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1 Introduction

Non-standard features of English are often seen as recent innovations, generated by rural, uneducated, minority, and other marginal speakers. A prime example is the distinctive morphosyntax of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), which has spurred a long-term research effort to locate its origins outside the history of English, in second language acquisition or creolization processes. Recently, we have argued that comparison with the prescribed standard, rather than with spoken English vernaculars, obscures the fact that many salient AAVE features were retained from earlier English forms (Poplack 2000, Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001). In this paper, we describe a novel use of existing materials that supports this conclusion.

Although English has never had an official regulatory body, despite such modest proposals as (1), a *de facto* "Academy"—comprising the authors of grammar books, usage manuals, and style guides—has spent centuries attempting to standardize the language.

- (1) Persons, as are generally allowed to be best qualified for such a Work... should assemble at some appointed Time and Place, and... some Method should be thought on for *ascertaining* and *fixing* our Language forever, after such Alterations are made in it as shall be thought requisite. (Swift 1712:n.p.)

Earlier grammarians were eager to describe the "linguistic chaos" around them, if only to vilify it. This is the point of departure for our analyses: forms salient enough to have incited such disapproval were not only attested, but likely widespread, in the spoken usage of the time. Grammarians' injunctions, if systematically extracted and analyzed, let us date, and to some extent quantify, the use of non-standard features.

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2 The OGREVE

The *Ottawa Grammar Resource on Early Variability in English* (OGREVE) is a 700-page compilation of mentions of morphosyntactic variability from 98 reference grammars of English published since 1577. Below, we describe how we built the OGREVE, and how we use it to extract clues to variability from even the most resolute advocates of the standard. We illustrate its utility by comparing the behavior of some key variables in Early African American English (AAE) with their treatment in the OGREVE. We show that *ain't* use and variable marking of present and past-tense verbs, and even more important, their variable conditioning, are the legacy of centuries of variability in English. We also demonstrate how radically different data sets—old grammars and contemporary vernaculars—can cross-validate each other as reliable sources of information on language variation and change:

2.1 Assembling the OGREVE

To develop the OGREVE, we first assembled and annotated a bibliography of 641 works on English written prior to 1900, including traditional prescriptive and descriptive grammars, as well as dialect grammars and usage manuals. Of these, 249 satisfied one or more of four initial criteria of accessibility, publication date, prestige, and, most importantly, the likelihood that morphosyntactic variability would be mentioned. We inferred this from descriptions in reference works, or titles like *Common Blunders Made in Speaking and Writing* (Smith 1855).

Of 249, 98 grammars were retained. Figure 1 shows the distribution of these works across time periods, with the growth of grammatical activity in the latter half of the 18th century paving the way for the later increase in dialect grammars and usage manuals. These OGREVE grammars tend to fall into one of three categories. Highly *prescriptive* works mention variation in order to castigate it. Jackson (1830: passim), for example, categorizes a variety of non-standard features as “low”, “very low”, “exceedingly low”, “vilely low”, “low cockney”, “ungentlemanly”, “filthy”, “ridiculous”, “disrespectful”, “blackguard-like”, “very flippant”, or “abominable”. *Descriptive* works report the existence of forms, with no value judgement, as with the list of recommended contractions in Miege (1688:110-1), which includes *ain't*. Other works are goldmines of *social or regional* non-standard forms, such as Pegge (1803/1814), which champions such “cockney” forms as *have took*, *com'd* [*<came*], *ghostes*, *hisp*, *mought*, *aks* [*<ask*], and *for to*.²

² These features survive in many contemporary varieties, Black and White.

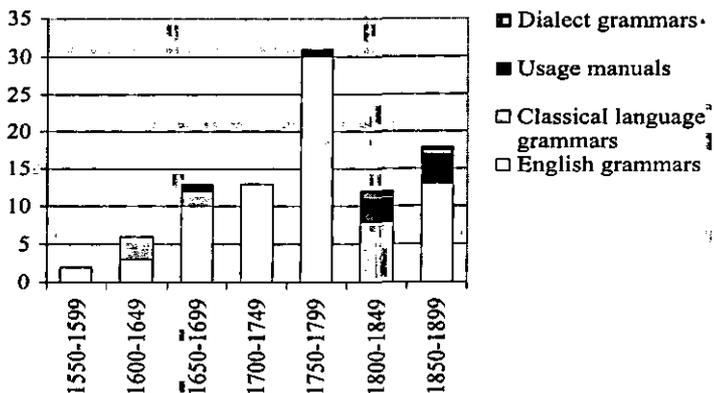


Figure 1. Distribution of the OGREVE across time periods

Naturally, the OGREVE does not purport to be a representative sample of all grammars ever written. Rather, it is a distillation of the works that we have found most relevant for the diachronic study of non-standard variation. Although each type provides a radically different view of linguistic variability, all provide complementary ways of attesting to its existence.

