

# Gone with the wind? Evidence for 19th century African American speech\*

David Sutcliffe

Universitat Pompeu Fabra

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## Abstract

For decades the variety of English spoken by African Americans in the United States has been a major focus of research in linguistics. Despite that, there is still considerable controversy over its past, and specifically whether there had formerly been a plantation creole which shaped the modern African American Vernacular English (AAVE) linguistic system as it emerged. Increasingly abundant evidence has now been assembled on the 19th century in the form of recordings of speakers born in the antebellum period, backed up by data from works of fiction. Taken together, this evidence strongly suggests that a variety of creole was indeed spoken alongside English, perhaps without clear separation, at least until the time of the Civil War.

**Key words:** Afro-American Vernacular English, Gullah, Creole, 19th century, Slavery.

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## 1. Introduction

It seems impossible to begin an essay like this without first making reference to the anglicist-creolist controversy that has polarised the work of linguists researching African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Anglicists are those who think that the distinctive vernacular(s) spoken by Black Americans have developed directly from the various dialects of English brought from the

(\*) I would like to thank Joe Dillard very warmly for his encouragement and dedicate this article to him.

British Isles, while the creolists argue that there was also some input from a creole-like system. That is to say, there may have been a creole-like variety in use on Southern plantations at some time before the ending of slavery in the nineteenth century which helped to shape modern AAVE.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, there is a third point of view which overlaps the other two: the divergence/innovation hypothesis, put forward variously by Guy Bailey, John Myhill and William Labov,<sup>2</sup> among others. That is, that the typical ways in which AAVE now differs from other dialects of English have emerged particularly over the last hundred years. This hypothesis would seem to fit well with the Anglicist viewpoint. However there are two theoretical complications here, which have arisen in response to what is after all a complex linguistic situation viewed across time and space. Firstly, one of the main proponents of the divergence hypothesis, Guy Bailey, now supports the creolist viewpoint (rather than the anglicist one) and argues that, regardless of what has happened in the 20th century, African American vernacular was, at some earlier period, conditioned by contact with an earlier plantation creole. Secondly, William Labov has come to the conclusion that the divergence which has occurred in AAVE over the 20th century, according to Bailey and others, has actually made AAVE more creole-like in its typology. So in a sense the plot thickens: some researchers (for example Bailey) see creole in AAVE's past, others in its present (Labov's current position), some see creole in both (the creolists) some in neither (the anglicists). It is hard to believe that these researchers are all working on the same language.

But by definition AAVE is a variety of English that takes its place among the range of English dialects spoken in North America. At the same time, AAVE may also be regarded as an Afro-American language, one of the range of such languages spoken mainly by people of African descent in North, Central and South America. A majority of these Afro-American languages show some degree of creolisation. So I would argue that linguists necessarily have to be aware of the two frames of reference to be able to work towards negotiable consensus. Assuming, then that neither of the two main positions, the anglicist and the creolist, are likely to be right to the exclusion of the other, and that AAVE is best understood as having a double affiliation, deriving from a complex historical source, I can now broach the subject of this article: a review of the evidence we have for 19th century African American speech, and the extent to which it might have differed from its modern counterpart.

1. Creoles are languages which were created by speakers who initially adopted a common language as a lingua franca, often a European language such as English or French, and in the process more or less restructured it. Well-known Caribbean examples are Jamaican and Haitian creole. In fact, most of the vernaculars of the anglophone and francophone Caribbean are more or less creolised.
2. See Bailey 1995; Labov 1996.

This issue will necessarily include another, whether such differences were in the direction of a creole or not. Notice that despite the way that the notion of creole looms large in the debate about AAVE's past and present, practically no hard evidence has been adduced of an earlier creole, in terms of actual speech examples from the United States mainland, at least until very recently. The honourable exceptions to this are, of course, Stewart (1968) and Dillard (1972).<sup>3</sup>

Over the last decade we have seen an enormous enrichment of our understanding and knowledge of 19th century African American speech. It might seem surprising that we have much firm evidence on this question at all, let alone the kind of audio recordings that constitute the typical form of evidence on spoken speech varieties. However, we are fortunate in having the ex-slave recordings, a corpus of mechanically recorded speech of twelve former slaves whose birth dates range from 1844 to 1861 and who in most cases were recorded as part of the Works Project Administration scheme between 1935 and 1942.<sup>4</sup> We also have some reliable fictional writing featuring AAVE which will take us back to the very beginning of the 19th century. And there are still other sources, including for example the Hyatt corpus (Hyatt 1978) which Wolfgang Viereck brought to our notice. What we find is that while evidence for a creole has continued to elude researchers, at least until very recently, there is clear evidence of a widespread and vigorous use of English —African American Vernacular English— which did not differ greatly from the AAVE of today.

