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Isolation within Isolation: The invisible Outer Banks dialect

Isolation within Isolation: The invisible Outer Banks dialect

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1 Introduction

It is sometimes assumed by sociolinguists that small, isolated speech communities will not tolerate a profusion of forms over a long period of time without discernible movement toward a reduction of variants.¹ In other words, it is believed that a homogenous social situation will eventually result in a homogenous dialect. At the same time, sociolinguists have realized that "because all societies recognize different types of behavioral roles, we may predict that no society, regardless of size, will evidence complete homogeneity in speech patterns" (Wolfram and Fasold 1974:16). To a large extent, however, proclamations about sociolinguistic variation within small speech communities are a matter of reasoned speculation rather than empirically supported evidence. In reality, we have few studies that examine the nature and maintenance of linguistic diversity in small insular communities.

As Dorian notes (1994:594), within sociolinguistics there has been a preoccupation with variation in large and socially much more complex populations--to the exclusion of variation studies in small communities. How much and what types of diversity are tolerated in small communities, and what are the factors that correlate with that diversity? Are the primary factors individualistic, social, demographic (e.g. age, occupation, etc.), or linguistic (e.g. change in progress, obsolescence, etc.)? Dorian's (1994) long-term, detailed study of East Sutherland Gaelic, one of the few studies of language variation in a small, occupationally concentrated community, concludes that there is considerable "individually patterned variation within small and homogeneous speech communities" (Dorian 1994:631). Dorian does not deny the possibility of linguistic heterogeneity which correlates with social boundaries within such communities; she simply focuses on the nature and extent of individual variation.

Our own study takes up the other side of diversity in small communities, namely, the social and ethnic boundaries that may correlate with speech differences. We show the significance of social boundaries in maintaining long-term diversity, even within insular communities comprised of just a couple of hundred people. We demonstrate this significance by considering the distinct variety maintained by a member of the only African-American family to inhabit Ocracoke, North Carolina during the last 130 years. Our study thus provides a unique window into the question of long-term diversity in insular dialect communities by demonstrating: (1) the robustness of diversity in an historically insular language situation, (2) the persistence of an ethnically distinct African-American Vernacular English variety alongside the European-American Ocracoke Vernacular in Ocracoke, and (3) the selective nature of

¹ We are deeply indebted to Kenny Ballance, not only for giving us the opportunity to interview Muzel Bryant, but also for his deep and abiding concern for Muzel Bryant's comfort and welfare during these later years of her life. Thanks also to Natalie Schilling-Estes for helpful comments on an earlier draft of the paper.

dialect convergence and divergence among groups and individual speakers in such communities.

2 The Sociohistorical Context

Ocracoke, North Carolina, is like many historically isolated island communities. On the surface it appears to be relatively homogenous because of its physical isolation, its occupational focus, and the dense, multiplex social networks that characterize many social relationships. Certainly, a primary basis for the unity of islanders is their common heritage as islanders "born and bred" and their solidarity against external physical and social threats to the island, such as real estate developers and transplants who want to change their community. However, closer investigation reveals that status, sex, and other social divisions of various types have persisted within this small community for a couple of centuries.

One of the most unnoticed social boundaries by outsiders is that of ethnicity. Of the 200 ancestral islanders, divisions would be hard to set between the Scotch-Irish and the British heritages but the difference between the only African-American family on the island and the European-Americans is recognized by all Ocracokers. The Bryant family has lived in Ocracoke as the only ancestral African-American family for over a century. The key participant in this study, Muzel Bryant, was born on the island in 1904. Her mother was born in 1869 on Ocracoke; the daughter of an ex-slave, she was brought to the island as the domestic servant for a family from the mainland. Muzel Bryant's father moved to the island in the early 1890s from a location on the mainland near New Bern, North Carolina.

Despite their longstanding status as the sole African-American family on Ocracoke, the Bryants were not always the only African Americans there. At the time of the Civil War, over 100 African Americans lived in Ocracoke, some of them the slaves of European-American island residents. After the Civil War, most of the African Americans left and only one family, the Bryants, remained into the twentieth century. It is ironic that the Bryants moved to the island at a time when other African Americans were leaving.

The Bryants had nine children born on Ocracoke from 1900 to 1912, but only three members of the Bryant family lived out their adult lives on Ocracoke; the other six moved to the mainland, rarely returning to the island. The three Bryants who remained throughout most of their lives included Muzel Bryant, her sister, Mildred, and her brother Julius. Of these three, only Muzel Bryant, age 91 at the time of our sociolinguistic interview in the spring of 1995, remains on the island.² Her sister, Mildred, died in the winter of 1995 at the age of 84, and her brother, Julius, died a couple of years ago.