2.2 Mining the OGREVE for Variation

Mining the OGREVE for mentions of variability first required learning the language of early grammatical classification. For example, an 18th-century author might mention non-standard past forms under *vowel substitution*; negation might be considered under *contraction*, historical present under *enallage*, and *ain't* under *blunders*. We also developed techniques to interpret signs of variability, trace evidence of its conditioning and account for its unequal treatment in the grammars.

Simple frequency of mention, for example, does not indicate how widespread a particular form may have been. Recent forms of the time attracted a lot of attention, usually negative, as they do to-day. In contrast, forms with analogues in classical languages, such as the English periphrastic futures *going to* and *about to*, rarely incurred much controversy (Priestley 1761/1969). The variability most appealing to early grammarians involved constructions where one variant could be argued to be more "logical" than another, as in (2), regardless of the frequency of such forms in discourse.

(2) *Grammatical exercises in logic:*

- a. Distinguish irregular preterites and participles (e.g., *sank* vs. *sunk*), to ensure clarity;
- b. Distinguish *shall* and *will* (*Will I?* is illogical, as *will* indicates volition, which a speaker need not question of himself);
- c. Avoid negative concord, as "two negatives make a positive";
- d. Avoid split infinitives, impossible in Latin and therefore unsavoury in English;
- e. Ascertain the "true" number of conjoined, collective and existential subjects, to ensure correct subject-verb agreement.

This discrepancy in treatment led us to look beyond frequency of mention for evidence of the forms of interest to us. The way a grammar described a form, and the context in which it was mentioned, helped us infer how widespread it was at the time.

Uncritical mentions are especially valuable, as they suggest a form was sufficiently widespread and established to escape censure. These include levelling of preterite and participle paradigms before the 1800s and bare preterites (e.g., *come*, *run*) in the 1600s. A mix of critical and uncritical mentions also implies widespread use, with stigma perhaps more recent, as with the early treatment of *ain't*. Similarly, defence of a form (e.g., *you was*) through appeals to popular usage is evidence that the form was both widespread and salient, but not sufficiently established to ward off censure. Associating a form with a marginal social group or region suggests it was widespread within that group and salient enough to draw attention outside it (e.g., variable *s*-marking). Without supporting context, lone mentions mean little; the strongest evidence for the early existence of a non-standard form is multiple attestations.

Even more useful than attestations of a form are references to the conditioning of its variable occurrence. Early grammars were most likely to attribute variability to such extralinguistic factors as region, as in (3).

- (3) a. "I am after writing" is "a Hibernian phrase". (Fogg 1796:130)
- b. "A *West Country*-man here in *England*, and a *North Country*-man, can scarce understand one another; at least, there is as evident a Difference, as between the *Greek* dialects." (*Bellum Grammaticale* 1712:11, emphasis in original)

When such forms were further equated with the working classes, lack of education or "vulgar" usage, as in (4), we can infer that they had spread into other vernaculars.

- (4) a. "But though illiterate people may say *which* instead of *who* and *whom*, with impunity, there is something too repugnant to good taste, too derogatory to understanding, in the use of a superfluous 'which'..." (Gwynne 1855:20-21)
- b. "The better class of those who say *ain't* or *he don't* have no patience with those who say *hadn't ought*; but even this vulgarism is not confined to the illiterate." (Hill 1893:82)
- c. "'Mr. Bowery and another *gent* were with me.' We must class this detestable contraction with the vulgarisms, though it is often met with in good company." (Duncan c.1870:77)

Given the demographics of British society and emigration after 1600, these are the non-standard forms that were likely to have figured in the varieties transported to the New World.

The possibility of tracing the linguistic conditioning of contemporary variability is probably the most valuable aspect of the OGREVE. Parallel conditioning over time is the strongest possible evidence that a current form is the legacy of an earlier stage of the language.

3 Links to Spoken Varieties

To illustrate, we situate three core grammatical features of Early AAE with respect to the English grammatical tradition, as instantiated in the OGREVE. The spoken data were provided by 101 descendants of African Americans who dispersed to Canada and the Caribbean during the time of slavery (for sociohistoric and linguistic details, see Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001).

3.1 *Ain't*

Consider first the ultimate stereotype of non-standard speech: *ain't*. As table 1 illustrates, *ain't* is virtually restricted to negating present tense *be* and *have* contexts in Early AAE.