Apart from Louisiana French Creole, the only substantial exception to this generalisation is the Gullah coast and the Gullah language still spoken today along the coastal strip of Georgia and South Carolina, and especially on the Sea Islands. Gullah is of course an Atlantic Creole and closely resembles the Anglophone creoles of the Eastern Caribbean. As is well known, the Atlantic creoles were created during the 17th century, when hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans were obliged to learn a form of English or of other European languages, mainly to be able to communicate with each other and forge a collective identity. In the process, the European language was more or less completely restructured. This at least is what happened in Jamaica and elsewhere in the Caribbean, and indeed along the Gullah coast. The question which then naturally arises is: to what extent did this happen in the United States outside the Gullah area? Did the 17th and 18th century ancestors of modern African Americans throughout the old South restructure or creolise English? And if so, to what extent did African American speech still retain signs of earlier restructuring or creolisation at the time of the Civil War?

3. The evidence adduced was necessarily not statistical and mainly limited to literary quotations some of which have been representations of African-born slaves.
4. This crucially important corpus was brought to scholars' attention by Jeutonne Brewer (see Brewer 1991). More such sound archives have now been found, and it is likely that the total number available has doubled since 1991.

## 2. AAVE and Gullah in the 19th century

At this point it would be worthwhile looking informally at the similarities and differences between 19th century Gullah and 19th century Black English (AAVE). The following two short passages are samples of the two varieties, and are actually taken from two versions of the same story: how Brer Rabbit ate Brer Wolf's cow and got away with it. The incident related here is the basic motif of the tale, where Brer Rabbit, after eating the meat, tricks Brer Wolf by sticking the cow's tail in the ground and telling Brer Wolf that the cow is disappearing into the nether regions.

(1) a. *19th century Harris AAVE*

«Run yuh [run here] Bruh Wolf! Run yuh! Yo cow gwine in de groun! Run yuh!» When ole Bruh Wolf got dar, which he come uh scootin, dar wuz Bruh Rabbit holin on tuh de cow-tail, fuh tuh keep it fum gwine in de groun. Bruh Wolf, he kotch holt, an dey gin uh pull uh two [they gave a pull or two] en up come de tail. Den Bruh Rabbit, he wink his off eye en say, sezee:

«Dar! de tail done pull out en de cow gone,» sezee.

Adapted<sup>5</sup> from *How Mr. Rabbit saved his meat* (Harris 1982: 113)

b. *19th century Gullah*

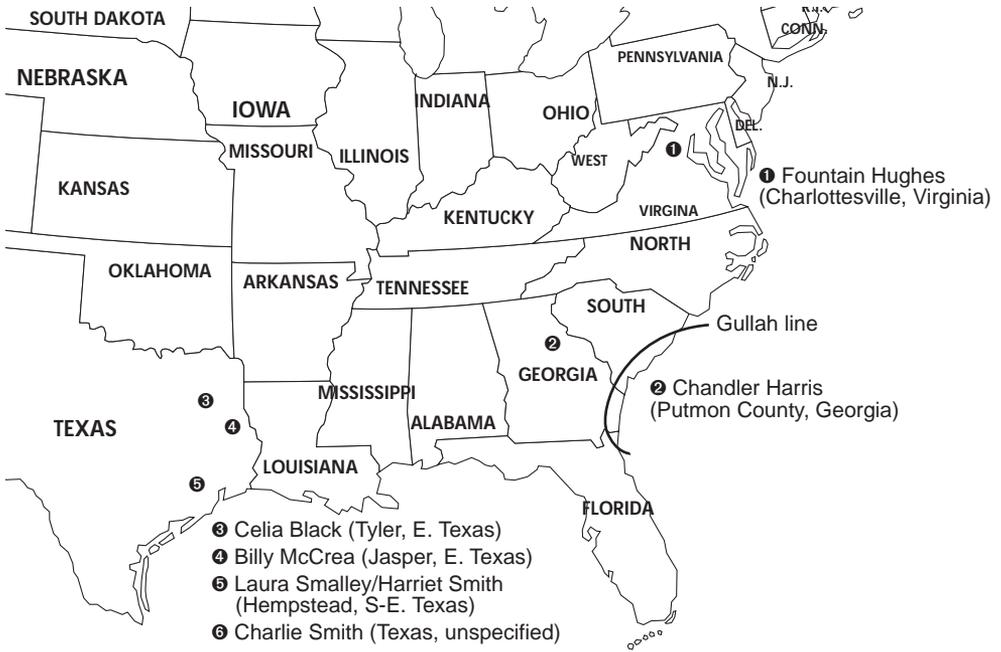
Den Buh Rabbit run ketch de cow tail en mek luk e duh try fuh pull [makes like he is trying to pull]. E grunt en e strain, e grunt en e strain. Turrecly [directly] e tell Buh Wolf say, «Buh Wolf, all uh try [as much as I try] uh couldn moobe um.» Den Buh Wolf gone dey e ketch de tail, en time e sta-a-t fuh pull, de cow tail come out de ma-a-sh en Buh Wolf gone SHUPOW on e back een de ma-a-sh en muddy up all e self.