The isolated island context Muzel Bryant grew up in is similar to that of other islanders in some respects, but her experiences were also fundamentally different from those of other Ocracoke children. Although she grew up on an island in a seafaring economy, Muzel Bryant never learned to swim and she rarely rode on a boat, except in later years when she rode the ferry to the mainland. She was given no formal schooling except when she went to live with an aunt and uncle in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania from the ages of 16-20. She had three brothers who also did not attend school during the

² Muzel Bryant now has a younger sister living with her who has recently returned to the island after living the majority of her adult life in New Haven, Connecticut.

regular hours because of the school segregation laws. The brothers, however, were taught at the school after the normal school day. Local community-based social activities also excluded Muzel Bryant. We learned from our older European-American subjects that there was once a dance hall which has become part of island's history--a wooden room with a record player, wood stove, and metal chairs lining the walls. When we asked Muzel Bryant if she used to go to the dance hall she said she did. However, when we asked if she liked to dance, she said she didn't know; she had never gone in; instead, she stayed outside, watching the others dance through the window.

Muzel Bryant began working at age 14 as a domestic and although she changed employers, she never changed occupations. After working in Philadelphia for four years, she never worked on the mainland again. She did not marry. Her sister Mildred also worked on the island for decades as a domestic servant and also never married. Their brother Artis, after enlisting in the Merchant Marine Corps and having his shipped bombed off the coast of Ocracoke during World War II, left the island after he washed up on its shore. Her brother Julius fished and worked at the fish house. Muzel's father worked as a janitor at the church and cut hair. Of the three Bryant children who remained on the island, only Julius apparently had any sort of regular social involvement with the community beyond work. Julius played poker with some of the other ancestral island men and brought his homemade meal wine, made with island-grown figs and peaches. The island men talk very fondly of his participation in the regular island poker games.

In regards to the acceptance of the Bryants by European-American Ocracokers, we have heard or read about no reports of overt, racially-motivated acts of aggression against the Bryants, and both Muzel Bryant and the European-American island residents reported to us that everybody treated everybody "just like family." We believe this situation to be true to the extent that everybody knew their place in the family. One older European-American island woman reported to us that the Bryant sisters had been treated fine and that everybody knew them by name - "Nigger Mildred and Nigger Muse."

In their later years, several families have come to cherish the Bryants and respect their situation on Ocracoke. In his book *Ocracokers* (1988), ancestral islander and local historian, Alton Ballance, whose family members have been long-time friends and

employers of the Bryants, devotes an entire chapter to Mildred Bryant and the Bryant family. In his next book, he will focus a chapter on Muzel. The island community, especially the Ballance family, have attended to Muzel Bryant's welfare for the last several years, taking her to the doctor for medical attention, preparing occasional meals for her, and paying social visits to her. The same was true of Mildred.

Perhaps the role of the Bryants was most symbolically placed in perspective at the Sunday church meeting we attended when the death of Mildred was announced. A church elder noted during announcements that Mildred Bryant was one of the oldest islanders. He then qualified his observation by noting, "Well, one of our oldest Black islanders." The separate status of the Bryants as African Americans in Ocracoke thus seems obvious. Our information and observations lead us to conclude that Muzel Bryant has lived her life socially separated from other Ocracokers in a number of important ways, even though she interacted on a daily basis with islanders through her work for over a half century.

How does Muzel Bryant's speech reflect her role as an African-American Ocracoker? To what extent is she a bona fide African-American Vernacular English speaker and to what extent is she an Ocracoke brogue speaker, given her isolated role

on an isolated island? In the next section, we provide a profile of her speech based on our analysis of the 90-minute interview we conducted with her in the spring of 1995.

3 A Dialect Profile of Muzel Bryant

In this section we characterize Muzel Bryant's speech, primarily by comparing how particular linguistic variables align with Ocracoke Vernacular English (OVE) (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1995; Wolfram, Schilling-Estes, Hazen, and Craig forthcoming; Wolfram and Schilling-Estes forthcoming) and African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) varieties (Wolfram 1969; Labov 1972; Wolfram and Fasold 1974; Baugh 1983). We have extracted data for a number of diagnostic variables which can help us situate Muzel's dialect with respect to the AAVE and OVE norms. We are now in the process of comparing Muzel Bryant's speech with specific age and sex cohorts in Ocracoke and in AAVE-speaking mainland North Carolina communities to provide a more empirically grounded basis for the initial comparison we offer here (Tamburro forthcoming).

3.1 Phonological Comparison

We have undertaken a number of quantitatively based analyses of Muzel Bryant's speech and complement these with some qualitatively based observations that help us situate her phonology with respect to OVE and AAVE dialect norms. The quantitative analyses include tabulations of word-final consonant clusters, postvocalic *r*, and the /ay/ vowel. We consider each of these individually.

