

# **SOME FICTIONAL USES OF BLACK ENGLISH VERNACULAR**

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The so-called black dialect made its first appearance in American fiction in the late eighteenth century and became a vogue in the nineteenth century. Black English seems to have survived as it is still used by vast numbers of Afro-Americans and appears in the speech of black characters in works by both white and black writers.

When linguists focused their attention on Black English Vernacular -- as Black English is now called -- they failed to reach an agreement as to its origins. Indeed, the dialectologists claim that black dialects are derived from English, and do not differ in any significant sense from the speech of whites.

*By and large the Southern Negro speaks the language of the white man of his locality or area and of his education .... As far as the speech of the uneducated Negroes is concerned, it differs little from that of the illiterate white; that is, it exhibits the same regional and local variations as that of the simple white folk(1).*

On the other hand, the creolists maintain that BEV is derived from a creole variety of English, and has undergone a process of decreolization.

*The non-standard speech of present-day American Negroes still seems to exhibit structural traces of a creole predecessor, and this is probably a reason why it is in some ways more deviant from standard English than is the non-standard speech of even the most uneducated American whites(2).*

Nevertheless, whatever their position, linguists seem to agree that BEV has some particular features which they have tried to investigate. In this paper, the

speech of black characters from the works of both black and white American writers(3) will be used to illustrate some of those features which linguists maintain are characteristic of BEV. The writers' renditions of BEV are based more on their exposure to black speech than on any intrinsic knowledge of linguistic studies.

Among the characteristic features of BEV, we can mention two groups: the phonological and the grammatical features. The first group involves the devoicing of word-final consonant clusters, the -r loss; the use of (f) and (d) instead of [ θ ] and [ ð ]; the heightening of vowels. The second group includes the -s deletion in the third-person singular, the plural, and the possessive cases; the absence of the copula; the use of multiple negation; the use of the prefix a- before participles.

Since this paper deals with fictional renditions of BEV, it should be noted at the outset that not all the above mentioned features appear in all the works selected for illustration.

## PHONOLOGICAL FEATURES

### 1. Devoicing of word-final consonant clusters

"One of the most complex variables appearing in black speech is the general tendency towards the simplification of consonant clusters at the ends of words."(4) The final consonant reduction affects clusters in which both members of the cluster belong to the same base. Most of these omissions are final (-t/ and -d/). These omissions do not affect meaning when they do not have any grammatical value as past tense markers.

e.g. I had a notion I could lan' mos' anywhers. (*HF* 52)

Jes thow hit at dat box again ... (*SF* 340)

Well, Marse Benjamin he a good massah jes' like Marse Alpheus. (*CNT* 137)

Well, I speck I got you dis time, Brer Rabbit. (*UR*)

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, there is a marked difference in the spelling -- and pronunciation -- of words in stressed and unstressed positions. In the stressed form the final consonant is present, but in the unstressed form it is absent. The most frequently used form in Jim's speech seems to be the unstressed

one -- doan', ain', couldn', didn', mine, wouldn'.

e.g. Don' hurt me -- don't. (HF 49)

I couldn' manage to k'leck dat money no way; en Balum he couldn't. (HF 54)

## 2 . -r loss

Walter Wolfram distinguishes different environments which affect the variability of -r loss:

- a. potential -r in a stressed syllable when preceded by a central vowel;
- b. potential -r in stressed syllable when preceded by non-central vowels;
- c. potential -r in unstressed syllables(5).

The novels offer the following instances of -r loss: mo', po', fo', do', sho, yo', yoself, foteen, hoss.

Peter Trudgill suggests that the absence of postvocalic /-r/ in BEV is a feature that can be traced back to British dialects whereas loss of /r/ after initial consonants may be peculiar to BEV(6).

## 3. [ θ ] and [ ð ]

The last phonological feature we will mention is the shift of / θ / to /f/ and /ð/ to /d/. Trudgill, among others, confirms that "many black speakers often do not have / θ /, as in thing, or /ð/ as in that. In initial position they may be merged with /t/ (rarely) and /d/ respectively, so that this is dis, for example .... In other positions, / θ / and /ð/ may be merged with /f/ and /v/ ..." (7).

Common instances of this phenomenon are: nuffn, sumfn, troof, mouf, bof, teef, de dem, dan, dey, dough, widout, bredden.

## GRAMMATICAL FEATURES

More central to BEV are the following grammatical features: absence of the -s morpheme (third-person singular, plural, and possessive); absence of the copula; use of multiple negation; a- prefixing.

### 1. -s deletion

Quite a few linguists(8) point out the low-frequency of plural and possessive -s suffixes in BEV. Just as variations in the presence or absence of the -s morpheme appear in linguists' studies, they also appear in novelists' black characters' speech.

e.g. Bound to git yo' money back a hund'd times, de preacher says! (HF 54)

It nearly kill me to think she might ... wind up in some white lady kitchen. (CP 17)

You'll know in the Lawd's own time. (SF 30)

You go on up dem backstairs like I tole you en git Benjy's clothes on him ... (SF 336)

I aint gwine git mixed up in white folks' business. (SF 357)

It has been suggested that the third-person -s morpheme is not carelessly dropped by BEV speakers; its absence is rather attributed to the fact that it is not an integral part of black speakers' grammatical system. Again, as in linguists' studies, variations appear in fictional renditions of this phenomenon.

e.g. He want to go out doors. (SF 3)

He don't know nobody's name. (SF 37; note also the double negation and the possessive -s morpheme).