Adapted from *Cow tail een de ma-a-sh* (Stoddard 1949: 12)

The language of passage (1a) is a conservative form of African American English extracted from the prolific writings of Joel Chandler Harris (born in Putnam County, Georgia). Harris, the creator of the Uncle Remus stories, was evidently very successful in recreating the AAVE of central Georgia, and the latter can be taken as broadly representative of the vernacular English dialects of African Americans throughout the South at that time (1880).<sup>6</sup> The Gullah passage (1b) on the other hand is a creole according to all the canons of what an Atlantic creole is, and can be seen to be operating within a creole grammatical system. Even so it will be noticed that the AAVE of passage (1a) has something in common with the Gullah of (1b). A family likeness is evident, for example, in the similar shape of certain morphemes across the two

5. The spelling has been adapted to make comparisons with the Gullah passage easier. Firstly *er* has been changed to *uh* (both spellings represent the sound [ʌ] as in «run»). Secondly, the apostrophes indicating «missing» letters have been removed.

6. On Harris's bidialectal ability, and his plantation upbringing, see Hemenway (1982).



Map 1. Position of the Gullah line circa 1900.

varieties and the relative lack of standard English inflections in both. Less evident from the above passages is the fact that both language varieties have vowels with phonemic length —not a feature of any mainstream varieties of English in North America— and in fact both have remarkably similar phonological systems.

This is so, even though the two varieties are separated geographically by a major linguistic divide. This runs down the Atlantic seaboard from just south of Myrtle Bay, South Carolina, to the Florida border.<sup>7</sup> To the east or seaward side of the line is the area where Gullah was, and to some extent still is spoken. Gullah has many overtly creole features scarcely attested anywhere else in the United States, even in 19th century fictional data.

To the west or inland side of the line, English (African American English) has been in vigorous use on the plantations since as far back as reliable records can take us, and was apparently used even for in-group interaction. This is not to say that there were no creole features in the AAVE on that side.

7. There is some Gullah further north in coastal North Carolina (Tometro Hopkins, personal communication, and confirmed by Hyatt's observations and transcripts of his recordings, Hyatt 1978). I am particularly indebted to Tometro for her help.

But, for example, Harris himself was at pains to emphasise the difference he observed between the Gullah of the coastal rice-growing areas and Sea-Islands, and the dialect spoken by Remus in «Mid Georgia». So the difference must have been in place at least several decades before that date (Harris (1882) 1982: 43; 192).

However, in the light of very recent research findings, the seemingly evident conclusion that there was no fully creole variety —no plantation creole— west of the Gullah line may now have to be revised. As a result of work begun in late 1995, there is now good reason to believe that at least some plantations west of the Gullah Line (in some cases nearly a thousand miles west of it!) were bidialectal communities. In other words, while English was clearly in widespread and flourishing use, individual speakers may have had access to a more creole-like variety that was being transmitted to succeeding generations until well into the 19th century. Furthermore, this variety seems to have been similar to coastal Gullah. We will now look at the evidence.

### 3. The co-existence of AAVE and Creole

Some of the most solidly-based evidence for the above assertion is *indirect*. As we have said, the 19th century AAVE dialect itself was not bereft of creole-like features, and the presence of such features suggests contact with a creole and/or language shift away from a creole. To find out more about this, I began analysis of the Harris/Uncle Remus corpus, mentioned above. This runs into 10 volumes and nearly half a million words. To date only the first volume has been processed and one important and representative feature looked at: the extent to which the simple verb is inflected for tense after *done* perfective and *aint* negative marker. These are points of focal interest since in both cases the basilectal creole pattern (for example in Gullah) would be to

"'How you speck Brer Rabbit gittin' on, Brer Buzzard?'  
sez Brer Fox, sezee.

"'Oh, he in dar,' sez Drer Buzzard, sezee. 'He mighty  
still dough. I speck he takin' a nap,' sezee.

"'I'm des in time fer ter wake im up,' scz Brer Fox,  
sezee. En wid dat he fling off his coat, en spit in his  
han's, en grab de axe. Den he draw back en come down on de  
tree - pow! En eve'y time he come down wid de axe-pow!-Mr.  
Buzzard, he step high he did, en holler out:

"'Oh, he in dar, Brer Fox. He in dar, sho."

"En eve'y time a chip ud fly off, Mr. Buzzard, he'd  
jump, en dodge, en holla his head sideways, he would, en  
holler:

"'He in dar, Brer Fox. I done <sup>year</sup> heard 'im. He in dar, sho'.