In Table 1, we give figures for Muzel Bryant's word-final consonant cluster reduction, following the procedures set forth for extracting this variable in classic studies

of AAVE phonology (Wolfram 1969; Labov 1972; Fasold 1972a; Guy 1980). In Table 2, we compare the incidence of cluster reduction with a sample of other vernacular varieties of English as set forth in Wolfram (1991:199).

Following Env.	Monomorphemic		Bimorphemic		Total
	+stress	-stress	+stress	-stress	
__C	14/14	4/4	19/21	1/1	38/4
Red./Tot.	100	100	90	100	0
% Red.					95
__V	13/13	3/3	4/7	3/7	23/3
Red./Tot.	100	100	57	43	0
% Red.					87
__##	6/6	4/4	0/0	0/0	10/1
Red./Tot.	100	100	--	--	0
% Red.					100
Total	33/33	11/11	23/28	4/8	
	100	100	82	50	

Table 1: Final consonant cluster reduction in Muzel Bryant's speech

LANGUAGE VARIETY	Followed by Cons.		Followed by Vowel	
	Monomorphemic % Red.	Bimorphemic % Red.	Monomorphemic % Red.	Bimorphemic % Red.
Muzel Bryant	100	91	100	50
Southern Black Working Class	88	50	72	36
Northern Black Working Class	97	76	72	34
Southern White Working Class	56	16	25	10
Appalachian Working Class/ Ocracoke Vernacular English	74	67	17	5

Table 2: Comparison of Muzel Bryant's word-final cluster reduction with other vernacular varieties (adapted from Wolfram 1991:199)

European-American varieties, including OVE, have a much reduced, qualitatively restricted version of consonant cluster reduction; they rarely reduce clusters before items beginning with a vowel and reduce clusters elsewhere much less frequently than their AAVE counterparts. By comparison, AAVE has a much more extended version of cluster reduction, both qualitatively and quantitatively.

The incidence of cluster reduction in Muzel Bryant's speech indicates a fairly basilectal version of this process--one similar to the one we have found only in some rural Southern varieties of AAVE (Wolfram 1971). The overall rates of consonant cluster reduction are more extensive than those found in the classic studies of AAVE. In fact, Table 1 indicates that the reduction of clusters in monomorphemic items is categorical. Furthermore, she indicates higher frequency levels of reduction for bimorphemic clusters preceding a vowel than those indicated in the classic studies on this phenomenon (cf. Wolfram 1969; Labov 1972; Fasold 1972a; Guy 1980; Labov 1989). As mentioned, OVE is aligned with other European-American vernaculars (cf. Wolfram 1991:199) and, thus, significantly out of line with the magnitude of cluster reduction indicated in Muzel Bryant's speech.

Postvocalic *r* reduction is also a significant marker of differential dialect status in OVE and in AAVE. Ocracoke is now, and traditionally has always been, an *r*-ful dialect area, distinguishing it from mainland Southern dialect areas (Wolfram, Schilling-Estes, Hazen, and Craig forthcoming; Tamburro forthcoming). At the same time, AAVE, especially in the rural South, is extensively *r*-less, vocalizing nuclear *rs* as well as syllable-coda *rs*. AAVE can also vocalize word-medial intervocalic *rs* in an apparent syllable realignment of these *rs* as codas (e.g. *during* as *du'ing* or *borrow* as *bo'ow*) rather than syllable onsets within the word. In Table 3, we observe the extent

of *r*-lessness in Muzel Bryant's speech in four different phonological environments: an unstressed syllable, as in *silver* or *mother*; a stressed syllable following a non-mid-central vowel, as in *guard* or *car*; a stressed nuclear *r*, as in *sir* or *work*; and an intra-word, intervocalic *r*, as in *Carol* or *Carolina*. Since the incidence of *r*-lessness in nuclear and in intervocalic, intra-word position tends to be lexically determined, we provide the number of different word types which indicate *r*-lessness.

	R-less/Tot	%	R-less word tokens/Tot
Unstressed Syllable <i>mother, other, silver</i>	104/107	97	
VR Tautosyllabic <i>guard, car, corn</i>	161/183	88	
Nuclear <i>sir, were, work</i>	39/44	89	13/13
Intervocalic Intra-word <i>ferry, marry, Carolina</i>	25/34	74	13/16

Table 3: The incidence of *R*-lessness in Muzel Bryant's speech

Table 3 indicates that Muzel's speech is obviously aligned with the Southern rural version of AAVE *r*-lessness, with extensive *r*-vocalization in all possible phonological contexts where *r* may be vocalized. Particularly noteworthy is the extensiveness of the *r*-lessness in intervocalic positions--a wide array of word tokens are shown to be predominantly *r*-less. This result is fairly unusual, except in traditional, rural AAVE. By contrast, of course, OVE is essentially *r*-ful, except in unstressed syllables, so the contrast between Muzel Bryant's speech and the traditional Ocracoke brogue is indeed dramatic.