Hit fills my ears, so turble wild hit comes / And keeps a-comin', and hit comes and comes. (BD 148)

He kind of young and he don't know. (CNT 137)

She laugh. It sound like something from a song. (CP 78)

Mama work so hard all week she just want to lie up in bed Sunday. And she like me ... to keep her compay. (GTM 131)

### 2. Copula deletion

This feature is probably the most noted one in BEV, although whether copula deletion is a grammatical or a phonological phenomenon cannot quite be determined. According to William Labov's study of BEV, there are various syntactic environments where the copula is deleted.

*The least deletion and contraction take place before a following noun-phrase; more occur before predicate adjectives and locatives; both rules apply with even greater frequency before a following verb with the progressive -ing and the highest frequency before the future form gon' or gonna(9).*

Put in the order of occurrence, Labov's rules can be illustrated thus:

#### Gon' / Gonna

Jason going to be rich man. He holding his money all the time. (SF 43)

Rev'un Shegog gwine preach today ... (SF 362)

You going crazy. That's where you going. (MW 66)

What we going to do? (GTM 140)

And what good being mad gon' do? (CP 85)

#### Pedicative-Adjective

You too big to sleep with folks. You a big boy. (SF 51)

You and Mr. Street just alike. (TB 33)

She not evil. (CP 85)

She so proud the Lord going to bring her low one day. (GTM 106)

#### Ving

You say it to him while he sleeping and I bet he hear you. (SF 37)

You fixin to ruin dat un. (SF 360)

You still promising the Lord you going to do better. (GTM 231)

#### Noun Phrase

You name Benjamin now. (SF 84)

The absence of the copula is also sometimes noted after the filler subjects 'there' and 'it':

e.g. There some snow now, but they going away. (*SF* 62)

Also to be noted in BEV is the frequency of the copula in non-third person forms(10).

e.g. One night I creeps to de do' pooty late. (*HF* 50)

I knows what you thinking. (*SF* 35)

I feels poor. (*CP* 15)

'Persian as I is,' Berenice would say. (*MW* 40)

Maybe I ain't, but I speck I is. (*UR*)

You needs whipping, that's what you needs. (*SF* 36)

I don't know ... what we is going to do. (*GTM* 142)

(de raf) done broke loose en gone! -- en here we is! (*HF* 75)

En I reck'n de wives quarrels considable. (*HF* 82)

Go now, afore they knows. (*BD* 54)

Is you right sho you never broke that window? (*SF* 344)

Is we gwine to church? (*SF* 356)

Summarizing his findings, Labov points out that the absence of the copula results from a deletion rule which operates on the output of contraction. "We find that the following general principle holds without exception: wherever SE (Standard English) can contract, BEV can delete is and are, and vice versa; wherever SE cannot contract, BEV cannot delete, and vice versa."(11)

### **3. Multiple Negation**

Another important grammatical feature of BEV that appears in both the linguists' studies and in the fiction considered in this paper is the extensive use of multiple negation. Walter Wolfram and Marcia Whiteman observe that "One of the characteristic ways in which all non-standard dialects are distinguished from Standard English is by the occurrence of negatives at more than one point in a sentence."(12) Fiction writers have rendered this phenomenon in such occurrences as the following:



But I didn't have no luck. (*HF* 51)

So dey didn't none uv us git no money. (*HF* 53)

[She] [d]on't know nothing but what you tell her. (*CP* 9)

That don't make no sense to me. (*MW* 46)

Fact is he don't want to be nowhere near her. (*TB* 33)

Can't do nothing with a nigger nohow. (*GTM* 56)

It caught me in the hip so bad I can't scarcely move. (*SF* 87)

#### 4. a- prefixing

The use of participles with a- prefixes is to be noted in only a few fictional instances. The prefix a- seems to occur only after a consonant.

e.g. I see a light a-comin' roun' de p' int bymeby. (*HF* 51)

The river wuz a-risin'. (*HF* 51)

Hit fills my ears ... / And keeps a-comin' ... (*BD* 148)

Don't you know, all this week He just burdened my soul, and kept me a-praying and a-weeping before Him. (*GTM* 223)

#### 5. Some Minor Features of BEV

a. Word respellings: acrost, afeard, skeered, bellering.

b. The generalized comparative and superlative morphemes: faithfuller, more pleasanter, onliest.

c. The generalized -s inflection: anywhers, innerds, upards, som'ers, whiles.

d. The inflectional /n/: his'n, your'n, deir'n.

e. Deletion of /m/ and doubling of /s/: devselves, hissself.

The purpose of this paper has been to present fictional renditions of some characteristic features of Black English Vernacular the studies of a number of linguists have focused on, and which seem to have survived from earlier varieties

of Black English. The following extracts from earlier times exhibit some of those features which both black and white writers have tried to recapture.

