence of the copula in (5a), as her speech may also be characterized as an inter-language. She appears to talk in a child-like manner (which is not a "creole feature"), referring to herself by her name, instead of using a pronoun. Although Candy had been brought from Barbados, she suggests that she was born in Africa and had been in Barbados only for a short while and may still have been learning English then.

- (5) a. Candy no witch in her country.
 b. Candy's mother no witch.
 c. Candy no witch, [in] Barbados.
 d. Mistress bring book and pen and ink, make Candy write in it.

None of the above archival evidence suggests that the Africans did not contribute anything to the present structures of AAVE. Rather, like any non-native speaking population that was appropriating colonial English as their vernacular, the Africans contributed elements to the colonial linguistic feature pool, thereby influencing the distribution of variants in it. The rest is a matter of how selection has proceeded, especially through the communicative practices of the locally-born members of their communities. We must, however, also bear in mind that race segregation was institutionalized late in the former tobacco and cotton-plantation colonies, which I too claim

to be the cradle of AAVE (Mufwene 2001a, 2008, to appear). This was late in the 19th century, after the abolition of slavery, as pointed out by Schneider (1995).

Race segregation is an important ecological factor that sheds so much light on why there are so many structural similarities between AAVE and AWSE. As also pointed out by Bailey & Thomas (1998), the dialects have common origins on the tobacco and cotton plantations and would not start diverging until the late 19th or early 20th century, that is after almost two centuries and a half of common social history between the African slaves and the White indentured servants. Incidentally, according to Kulikoff (1986), the indentured servants constituted 50–75% of the southern White population by the time of the abolition of slavery. Kulikoff (1991: 202) also notes that “[a]s many as four fifths of all colonists, including their families, servants, and slaves, were farmers”, thus also speakers of nonstandard English. Bearing in mind that some members of this European population did not originate in England and may have learned the language also in the colonies, alongside the African slaves, it is question-begging to claim exclusive ethnic or national origins for some features of AAVE that set it apart from other nonstandard English dialects, particularly those discussed above. This is more evident in the case of “consuetudinal *be*”, as in *he be busy/reading/gone/home every time I show up*, which denotes repeated states of affairs (such as the transient ones expressed with the progressive) and is not particularly evident in African languages, though these usually have a HABITUAL marker. Because it is attested in Hiberno English, perhaps one may invoke African linguistic influence only by partial congruence. On the other hand, we would be remiss to exclude the role of community-internal dynamics in generating new structures such as the camouflaged ones, to which Spears (1982) and Baugh (1983) have drawn our attention.

2.3 How Jim Crow fostered AAVE

On account of the above considerations, I submit, somewhat subversively, that AAVE is an invention of Jim Crow,⁸ bearing in mind that the average African American says they speak English, just like the average White American does. It is linguists and African American ideologists that claim African Americans speak AAVE or Ebonics. Although African Americans know they speak differently from European Americans and there is variation within the European American population, they seldom bother to refer to their way of speaking English by any specific name. “Talking Black” is rather cultural but is not tantamount to speaking AAVE (as may be inferred particularly from variationist sociolinguistics); the phrase has usually alluded to using phrases and figures of speech that are typical of African American discourse (Mufwene 2001b).

8. I owe this hypothesis partly to Schneider (1995), who underscores the significance of the late institutionalization of race segregation in the American Southeast in fostering the divergence of AAVE from what was otherwise a common American Southern English.

In claiming that Jim Crow invented AAVE, I refer to particular circumstances that led Northern White Americans to refer to AAVE as peculiar, which would culminate in linguists' engagement to account for it as a normal dialect of English, which is as rule-governed as any other language (variety). Jim Crow is associated with the institutionalization of residential race segregation in the American Southeast in the late 19th century and the concurrent adoption of discriminatory laws that not only forbade African Americans, who had just been emancipated from slavery, to use the same public facilities as Whites but also prevented them from competing for the same kinds of good paying jobs or getting equal pay for the same work. That political and economic world order also produced lynching for African Americans who protested against or violated some of the relevant laws, especially those that threatened the White supremacist ideology. A consequence of this post-Emancipation state of affairs was the Great Migration (1910–1970), which brought numerous African Americans, about 6.5 million (“Great Migration”, *Wikipedia* 25 October 2013), most of them from tobacco and cotton-plantation states, typically to Northern and later to Western cities, in search of better living conditions.

However, although African Americans faced no lynching at the destination, they found themselves living in ghettos that kept them segregated from the White population, in which they have continued speaking in fundamentally the same ways they always did in the American Southeast.⁹ Northerners identified this otherwise nonstandard American Southern English as Black English, now referred to as AAVE. To be sure, this characterization may have been on a par with other varieties such as German and Italian Englishes, then also confined to European national ghettos, typical of the residential segregation of American cities that lasted until past the mid-20th century. However, AAVE was more socially stigmatized, as it was a barrier to professional ambitions of African Americans to an extent not experienced by those who spoke those other, national English varieties, as can be inferred from the Civil Rights protests and riots of the mid-20th century. The fact that the American North and West considered the American Southeast backwards did not help, especially when it was generally also thought that White Southerners speak the way they do because their ancestors had been influenced by their “Black nannies” during the pre-Emancipation period.