Finally, we may examine where Muzel Bryant fits in with respect to the most diagnostic of all OVE indicators, the traditional Ocracoke [ɹ] vowel in words such as *time*, *tide*, and *high*. Our current investigation of OVE (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1995; Wolfram and Schilling-Estes forthcoming) has focused extensively on this vowel and its competing variants, which included a glide-reduced, Southern variant [a:], and the less regionally marked variant [ay]. The figures for the three competing variants are given in Table 4. The table includes a comparison of Muzel Bryant's figures with those for a subsample of older OVE speakers, the most comparable group of OVE age cohorts for Muzel Bryant. The figures for OVE are taken from Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1995). The figures are broken down on the basis of four phonetic environments: (1) preceding voiceless obstruents, (2) preceding voiced obstruents, (3) preceding nasals, and (4) preceding laterals.

SUBJECT		Vl. Obstr.			Vd. Obstr.			Nasal			Lateral		
		[_y]	[a:]	[ay]	[_y]	[a:]	[ay]	[_y]	[a:]	[ay]	[_y]	[a:]	[ay]
Older OVE Speakers	N	117	20	181	139	8	44	138	14	84	35	17	54
	%	36.8	6.3	56.9	72.8	4.2	23.0	58.5	5.9	35.6	33.0	16.0	50.9
Muzel Bryant	N	0	7	32	1	0	46	0	5	39	0	26	13
	%	0.0	17.9	82.1	2.1	0.0	97.9	0.0	11.4	88.6	0.0	66.7	33.3

Table 4: The incidence of [_y], [a:], and [ay] for Muzel Bryant and older OVE speakers

The figures in Table 4 clearly indicate that Muzel Bryant does not participate in the traditional Outer Banks production. There is near-categorical absence of the traditional Ocracoke variant--the [ɹy] variant. At the same time, the incidence of Southern glide weakening is also relatively low compared to its incidence in current versions of AAVE and Southern mainland North Carolina speech as well. The one exception is preceding a lateral. However, the liquids *r* and *l* constitute a special case of resyllabification (e.g. *fire* is produced as [far] and *isle* is produced as [al]) and is not a clear case of glide reduction. In resyllabifying /ay/ before laterals, Muzel Bryant is like OVE speakers, but also like speakers of many mainland varieties of Southern English as well, including some AAVE rural Southern varieties. Although the incidence of glide weakening is relatively low for Muzel Bryant vis-a-vis current-day AAVE, it is not out of line with the historical development of this phonetic change. Feagin (1994) and Thomas and Bailey (1994) have suggested that glide weakening in Southern speech is apparently a relatively recent phenomenon and that older Southern speakers often do not indicate glide weakening--at least not to the extent indicated by the current generation of speakers. Furthermore, the seven African-American speakers from Eastern North Carolina included in the *Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States* (Kretzschmar, et al. 1994), all born between 1840 and 1870, show a predominance of the diphthongized version of /ay/.³ Thus, Muzel Bryant simply seems to be retaining an older version of AAVE phonology that was brought to the island with her grandparents with regard to /ay/.

These quantitatively analyzed variables are not the only indications of a basilectal AAVE phonology for Muzel Bryant. She exhibits fairly extensive syllable reduction, so that polysyllabic items may be reduced (e.g. *ostering* --> *ost'ing*, *waterfront* --> *wa'front*, *community* --> *commu'ny*), and in special phonetic circumstances, bisyllabic words are reduced to monosyllabic ones. For example, weak consonant onsets in (C)VVC sequences with unstressed final syllables may be reduced in a specialized version of apocope (e.g. *other* --> *o'*; *mother* --> *mo'*). The cumulative effect of these syllable-reduction processes results in a fairly extensive basilectal version of AAVE phonology.

In determining where the components that constitute Muzel Bryant's language locate themselves in relation to traditional AAVE and OVE patterning, the overview of phonology indicates a dramatic alignment with traditional AAVE phonology. OVE phonology has had virtually no effect on Muzel Bryant's dialect - at least with respect to the features considered here.