"En Brer Fox, he lammed away at dat holler tree, he did,  
like a man maulin' rails, twel bimeby, ater he done got de

Figure 1. Copy of corrections made by Joel Chandler Harris to the first edition of *Nights with Uncle Remus* (1880).

**Table 1.** Rate of inflection after preverbal *done*.

| Modern AAVE |   | Harris AAVE |       | 19th century Gullah |                      |
|-------------|---|-------------|-------|---------------------|----------------------|
| N           | % | N           | %     | N                   | %                    |
| CATEGORICAL |   | 22          | 63.6% | 17*                 | CATEGORICALLY ABSENT |

Sources: Harris 1982; Stoddard 1949; Weldon 1994

\* 16 ambiguous, «don't-count» tokens also occurred.

leave the lexical verb invariantly uninflected for tense (*done tell*, *aint see*, etc) regardless of the context.

We have room here to look at the *done* construction: whatever happened in the past, in modern AAVE *done* is virtually always followed by the inflected verb (*done told*, for example) presumably under pressure from other varieties of English. However, when we look at the figures for Harris, volume one (see Table 1) what we find is that the verb after *done* follows the modern AAVE pattern 63.6% of the time (e.g. *done told*, etc.) and follows the creole pattern 36.4% of the time (e.g. *done tell*, etc.).

Figure 1, above, is a reproduction of some corrections made by Joel Chandler Harris to the first edition of volume one (*Nights with Uncle Remus*, Harris 1880). Here, and in two other instances, Harris corrected *done heard* to *done year* (*done* + uninflected verb). These are just some of the many corrections he made to render Uncle Remus' language «more authentic». Most of these were not finally incorporated. The figures for *done* plus following verb in Table 1, therefore, refer to the text without the changes. Had they been included there would have been an even higher rate of occurrence of the creole pattern.<sup>8</sup>

So, in this respect at least, Harris's AAVE takes up a transitional position in linguistic space between Gullah on the one hand and contemporary AAVE on the other. Notice, incidentally, that the marking of the verb after *done* is not a minor feature, it involves a major component of the tense-aspect system, and reflects on the whole typology of the language. This finding alone suggests that there was a creole substrate or adstrate exerting influence on the African American English of the 19th century, even in areas far outside the Gullah area.

But then, given such indirect proof, what *direct* proof is there for the occurrence of a plantation creole west of the Gullah Line? What recorded or transcribed data do we have which actually features it? As was mentioned earlier, until very recently there was almost no direct evidence of this kind. The newly available information comes largely (not entirely) from the ex-slave recordings (ESR). These are recorded interviews of aged speakers who had spent their ear-

8. My thanks go to the Woodruffe Library archive, Emory University (Atlanta) for supplying me with photocopies of all the relevant pages from their annotated first edition.

liest years on the plantations in the South until «freedom broke». This material has already received much scholarly analysis in the ground-breaking volume *The Emergence of Black English* (Bailey et al. 1991). So the work presented here is, in effect, gleaning after the reapers have passed.

It is hardly surprising that the main transcript from *Emergence of Black English* (hereafter *EBE*) made collectively by the contributors to that volume, should contain omissions and other features which could be rectified upon further listening. After all, the editors themselves refer to the transcripts as «analogs» of the original verbal performances. In many cases originally unintelligible sequences can be clarified simply by accessing the right frame of reference. For example, in the following extract, Charlie Smith's interviewer (Elmer Sparks) refers to the title of a publication, *Believe it or not*. The latter is a compendium of amazing facts collected by author Robert Ripley. But without the necessary background knowledge, none of the *EBE* transcribers was able to decipher this.

- (2) **Interviewer:** Uh, were you, uh, interviewed by Robert Ripley? Do you remember that, Robert Ripley?

CS: Robert...

**Interviewer:** Ripley. He's right there. That's «*Believe it or not*.»

(*EBE* transcribes: *Ripley. He's right there. That's*[unintelligible]...)

*EBE* Charlie Smith (Texas): 259-262

Smith's great age had obviously been the reason for Ripley's interest, together with the fact that he had been enslaved and brought from Africa (Galina, Liberia). At the time of the interview in 1974, Smith claimed to be 144 (the *EBE* gives his age as 130), and he had been living for many years in Texas, working as a cowboy.

Where proper names are involved, the problem is evidently lack of contextualisation without which it is apparently difficult to «hear» what is said, let alone parse it correctly. And in somewhat the same way, an important step towards clarifying some obscurities in the original *EBE* transcript was simply to enlarge the linguistic frame of reference (of the transcriber) to include creole. To expect, in other words, creole-like forms to occur.