The OGREVE reveals that the identical conditioning was already in place over 300 years ago: *ent* and *hant* are permitted, but only as contractions of *is not* and *has not* (Table 2), the same contexts which favor *ain't* in Early AAE.

	Samaná English	African Nova Scotian English	Ex-Slave Re- cordings
<i>Have</i> + not	80	100	90
<i>Is/are</i> + not	71.7	91.7	84.6
<i>Was/were</i> + not	1.8	5.9	1.8
<i>Did</i> + not	6	2	3
<i>Do</i> + not	"occasional"	0	"occasional"

Table 1. Percentage rates of *ain't* use in different verbal contexts in three varieties of Early African American English (adapted from Howe and Walker 2000:114-120)

don't	for	do not
han't		have not
shan't		shall not
can't		cannot
ben't		be not
'ent		is not

Table 2. Permissible negative contractions, according to Mjiegé (1688)

3.2 Variable Past Marking

Another hallmark of non-standard dialects involves variability between marked and bare past-tense verbs (5). Attempts to divine the origin of this variability in AAVE context have imbued bare forms with functions alien to English, particularly when strong verbs, such as *come* in (5b), are involved.

- (5) a. Bunch of us *walked* up the stairs and *sat* down and Caroline *looked* up. (NPR/039/735)³
 - b. As they *return*, the doctor *went*. And when the doctor *went*, she *come* and she *work*, she *work*, she *work*. (SE/002/1176)
- (6) General (verb-class) rules for past-tense formation "are so numerous and intricate, that they rather perplex the judgement than assist the memory of the learner." (Fenning 1771/1967: 65)
- (7) "In this conjugation also belong almost all the common verbs of the second conjugation (not because of any peculiarity in our language, but be-

³ Codes in parentheses identify: (1) the corpus: Samaná English (SE), Ex-Slave Recordings (ESR), North Preston (NPR), Guysborough Enclave (GYE); (2) the speaker; and (3) the location of the utterance on recording, transcript, or data file. Examples are reproduced verbatim from speakers' utterances.

cause *common usage attempts anything*)." (Gill 1619/1972: 121, emphasis added)

English grammarians have long invoked the membership of strong verbs in different verb classes, although the nature and even existence of such verb classes has been debated since at least the seventeenth century. Some grammarians, such as Fenning (1771/1967), simply resorted to long tables of verb conjugations (6). Even those who championed verb classes had to admit variability, as Gill (1619/1972:121) notes about one of his verb classes (7).

ÖGREVE data are particularly relevant to the origins of this variability. We first note that the "enallage," or alternation, of preterit with present (usually zero) morphology has been attested since at least 1577 (8). Mentions of this variability persist for centuries (9).

- (8) "Enallage of tyme, when we put one time for another, thus. Terence. *I come* to the maydens, *I aske*, who she is, they say, the sister of Chrisis, for, *I came* to the maydens, *I asked* who she was..." (Peacham 1577: n.p.)
- (9) a. "The Present Tense in particular is sometimes used for the Preter Imperfect. As, having met with him, he *brings* him to his House, and *gives* him very good Intertainment. There we say *brings* for *brought*, and *gives* for *gave*." (Miège 1688: 70)
- b. "'Then *comes* Alexander with all his forces' for 'Then *came* Alexander'" (Lowe 1723-1738/1971: 7)
- c. "*sware*, for *swore*; *speak*, for *spoke*" (Fisher 1750/1968: 125)
- d. "In historical narration, [the present] is used with great effect for the Past tense;..." (Bullions 1869: 39)

Table 3 graphically illustrates grammarians' treatment of a number of notoriously variable and invariant preterit verbs since the 16th century. We note first that non-critical attestations (each represented by an o) of both bare and non-standard marked variants of preterit *eat*, *run* and *come* cluster in the earliest period. Over time, acceptance of variation decreases. As the standard becomes firmly entrenched after 1800, there is an increase in the number of critical mentions of bare preterits (each represented by an X). They are stigmatized as vulgar, provincial, or dialectal, and eventually are excluded from the standard. These are, of course, the very variants now often analysed as incursions, rather than retentions. They are also the verbs most responsible for the high rates of bare preterits in Early AAE strong verbs (Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001).

Other verbs, like *go*, *have*, and *be*, are so frequently inflected that they are often excluded from contemporary quantitative analyses (e.g., Blake 1997, Patrick 1999, Poplack² and Tagliamonte 2001, Rickford 1986, Tagliamonte and Poplack 1993, Winford 1992). Note that *no* bare forms of these verbs were attested in the OGREVE either, as in the shaded portion of Table 3. Such patterning suggests that Early AAE inflectional preferences are lexical residue of earlier English tendencies. This bolsters the conclusion (Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001) that variable inflection of past-tense strong verbs in Early AAE is simply a legacy of English.