3.2 Morphosyntactic Diversity

In this section, we report on several morphosyntactic variables in the speech of Muzel Bryant: copula deletion, subject-verb concord, past tense *be* regularization, and plural deletion. These are diagnostic in terms of situating her speech with respect to AAVE and

OVE. They are also of interest in terms of how they compare with the phonological features we have just considered, which show a strong alignment with an older, basilectal version of AAVE phonology.

³ Thanks to Erik Thomas for compiling the summary LAMSAS data on the African-American informants from Eastern North Carolina referred to here.

One diagnostic variable that differentiates AAVE and OVE is copula/auxiliary deletion (Labov 1969; Wolfram 1974a). Although this feature is typically considered a phonological variable, we include it in our morphosyntactic overview since there is evidence that it is not as phonologically sensitive as the classic phonologically-derived cases of copula absence discussed in analyses such as Labov (1969) and Wolfram (1974a). The figures for Muzel Bryant's copula/auxiliary absence are only broken down according to *is* and *are*, and by preceding Pronoun and NP, since we do not have enough examples for more detailed analysis of the following phrases which have been shown to be significant constraints on copula absence (Labov 1969; Wolfram 1974a; Baugh 1983; Rickford, et al 1991).

	Pro			NP		
	<i>IS</i>	<i>ARE</i>		<i>IS</i>	<i>ARE</i>	
Del./Tot.	3/11	4/7		4/4	1/3	
% Del.	27	57		100	33	
Totals	Pro	7/18	=	39%		
	NP	5/7	=	71%		
	<i>IS</i>	7/15	=	47%		
	<i>ARE</i>	5/10	=	50%		

Table 5: The incidence of copula/aux deletion in Muzel Bryant's speech

Although the numbers of tokens are small in our sample, the alignment of Muzel Bryant's speech is still very revealing. Copula absence is certainly a trait of her speech, again aligning it with AAVE as opposed to OVE. OVE is not a copula deletion dialect, whereas AAVE is well known for this process. Overall, Muzel Bryant's speech aligns with AAVE rather than OVE, but the variable patterning of copula absence seems to be somewhat skewed. Previous investigations of copula absence (Labov 1969; Wolfram 1974a) have indicated that the two major constraint effects considered here--the preference of *are* deletion over *is* deletion and a preceding *Pro* favoring deletion over an *NP* are revealed even with quite small numbers of tokens. But in this case, the constraint patterning does not stand out. In fact, no preference for *are* deletion over *is* deletion or *Pro* over *NP* subject is indicated. Also, the figures for copula absence, particularly for *are*, are not nearly as high as those reported for AAVE in the classic studies of copula deletion (e.g. Labov 1969; Wolfram 1974a; Baugh 1983; Rickford, et al. 1991, Rickford 1995). For example, as summarized in Rickford (1995), the deletion of *are* tends to be over 50 percent, particularly following a pronoun. At this point, we are not sure why the figures for copula absence are somewhat out of line with the typical patterns for AAVE, although her morphosyntactic features seem to be somewhat eroded by comparison with typical AAVE patterns. The process of erosion this feature has undergone may be responsible for the altered variable state of this feature.

Subject-verb concord has been shown to be a diagnostic variable in many American English varieties, including AAVE and OVE, but the nonstandard concord pattern varies in quite different directions for these varieties. The status and function of

verbal *-s* in AAVE has been a much debated topic, with a number of variationists (Wolfram 1969; Labov 1972; Fasold 1972a) concluding that AAVE has no verbal concord in the present tense. Most often, the verbal *-s* for verbs inflected as third person singular are absent (e.g. *It go* for *It goes*), while verbal *-s* may show up for other persons and numbers (e.g. *I goes* for *I go*). In OVE, a different pattern is indicated. Inflectional *-s* shows a distributional pattern similar to that found in the Appalachian and Ozark regions, as indicated in Hazen (1994), Christian, Wolfram, and Dube (1988). In OVE, third person singular forms have an *-s*. In addition, third person plural NPs (non-proforms) may receive a verbal *-s*, particularly when the NP is a collective NP (e.g. *People likes fishing*) or coordinate NP (e.g. *Me and my brother likes fishing*). The pronoun *they* in OVE greatly disfavors the presence of verbal *-s* as it had done in Scots English centuries before (Hazen 1994, Montgomery 1989). Important for our study is the fact that OVE does not indicate any absence of *-s* on third person singular forms, thus contrasting with the classic AAVE pattern. Muzel Bryant's pattern of subject-verb concord is given in Table 6.