#### 4. Creole microswitches in the ex-slave recordings

The very nature of the interview situation in which these former slaves were placed would have sharply decreased the chances of the most markedly in-group vernacular from occurring. Accordingly, what we have by way of evidence are fleeting intrusions of creole morphemes from a linguistic level which in general the speaker did not intend to use.

Three such useful markers of this kind are the use of the *duh* equative copula and preverbal aspect marker, creole-like personal pronouns, and the

typically creole *-dem* pluralising suffix. The review of these features, given below, concludes with a short note on locative copula *de* and on zero tense marking.

#### 4.1. *DÛH* preverbal marker/copula

There are many hundreds of examples of this low-toned *dùh* particle in the ESR materials, used preverbally in a number of unexceptional uses, for example as an infinitive marker. In such contexts it is plainly an allomorph of *tuh* ('to').<sup>9</sup> In sharp contrast we have found a very small number of examples (perhaps ten) where *dùh* is used unmistakably and unambiguously as a continuative aspect marker, just as in Gullah and other creoles:

- (3) *But they was sure fine white folks over there,  
... whuh I dùh wòrk at.  
where I ASP work at  
'where I used to work'  
(EBE transcribes: ... where they work at.)*

*EBE* Laura Smalley (Hempstead, S-East Texas): 506

When I first listened to the Laura Smalley interview, I passed over this little sentence without paying it special attention. Luckily something registered subconsciously, and this resulted in my going back to look for it on the following day. I realised then (a) that the *EBE* transcription makes no referential sense in the context, since the only employee Mrs. Smalley is talking about at this point is herself; (b) the form transcribed as *where* ended on an [ɪ] with high pitch and was preceded by a lengthened [ɹ:], a very odd pronunciation for *where*. Segmentation, however, gives us *whuh* (where) plus a first person pronoun *I* (pronounced [ɹɪ] as in Gullah), which not only makes referential sense in the context but forces a grammatical reinterpretation of [dɔ] as the continuative aspect marker. This, too, makes greater contextual sense than the *EBE* transcription.

In one of the most telling passages of her interview, Smalley again uses *dùh* aspect particle when she describes the brutal flogging of a young woman by the latter's own father, Uncle S., who was plantation overseer. Mrs. Smalley concludes wryly:

- (4) *If you pa dùh whíp you half a day, you aint want eat  
If your father ASP whip you half a day, you UNTENSED NEG  
want eat  
'If your father is whipping you for half a day you don't want to eat.'  
(EBE transcribes: If they whip you half a day, you ain't want to eat.)*

*EBE* Laura Smalley: 226-227

9. Here and elsewhere I have greatly benefited from insights drawn from Mufwene (1991).

Here Smalley's speech is rapid, which is one reason for the discrepancy between the *EBE* transcription and mine. This time the *dùh* confers durative rather than habitual aspect. The utterance could be glossed as: «If your father goes on whipping you for half a day, you don't want to eat». Ian Hancock (personal communication) provided a further instance of this feature: a rare example in print taken from a gramophone record and its label.

- (5) *I de go now*  
 I ASP go now  
 'I'm going now'

John Copeland, New Orleans blues singer

In all these examples *dùh* can be described as conferring continuative or non-punctual aspect. Notice that the containing verb phrase lacks a tense marker, and the past, present and future reference (in 3, 4 and 5 respectively) is recovered from the context. Alternatively, in Gullah, an optional past or past anterior *bin* marker can be prefixed to *dùh* to produce the form *binnuh*.

Ex-slave Harriet Smith's speech in her interview was very acrolectal (very 'English'). However her interview contains one good example of aspectual *dùh*. This is worth looking at in some detail. When asked whether there were any tensions between Blacks and Whites «after the big break-up» (i.e. after the Civil War) Harriet Smith points out that the B. family of «poor whites» had killed her first husband and his brother. In the case of her husband, at least, the murder was motivated by irritation at his success as a local politician. The main *EBE* transcript is quoted here (italics are mine):

- (6) **JHF:** *Did you raise many uh, did the white folks uh, poor white trash and the colored folks have many fights after the big break up? Have many run-ins [arguments]?*  
**HS:** [misunderstanding] *No, we never had nothing to run in but wagons and teams.*  
**JHF:** *Well I mean did they have many uh, you know, quarrels and uh, fusses?*  
**HS:** *No, no, they jus' have these white, these B.'s that they kill our white, our boys, my husband' and his brother, were poor white people.*