Although this summary is (over)simplified, it certainly underscores the significance of Jim Crow as an “attractor” (in the language of complexity theory) in the identification of AAVE as a separate variety from White Southern English. As pointed out by, for instance, Bailey & Thomas (1998) and Bailey (2001), the two varieties have indeed diverged, at least to the ears of those who can tell the difference within the same socioeconomic class. However, the divergence, which has occurred over the last

9. To be sure, some regional differences have evolved now in AAVE (Troike 1973), with Northerners sometimes deriding the way Southerners speak. However, these differences are more noticeable to insiders than to outsiders and may lie more in some lexicon (such as with the use of *yall* ‘2nd PERS PLURAL PRONOUN’ and verbs such as *reckon* ‘suppose’, which can also be characterized as southern features) than in the grammar.

century, has not erased the common origins of these varieties on the tobacco and cotton plantations of the American Southeast and out of the frequent if not daily interactions that took place between, on the one hand, African slaves and, on the other, White farmers and indentured servants for close to two centuries and a half before the institutionalization of Jim Crow. Barring the zero copula, the consuetudinal *be*, negative inversion, and some camouflaged constructions, whose genetic connection to AECs is also dubious, AAVE has remained very much a transplanted American Southern English variety that has been ethnicized in the American North and West.¹⁰ Its phonology has remained essentially southern, as have many other aspects of its grammar discussed above.

3. By way of conclusion

My general position about language evolution is that every language (variety) evolves locally, subject to various ecological pressures that are specific to itself (which does not preclude evolutionary similarities with others). Even for the same language such as English coming in contact with more or less the same other languages, such as the substrate languages previously spoken by African slaves of the Caribbean and North America during the 17th–19th centuries, there are several ecological factors that were not identical from one colony to another. From an internal-ecology perspective, as far as metropolitan English (to be situated in England) is concerned, it must be borne in mind that it was not a homogeneous variety. Even if the same variants were taken to the different colonies, their systemic or demographic strengths were probably not the same from one plantation to another, let alone from one colony to another. Even if this were the only ecological factor that matters, we should not be surprised by the fact that AAVE has wound up so different from the other English-based vernaculars developed by the African slaves and their descendants in the different colonies, nor even by the fact that the different creole varieties do not have identical systems, with indeed Gullah being more North American than the others (Mufwene 2001a, 2001c, to appear).

There are indeed many other, external ecological factors that matter, including the fact that sugarcane cultivation was the dominant economic industry in the Caribbean, unlike in the American Southeast, where rice cultivation prevailed on the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, while tobacco and cotton thrived in the hinterlands of English colonies. Sugarcane led to the development of huge plantations, using a huge slave labor force, which was segregated early from the European colonists. Tobacco and cotton plantations were much smaller and used more indentured servants than

10. It is imperative to find out more about the histories of these features, for instance, whether they consolidated late among AAVE speakers and became ethnic markers, after the institutionalization of Jim Crow, or whether White Southerners abandoned them under the influence of heavy immigrations from Europe during the same period. The answer may bear heavily on the position developed here.

slaves, the latter hardly exceeding 40% of the population, except in a handful of coastal Virginia plantations. The colonial populations in these territories would not be segregated until after the abolition of slavery and the institutionalization of Jim Crow in the late 19th century. Rice cultivation on the marshes of coastal South Carolina and Georgia also required a large slave labor force (smaller though it was than on sugar-cane plantations of the Caribbean) and experienced race segregation as early as 1720.¹¹

This early segregation fostered an early divergence of White and Southern English vernaculars, which would become more pronounced over the following two centuries. However, we must also remember that even descendants of White colonists of the region speak differently from the average White Southerner. This is quite consistent with the following observation of mine: White and Black populations of the same region speak alike, they are all American, Southerners, coastal, or Caribbean before being White or Black; and it may be difficult for some outsiders to distinguish them by their speech patterns alone, an exercise that is easier for the locals. Whites and Blacks outside the American Southeast speak clearly different vernaculars as a consequence of the Great Migration, which did not eliminate race segregation. The ghettoization of African Americans would gradually replace the segregation of European Americans by nations in cities where they had relocated. African Americans could thus maintain their southern way of speaking, while European Americans were getting integrated gradually and national varieties such as German, Italian, and Scandinavian Englishes were vanishing. Overall in the history of American Englishes, the divergence was more pronounced where race segregation was institutionalized early and less so where it was set in place late, as in the American Southeastern hinterland. It is in this context that I can claim that Jim Crow invented or produced AAVE, albeit indirectly. I am grateful to Edgar W. Schneider for highlighting the significance of this factor in the history of AAVE and AWSE.

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11. Based on Edgar (1998), the coastal setting of the rice fields may account more for the physical segregation of the slaves on the mosquito-infested marshes of coastal South Carolina (and Georgia) than the actual demographics of the plantations. I show in Mufwene (to appear) that the rice plantations had much smaller numbers of slaves (often just about 50 individuals) than Caribbean large sugar-cane plantations.

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