		3rd sg.	3rd pl.	Non-3rd
Pro	-s	5	1	0
	Æ	8	11	100
NP	-s	2	2	NA
	Æ	0	5	NA
Totals:				
3rd sgl. <i>-s</i> absence		53% (8/15)		
3rd pl. <i>-s</i> attachment		16% (3/19)		
1st, 2nd person <i>-s</i> attachment		0% (0/100)		

Table 6: Subject-Verb concord of non-*be* verbs in Muzel Bryant's speech

Muzel Bryant's pattern of subject-verb concord shows a much greater affinity to AAVE than to OVE. Approximately half of her third-person singular *-s* forms are absent, aligning her with AAVE vis-a-vis OVE. This pattern matches no other Ocracokers that we have investigated (Hazen 1994). She obviously has an affinity with the AAVE subject-verb concord pattern, but it is not nearly as extreme as some basilectal versions of AAVE concord found in the literature (Wolfram 1969; Labov 1972, Fasold 1972a), where *-s* absence rates may be near-categorical.

Present tense *be* forms, another critical dialect concord diagnostic, shows a slightly different pattern of alignment for Muzel Bryant. She shows little nonstandard regularization of *is* for *are* (e.g. *They is here* for *They are here*); only one out of 12 cases of non-3rd singular *be* is regularized to *is*. She also has no instances of *are* for *is* (e.g. *She are here* for *She is here*); no instances of *are* were observed in the 28 instances of 1st singular and 3rd singular.

Past tense *be* indicates a different pattern of regularization. Muzel Bryant shows both *were* regularization (e.g. *I weren't there*) and *was* regularization (*We was there*). In Table 7, we summarize her regularization patterns for *was* and *were*, broken down in terms of positive and negative forms of past tense *be*, since this distinction has been shown to be significant for OVE (Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1994). We compare

Muzel Bryant's figures with the percentages for the OVE community, as given in Schilling-Estes and Wolfram (1994), and the figures for AAVE, adapted from Labov et al. (1968:247). Figures for leveling in positive and negative forms are not differentiated for AAVE since Labov, et al. conclude that "our present information shows that this verb behaves the same way in the positive and negative." (1968:249).

TYPE OF LEVELING	No./Tot M.B.	% M.B.	% OVE	% AAVE
Leveled <i>was</i> e.g. <i>You was here</i> <i>They was here</i>	4/8	50.0	21.6	86.1
Leveled <i>were</i> e.g. <i>I were here</i> <i>She were here</i>	10/55	18.2	1.1	8.3
Leveled <i>wasn't</i> e.g. <i>You wasn't here</i> <i>They wasn't here</i>	0/1	0.0	20.5	(86.1)
Leveled <i>weren't</i> e.g. <i>I weren't here</i> <i>She weren't here</i>	5/6	83.3	48.4	(8.3)

Table 7: The incidence of *was/were* leveling for Muzel Bryant

Although the tokens are limited, Muzel Bryant's figures seem to be much more in line with the OVE pattern than the typical pattern set forth for AAVE, where the overwhelming pattern predominantly favors *was* regularization. In fact, for some AAVE speakers, *was* regularization is categorical. Muzel Bryant's speech does not match this pattern. She is similar to a few of the older OVE speakers in that she regularizes to *were* with positive as well negative sentences, but she is like all OVE speakers in showing a clear-cut preference for *were* regularization with the negative form *weren't*.⁴ In AAVE, the predominant pattern in negatives is *wasn't* regularization. In fact, Weldon (1994:361) notes further that for AAVE "*wasn't* is the near-categorical negative auxiliary in past tense copular constructions." Muzel Bryant has not followed traditional AAVE patterning for the negative past copula.

Before concluding that Muzel Bryant has simply adopted the OVE pattern in this respect, it should be noted that some *were* regularization has been attested in AAVE (see Labov, et al 1968:249), although it has not been discussed much. Our incipient field interviews in some rural AAVE communities in North Carolina suggests that *were/n't* regularization may turn out to be a fairly productive AAVE pattern. Most of the studies indicating predominant patterns of *was/n't* regularization have been based on Northern, urban AAVE populations (Labov 1972; Weldon 1994). The apparent

⁴ It should be noted that most of her cases of positive *were* regularization were in the quasi-formulaic agreement phrase (e.g. *Yes, sir, yes it were*), so that her overall tendency toward positive *were* may not be as extensive as indicated in the figures given here.

alignment with the OVE grammatical pattern in this instance thus may not necessarily be a case of switched alignment, but a retention of an older, rural Southern AAVE variety which has been modified to some extent in the direction of the OVE pattern.

Finally, we have tabulated the incidence of plural absence on NPs. In AAVE the plural marker is absent at relatively low levels (Wolfram and Fasold 1974; Poplack and Tagliamonte 1994), typically less than 15 per cent out of all potential cases. In OVE, on the other hand, the plural marker is only regularly absent with nouns indicating weights or measures which co-occur with a quantifier (e.g. *She swim two mile everyday; We caught 30 pound of flounder*). Table 8 summarizes the incidence of plural absence for Muzel Bryant.