*EBE* Harriet Smith (Hempstead, S-East Texas): 493-501

Ironically, Harriet Smith had nursed the killer, WB, when he was a baby (HS: 440-442). What she is saying is that she and her family had little trouble with the richer whites, only with what Faulk calls «white trash», poor people who felt profoundly threatened by the ending of slavery and who were unlikely to be brought to justice for committing violence on Blacks. The point of linguistic interest is the italicised sequence pronounced /dà(t) dḡ kíl/ and transcribed in the *EBE* as *that they kill*. At first glance the *EBE* version seems tenable, always assuming that pronoun «they» may be pronounced /dḡ/. However, this reading does not fit with

the intonation pattern. Interpolating from other instances, in Smith and elsewhere, personal pronoun subjects of relative clauses are normally assigned high pitch followed by high on the verb: *dé kíl* not *dè kíl*. There is a typical example of this pattern in line 375 of the interview, where Smith says: *whàt théy héared óthèrs sày*.<sup>10</sup> Another comparable example, this time actually a relative clause, is Laura Smalley's *whùh ÌÍ dùh wórk* (in example 3 above). So /*dà(t) də kíl*/ almost certainly means «that were killing» and not «that they kill». It may thus be added to the list of confirmed instances of *dùh* aspect marker in AAVE data.

#### 4.2. *DÛH* equative copula

So far I have found only one unambiguous and clearly heard example of the *dùh* particle used as equative copula. (Equative copula is a creole category, the equivalent of the verb «to be» used with a Noun Phrase predicate). However, this is an important finding since *dùh* equative copula is a very basilectal feature:

- (7) *Well, dát dùh hí(s) square, from that Post Office, clean down to the Citizen Bank.*

Well that COP his square...

'Well that was his square...'

(*EBE* transcribes: *Well that was his square...*)

*EBE* Billy McCrea (Jasper, East Texas): 56-57

The *EBE* version coincides with the standard English gloss. But what Mr McCrea actually says —*dát dùh hí(s) square*— is from another grammatical system, and similar if not identical to Gullah: compare with *dis yuh duh my cow tail* 'this here is my cow tail'. In (7) McCrea is referring to his old master's ownership of the main square in Jasper, Texas. At all events, many other potential examples of *dùh* copula are structurally ambiguous, as in (8):

- (8) *Dát dùh púnishment they got.*

That Ø DEF NP...

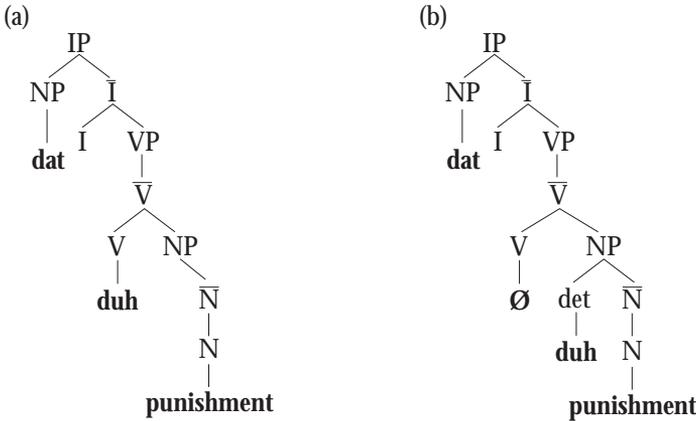
or That COP Ø NP...

'That was the punishment'

(*EBE* transcribes: *That's the punishment they got.*)

*EBE* Billy McCrea: 33

10. They share the same upstep/downstep pattern in both AAVE and Jamaican Creole (for the latter, see Sutcliffe 1992: 116).



**Figure 2.** Alternative derivations for *Dat duh punishment [they got]*. ESR McCrea interview (cf. *EBE: That's the punishment they got* (line 33)).

In all such examples, *duh* appears to be the definite article but might actually be *duh* copula with the following definite article subsumed or deleted. Here, as elsewhere, the system seems to exploit ambiguity to manage the interface with more anglicised varieties. The modern AAVE versions of (7) and (8) would be: *das his square* and *das duh (the) punishment* respectively. All this has deep implications for the study of the copula in modern AAVE, and can now be related to work on the copula in distant varieties of creole (for example McWhorter 1996, and Migge 1997, on Sranan, Escure 1983, on Belizean).

### 4.3. Creole personal pronouns

On several occasions, the pronouns selected by the ESR speakers appear to be used in a genderless way, typical of Gullah and other basilectal creoles. So that for example *he/i* is used for 'she', and *um/em* (genderless 3rd person object pronoun) is used for 'her'. Speaking of her mother, Laura Smalley says:

- (9) *When she was a chile [pause] he say dat uh, one mornin she went out, an' Ole Mistress - she'd big nough you know for to handle water.*

Laura Smalley: Unpublished ESR archive 5497B. Library of Congress.