3.3 Variable Verbal -s Marking

A final illustration is drawn from the variable inflection of present tense *-s*, regardless of person and number of the subject, as in (10). Researchers have long been at odds over how best to account for non-concord *-s* forms. Some have identified them with the durative or habitual markers of English-based creoles, but variable concord across the present-tense paradigm is also well-attested from the earliest English grammars, as in (11). By 1788, the grammarian Beattie was even able to assign—accurately, as it turns out—geographical and social conditioning to non-concord *s*-marking (12). Note that although Beattie links the form to the north, he also describes its use among the “common people” of the rest of England. A century later, dialect grammars had succeeded in identifying the linguistic conditioning of this variability (13).

- (10) I quarrel because they *tell* the old people *likes* to quarrel (SE/003/177)
- (11) “The second person is of him that is spoaken to; as, *thou wrytes*. The third person is of him that is spoaken of; as, *Peter wrytes*. (Hume 1617: 27) [...] *I wryte, thou wrytes, he wrytes* (30) [...] *I have bene, thou hes bene, he hes bene*” (32).
- (12) “[I]n old [i.e., Early Modern] English, a verb singular sometimes follows a plural nominative; as in the following couplet from Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*, She lifts the *coffer-lids* that *close* his eyes, Where lo, *two lamps* burnt out in darkness *lies*. The same idiom prevails in the Scotch acts of parliament, in the vernacular writings of Scotch men prior to the last century, and in the *vulgar dialect of North Britain to this day: and, even in England, the common people frequently speak in this manner*, without being misunderstood.” (Beattie 1788/1968: 192-3, emphasis added).
- (13) a. “When the subject is a noun, adjective, interrogative or relative pronoun, or when the verb and subject are separated by a clause, the

verb takes the termination *-s* in all persons." (Murray 1873:211)

- b. "... the 3rd pl. pres., where, with a pl. subst., it is the rule to say *is*. Thus a farmer would say 'horses *is* dearer this spring an (than) beace (cattle) *is*'; but with the pronoun always - 'they *er*'." (Peacock 1863:11)

This distribution, which has come to be known (after Ihalainen 1994: 221, Klemola 1996: 49, 179-80) as the Northern Subject Rule, can be operationalized as a factor group. The variable rule analyses summarized in Table 4 test its contribution to the probability that Early AAE present tense verbs will be marked with *-s* in third person plural contexts.

Note the propensity in most varieties for *-s* to appear on verbs whose subjects are non-adjacent (14) and to be avoided when the subject is an adjacent personal pronoun. Such non-trivial parallels to the Northern Subject Rule described in the OGREVE confirm that this Early AAE effect is a legacy of English as well.

	SE	ESR	GYE	NPR
Corrected mean:	.260	.064	.068	.114
Total N:	699	72	244	173
Non-adjacent pro- noun or NP	.59	.70	.78	.41
Adjacent pronoun	.47	.39	.35	.56

Table 4. Four independent variable rule analyses of the operation of the Northern Subject Rule in 3RD PERSON PLURAL contexts in four varieties of Early AAE. Excerpted from Table 7.6 in Poplack and Tagliamonte (2001).

(14) They *püt* all kinds of stuff in that stuff now (NPR/032/3154)

4 Conclusion

The purpose of the OGREVE is to discern the existence and conditioning of prior variability from works whose professed aim was to eradicate it. Despite the apparent gulf between our research agenda, which focuses on linguistic variability, and the concerns of early grammarians, who promoted invariance, we have begun to exploit the unacknowledged dialogue between prescription and praxis.

Linguistically principled investigation of the OGREVE and systematic analysis of variability has enabled us to propose an alternative history for AAE. We traced Early AAE variable patterns, discovering, operationalizing, and empirically testing diachronic clues to their conditioning. This exercise

has revealed many detailed similarities between Early AAE and the English historical record, only a few of which have been presented here (cf. Poplack 2000). This leads us to suggest that many aspects of Early AAE described as innovation, incomplete acquisition or contact-induced change are in fact retentions of once-robust features since eradicated from the accepted standard.

The OGREVE is very much a work in progress. As our research program continues to develop, new sources will be added, new data will be extracted, and new studies will be informed by the insights gained from work to date. The development of such a resource requires a substantial commitment of time, energy, and intellectual curiosity. We have shown how analysis of the resulting materials, by revealing the variability inherent in earlier English, can enrich the study of any descendant language variety.

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