Following Environment	Preceding Environment		
	C__	V__	Total
__C Del./T.	2/18	0/10	2/28
% Del.	11.1	0.0	7.1
__V Del./T.	4/28	1/26	5/54
% Del.	14.3	3.9	9.3
__# Del./T.	5/25	1/11	6/36
% Del.	20.0	9.1	16.7
Total	11/71	2/47	
	15.5	4.3	

Table 8: Plural deletion in Muzel Bryant's speech

Muzel Bryant's overall rate of plural deletion, slightly over 10 percent, aligns her neatly with the level of plural absence typically found for AAVE speakers (e.g. Wolfram 1969; Tagliamonte and Poplack 1991). This overall level of plural absence is higher than OVE. More importantly, Muzel Bryant's plural absence is not structurally restricted to weight or measure nouns, as it is in OVE.

The phonological environment of the plural--whether [s], [Iz], or [z]--appears to play a role in determining the occurrence of the plural morpheme. The most favorable preceding environment for plural deletion is a consonant, which makes phonetic sense since [s] and [z] would create a more marked consonant cluster. Plural absence appears to show some sensitivity to phonetic composition, following the pattern found for AAVE in Tagliamonte and Poplack's study.

Clearly, Muzel Bryant shows an alignment with AAVE in some highly diagnostic morphosyntactic structures. However, it is also noteworthy to mention a couple of typical AAVE features we have not found in her speech, namely, habitual *be* V *-ing* and remote time, stressed *béen*. These are two prominent structures characterizing current versions of AAVE. The absence of habitual *be* is significant, but we cannot be certain of the reason for its absence. It may be that she simply has retained an older, rural version of AAVE which has not been subjected to the more recent grammaticalization of *be* V *-ing* described by Bailey and Maynor (1987). This conclusion would support mounting evidence that *be* V *-ing* is a more recent, primarily urban innovation within AAVE, as Bailey and Maynor conclude. It is also possible that

some of the AAVE structures in the Bryants' speech have eroded over a century and a half of isolation on the island from a larger AAVE speech community.

At this point, we are not sure how to account for Muzel Bryant's absence of remote time *béen*, which has been attested as an older AAVE form. Although Muzel Bryant does not use *béen* in our interview, she does use completive *done* and *a*-prefixing, structures common in OVE. Both of these structures are also found in older, rural versions of AAVE. It is possible that more data might reveal the use of remote time *béen* since it is a relatively infrequent structure and might simply not have arisen in our interview. However, she certainly had many occasions to recall remote past events in the course of our 90-minute interview, so it may not simply be an accidental gap.

We may make one final observation of her syntax. Muzel Bryant rarely uses post-verbal, indefinite negative concord (e.g. *I don't do nothing*), even though there are a number of occasions where she might have used it. Out of 28 potential cases of a negatized auxiliary with a post-verbal indefinite, only 4 are realized as multiple negatives. Thus, the incidence of multiple negation (14.3 per cent) is well below the rates reported for AAVE. In fact, these rates are well below the rates found in most vernacular varieties of English, regardless of ethnicity. This case cautions us that we cannot simply assume categorical nonstandardness for Muzel Bryant's speech. The empirical evidence indicates some selectivity with respect to adoption of nonstandard structures in general, as well as selectivity with respect to the adoption of OVE and AAVE features.

4 The Sociolinguistic Significance of Muzel Bryant's Dialect Alliance

Our profile indicates that Muzel Bryant has maintained a strong overall alliance to AAVE, despite the fact that her family has been the only African-American family on Ocracoke for over a century. Interestingly, her AAVE phonology seems to be more basilectal than her morphology and syntax, which suggests some dialect erosion of AAVE morphosyntactic structures. In her phonology, the level of consonant cluster reduction, *r*-lessness, and other syllable structure processes appear to be quite extensive when compared with the classic descriptions of AAVE phonology. At the same time, she has not adopted the most significant icon of Ocracoke speech, the [ɹ] vowel.