Here, the *he* refers to Smalley's mother. Similarly, in example (10) *he* (pronounced /i/) is used to refer to the landowner's wife, someone Smalley clearly addresses as *ma'am*. The extended context is given:

- (10) *He [landowner] said, «Well if you can't pull this [weed] up, when you get this crop off, you leave, leave my place.» I say, «Thank you sir». [laughs] Well, I got that crop, you know, made a good crop that year, got the crop in, went off to see his wife an' his wife come down there one day he say uh, «Laura,» [I] say, «Ma'am.»...*

*EBE* Laura Smalley: 520-524

Mrs. Smalley, like other 19th-century born speakers of AAVE, regularly uses the object pronoun *um*, meaning either 'him', 'it' object), or 'them'. This in itself is quite a conservative form. On at least three occasions Smalley extends this usage and uses *um* to refer to singular female referents, in other words selecting *um* instead of object pronoun 'her'. This genderless use of *um* singular is common in Gullah and several other Creoles.

There is a neatly unambiguous instance of this genderless *um* in the otherwise quite acrolectal speech of Celia Black, aged 120 at the time of her interview:

- (11) *When my, Mrs. C. [slave owner] brought my mother to this country [Texas] she wouldn't let no, wouldn't let no, wouldn't let nobody take, take her from there. She raised her there with her, with her chillun, with her chillun. She raised um there with her boys an girls.*

*EBE* Celia Black (Tyler, N-East Texas): 117-120

Here there can be no doubt that the referent is female. The *um* pronoun is in unambiguous coreferential position with *her* used in the preceding sentence. A tiny piece of ephemera caught by a tape recorder in 1974, and yet it constitutes an important example. It is also fascinating to think that Mrs. Black is talking with matter-of-fact familiarity about someone born almost two centuries ago.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to these genderless uses, pronouns which are object pronouns in English are sometimes (rarely) used as subjective or possessive pronouns, by both Fountain Hughes and Laura Smalley.

- (12) *I does enjoy certain im show*  
 'I do enjoy certain of his [radio] shows'  
 (*EBE* transcribes: *I does enjoy certain of his show*)

*EBE* Fountain Hughes (Charlottesville, Virginia): 277-288

- (13) *Oh we learnt...dem had some dat in our church you know up here.*  
 'They had some of that [singing of spirituals] in our church...'  
 Laura Smalley: Unpublished ESR archive 5497A; Library of Congress.

11. Celia Black and her mother were brought up as «young misses», but this did not mean they were free. Referring to the difficulties put in the way when her mother wished to marry her father, she says: *In them days, them days, the white people had control over the. When they had coloured help, they wouldn't hardly, wouldn't gree for you to take um away from um.* *EBCB*: 114-17.

#### 4.4. -DEM plural marker

Surprisingly for such an obviously creole form, pluraliser *-dem* is not only found in our 19th century AAVE materials but can still be heard today in some versions of AAVE. It appears to be used solely as an associative plural marker in available data, referring collectively to a person and their associates. Associative *-dem* is attested for present-day Louisiana AAVE in Hancock (1987: 306). Furthermore, Anita Henderson (personal communication) reports hearing a Mississippi-born relative of hers use the form in conversation:

- (14) *Das Liz-dem*  
 'That's Liz and her circle'

A. Henderson (p.c. 1996)

Associative *-dem* occurs at least once in the ex-slave recordings, used by Laura Smalley:

- (15) *Màmá-dèm didn' know where to go, you see, after Freedom broke.*  
 Mama and the rest of them....  
 (EBE transcribes: *Mama an' them didn' know where to go...*)

EBE Laura Smalley:166-167

Elsewhere, Mrs. Smalley says *mama-nem* ('mama and them', the usual form in modern AAVE). There is no doubt that the *-dem* marker used as an associative pluraliser is a prototypical creole morpheme. In addition to Louisiana AAVE, Hancock (1987: 305-306) attests the form for Krio, Gullah, Guyanese, Jamaican, Bahamian and other creoles.

#### 4.5. DEH locative copula

Until now the only apparent instances of this morpheme occurring in African American speech outside the Gullah area have been ambiguous with the adverb *there*. However, on the point of concluding this paper (July 1997) further relisting to the McCrea interview revealed the following unambiguous example of *deh* locative copula ('be located') followed by *deh* locative adverb ('there'):

- (16) ... *lèh dém dèh déh dés hòllá èn prây*  
 ... CAUSE 3rd-plur LOC-COP LOC just cry and pray  
 '... let them stay/be there just hollering and praying'  
 (EBE transcribes: *hear them niggers hollering an' praying*).

EBEMcCrea: 99

Compare a Gullah example of the same structure:

- (17) *B'Allegetter dèh déh dùh sléép wid i mout opm*  
 Bro Alligator LOC-COP LOC CONT sleep with he mouth open  
 'Brother Alligator was there sleeping with his mouth open'  
 Stoddard 1949, II: 18

In comparable instances in Gullah and Jamaican, *dèh déh* used in this grammatical context carries an additional aspectual meaning ('continually shouting'; 'fast asleep, sleeping steadily'). All in all, (16) is an important example. However it is not easily deciphered (and my transcription differs substantially from the *EBE* version). Speed of articulation is quite fast and in the space of about a second one hears rapid alternation of voiced stops and vowels.