*But some ob dese days my time will come,  
I'll year dat bugle, I'll year da drum,  
I'll see dem armies, marchin' along,  
I'll lif' my head an' jine der song.(13)*

*God won't let Massa Linkum beat de South till he do right. Massa Linkum he great man, and I'se poor nigger; but dis nigger can tell Massa Linkum how to save de money and de young men. He do it by setting de niggers free. S'pose dar was awfu' big snake down dar, on de floor. He bite you. Folks all skeered, cause you die. You send for doctor to cut de bite; but snake he rolled up dar, and while doctor dwine it, he bite you agin. De doctor cut out dat bite; but while he dwine it, de snake he spring and bite you agin, and so he keep dwine, till you kill him. That's what Massa Linkum orta know.(14)*

The controversy over BEV being still on, one can only surmise that whether BEV is a survival of old English forms(15) or a survival of a dialect that "has served as an important element of black cultural unity,"(16) it can be neither dismissed as an inferior variety of Standard English, nor attributed to the fact that, as a slave rather ironically put it, "De black man is natchally lazy ... De reason he talk lak he does, is 'cause he don't want to go to de trouble to 'nounce his words lak dey ought to be."(17).

## NOTES

- (1) Hans Kurah, *A Word Geography of the Eastern United States* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1949), p. 6. See also Raven I. McDavid, Jr., "American Social Dialects." *College English*, 26 (1965), 254-260; George P. Krapp, "The English of the Negro," *American Mercury*, 11 (1924).
- (2) - William A. Stewart, "Continuity and Change in American Negro Dialects," *The Florida FL Reporter*, 5, ii (1967), 22, 24, 26; J.L. Dillard, "Negro Children's Dialect in the Inner City." *The Florida FL Reporter*, 5, i (1967), 3-10, Beryl Loftman Bailey, "Toward a New Perspective in Negro English Dialectology," *American Speech*, 40 (1965), 171-177.
- (3) - Illustrations of BEV features are drawn from the following: James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1954; London: Black Swan, 1984), referred to in the text as *GTM*; William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929; New York: Vintage Books, 1954), referred to as *SF*, Carson McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding* (1946; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), referred to as *MW*; Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1981), referred to as *TB*; William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (New York: The New American Library, 1966) referred to as *CNT*; Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884; New York: New American Library, 1959), referred to as *HF*, Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (London: The Women's Press, 1983), referred to as *CP*; Robert Penn Warren, *Brother to Dragons* New York: Random House, 1953), referred to as *BD*; Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings* (1880; New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1921), referred to as *UR*.
- (4) - William Labov, *Language in the Inner City. Studies in the Black English Vernacular* (1972; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), p. 15. See also Walter A. Wolfram, *Sociolinguistic Description of Detroit Negro Speech* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1969), p. 50: "The absence of the second member of a word-final consonant cluster has been cited ... as one of the most important variables in the sound patterns of Negro speakers.", John Baugh, *Black Street Speech: Its History, Structure, and Survival* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1983).
- (5) - Walter A. Wolfram, op. cit. p. 111.
- (6) - Peter Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 68. In *A History of the Old South* (New York, 1949), p. 6, Clement Eaton claims that elision of -r was a practice of old English speech during the period of emigration.
- (7) - Trudgill, op. cit. p. 68.
- (8) See Walter A. Wolfram, op. cit., p. 53; J.L. Dillard, "Non-Standard Negro Dialects -- Convergence or Divergence," (Jamaica, 1968), p. 2, paper given at the Conference on

Pidginization and Creolization of Languages, quoted in Wolfram, p. 11; W. Labov, "Some Sources of Reading Problems for Negro Speakers of Nonstandard English," in *New Directions in Elementary English* (1969; Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1975), p. 41.

- (9) - William Labov, "Contraction, Deletion, and Inherent Variability of the English Copuls," in *Language in the Inner City*, op. cit., p. 87.
- (10) - Ibid, pp. 70-71. Wolfram attributes this phenomenon to BEV speaker's "basic unfamiliarity with the SE rules governing -z occurrence," in *A Sociolinguistic Descriptions of Detroit Negro Speech*, op. cit., p. 46.
- (11) - Labov. op. cit., p. 73.
- (12) Walter A. Wolfram and Marcia Whiteman, "The Role of Dialect Interference in Composition," *The Florida FL Reporter*, 1971.
- (13) A Negro Spiritual (Mississippi), quoted in Vernon Lane Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill, H.C., 1947), p. 20.
- (14) Extract from a speech delivered by Harriet Tubman in 1861, quoted in James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War: How Negroes Felt and Acted During the War for the Union* (New York, 1965), p. 43.
- (15) - Cleanth Brooks, "The English of the South," in *A Various Language*, ed. J.V. Williamson and V.M. Burke (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 138.
- (16) Eugene G. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1972; Vintage Books, 1976), p. 440.
- (17) - George P. Rawick, *The American Slave. A Composite Autobiography*, vol. III, 3 [The South Carolina Narratives] (Westport, 1972), p. 50, quoted in E. Genovese, op. cit. pp. 304-305.