Muzel Bryant's morphosyntactic alignment show an obvious connection to AAVE rather than OVE, but it is a less basilectal affinity. Thus, her levels of inflectional *-s* absence and subject-verb concord are not nearly as extensive as that found in the classic AAVE studies. Furthermore, she also shows an affinity with the typical OVE *were/n't* generalization pattern rather than the typical pattern of *was* regularization described for AAVE. And she indicates a somewhat erratic pattern of affinity with AAVE for copula absence, supporting the observation that dialect erosion does not always follow the normal progression of systematic variability expected in language change (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1995). Finally, Muzel Bryant's negative concord seems out of line with the typical AAVE variety, or any typical vernacular variety of English for that matter. To be perfectly honest, this is not what we expected. We anticipated more erosion of her AAVE phonology and the adoption of OVE phonology in its place, rather than the converse. Other studies of linguistic assimilation across ethnic boundaries (Wolfram 1974b; Rickford 1985; Ash and Myhill 1986) indicate that lexical items and phonology

are much more apt to be assimilated from neighboring ethnic groups than morphosyntactic ones. For example, in comparing an older Anglo-American speaker who lived the majority of his life in a Gullah-speaking environment, Rickford (1985:105) concludes that the speaker was "similar with respect to phonological features, but different with respect to morphosyntactic ones."

Although we cannot be certain about the reasons for the alignment patterns that have surfaced in Muzel Bryant's speech, a couple of possible explanations come to mind. One explanation is historical. It may simply be the case that AAVE a century ago was not as basilectal in its grammar as it was made out to be by hardcore creolists (Dillard 1972). Or, the variety of AAVE that was present in the mainland areas of Eastern North Carolina where the Bryants came from in the 1800s was not as basilectal as we might assume. Recent evidence (Schneider 1989; Bailey, Maynor, and Cukor-Avila 1991; Montgomery 1994) certainly points to an AAVE grammar a century ago that may not have been as extremely different from European-American Vernacular English as it was originally assumed to be (Stewart 1968; Dillard 1972; Fasold 1972b).

Another possible explanation has to do with the Bryants' social position in Ocracoke. In our sociohistorical profile, we painted a picture of the Bryant family as invariably distinct, regardless of how much their presence was accepted as part of "the island family." Our analysis has shown that part of this distinctness was obviously manifested in their speech. The distinctiveness of the Bryants' speech is recognized by most islanders who have interacted with them.⁵ Muzel Bryant also recognizes this difference, as indicated in the following comments from our interview with her. In the transcript, KH is Kirk Hazen, WW is Walt Wolfram, and MB is Muzel Bryant.

- KH: Did your daddy sound like the other islanders? Or did he sound different?
 MB: He sounded a little bit different than what the islanders.
 WW: Do you think your family talked a little different from the other islanders?
 MB: Yes, I do, yes sir, uh huh.
 WW: What was it about it that was different?
 MB: I don't know, they just speak a little bit different than us in a way I guess.
 KH: And your mom spoke a little bit different also?
 MB: Yes, she did.
 WW: Sometimes people say that islanders speak a brogue. Have you ever heard that?
 MB: Have what kinda--a different brogue? Yes I have heard 'em say, I don't know why. I guess it's what short i or why?
 KH: Do you think you have a brogue?
 MB: Me? I don't know, I may have.

While we may not be certain how to interpret some of Muzel Bryant's remarks given the conventions of social politeness and deference that characterized her interview with us, it is clear that she recognizes the distinctiveness of her family's speech in Ocracoke, just as her inalienable difference from other islanders is recognized in other social areas. Her speech is an obvious token of this difference, indicative of a role and status in Ocracoke apart from other residents. In some respects, phonology is the most

⁵ When we asked a few of the Ocracoke men if Julius talked like other Ocracokers, they emphatically said "no", offering examples of how he pronounced certain words "funny." However, one of the Ocracoke men observed that Julius Bryant had "little more of the brogue" than his sisters. Unfortunately, no recordings of his speech were made.

convenient and obvious level for indicating such an emblematic dialect difference. Certainly, it is the phonology of Ocracoke that is always highlighted as unique. The so-called "brogue" is known by its phonology, not by its syntax or morphology. If a person must be marked as different from other Ocracokers, then it would certainly be most appropriate for them to be revealed through phonology. Over a century, some erosion from daily interaction with Ocracokers may affect less symbolic aspects of speech, such as the morphology and syntax. Thus, the ultimate explanation may lie in the ethnic boundary that has marked the Bryants as different from other Ocracokers and the recognized linguistic level for marking authentic Ocracokers--the distinctive phonology.

It must also be noted that dialect phonology is established relatively early in language acquisition and, once established, is typically set for life (Payne 1980). It would be interesting in this regard to see what a great-grandchild of Muzel Bryant today might speak like. Of course, we will never know, given the sociohistorical context of the Bryant's existence in Ocracoke and the social restrictions under which they lived. In this case, we can only learn important lessons from the past. Certainly, Muzel Bryant's experience has taught us, somewhat tragically, that social isolation is not a function of community size or organizational complexity. We thus conclude that there is no reason why small communities cannot participate and maintain quite robust diversity over long periods of time--especially if ethnic boundaries are distinctive and persistent.

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