#### 4.6. Zero tense marker

All the features discussed in this section so far are examples of overt creole morphemes, or short sequences of such, occurring in the 19th century AAVE of the ex-slave recordings. It is worth remembering, however, that 'zero' occurring where English has inflection or a grammatical particle is also a typical creole feature. To take just one example, uninflected verbs with past-tense reference occur even in modern AAVE. In perhaps 80% to 90% of cases, the lack of inflection can be explained (or explained away) as (1) use of the historic present in narrative, (2) phonological simplification leading to loss of the *-ed* ending, (3) a past tense form identical to the present, as with standard English *put*, or non-standard *come*, or 4) deletion of underlying 'would' (however explained) in habitual past tense reference, as in 'we (would) often go'. These are all valid explanations, depending on the instance in question. However, there will be a residue of cases, particularly in 19th century data, which cannot be explained in any of these ways, and which are unequivocal occurrences of zero-marked verb with past-tense reference. Our final example from Texan Billy McCrea is an instance:

(18) *I've seen two mens they had they were punishing for what they do*

'I've seen two men they had there that they were punishing for what they had done'

*EBE* Billy McCrea: lines 28-29

None of the explanations (1)-(3) apply here. And in the case of (4) habitual *would* cannot be underlying—the men are being punished for what they did. Even if their 'crime' had been habitual, *would* just does not fit.

## 5. Conclusions

**Interviewer:** *Did (your step-father) talk like you all do or did he talk...*

**LS:** *No'm. He had broken language. He had broken language. Some kin' of broken language.*

The microswitches we have been looking at here are evidently small, scarcely noticed slips into a variety that the speakers might have spoken fluently and consistently in other circumstances. On this evidence, it now seems likely that a Gullah-like variety of creole was spoken alongside English in the non-Gullah areas of the South from Virginia and Maryland to Texas. This finding further supports the substrate or adstrate creole influence found in the Remus stories by Joel Chandler Harris.

At the time of the Civil War this Gullah-like variety was apparently still in widespread use, or at least had a wide geographical spread. Evidence from the Laura Smalley and Billy McCrea interviews shows that it was established in South East Texas, even though the latter was not settled by Anglos and Blacks until two decades or so before the outbreak of the Civil War. It is probable that most of these people came from Louisiana and Mississippi. From the John Copeland quote and other attestations it seems that the Lower Mississippi was an area where a Gullah-like variety could have survived until very late. Lastly, the occurrence of creole features in the ESR interview with Virginian Fountain Hughes and in Dance (1978), plus an attestation in Hancock (1987: 292), all suggest that a creole-like variety was in use in 19th century Virginia.

At all events, this 'hinterland' Gullah was probably weakening and merging with English even before the Civil War. By 1940-1942 when most of the ex-slave recordings were made of very elderly speakers it must have been on the point of extinction in most areas.

This evidence obviously gives added support to the creole hypothesis, and therefore challenges the anglicist hypothesis — unless the latter is restated in a weaker form, that is that varieties of British English were adopted and adapted by African American speakers *alongside* a more creole-like variety. As regards the divergence/innovation hypothesis, the existence of an earlier creole might well 'explain' the creation and expansion of apparently creole structures in modern AAVE as a resurgence, in modified form, of earlier patterns. This would perhaps involve the covert transmission of typological principles which could be activated at a later date.

## 6. Endnote

I should not like to close without paying brief tribute to Laura Smalley, Billy McCrea and the other former slaves who are the subjects of the ex-slave interviews. As several of the examples quoted here show, there was much brutality and danger in their lives, even after the abolition of slavery. However, the human spirit seems to be indomitable. Mrs Smalley for example is scrupulously fair (perhaps *too* fair) in her assessment of her ex-employers, Mr and Mrs P. These are the 'fine white folks' in example (3). She analyses the man as being 'fractious' (he was evidently prone to dangerous fits of anger) and yet a good man, and she communicates this without a hint of irony or apparent accommodation to the white man. I think she is

too old and too dignified to stoop to this. Her interviewer John Henry Faulk in turn shows a complete lack of prejudice or patronage. Even more strikingly, there are other passages, for example the interview with McDonald and an unnamed woman,<sup>12</sup> where either the speakers are absolute masters of accommodation (traditional 'shucking') or there genuinely is an indomitable optimism—and I think it is the latter—which communicates across the years like a blaze of light.

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12. Perhaps her name was Carol: the last words that interviewer John A. Lomax utters before turning off the machine are not transcribed in *EBE*. But he clearly says «Well Miss Carol...»

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