

Variation and Development:
The Question about Bidialectalism and Co-Existent Systems in African American English

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One view of African American English (AAE) is that it is a variety that consists of two components, one that reflects the properties of general American English and an African American component that is the locus of properties that distinguish AAE from other varieties of English (Labov 1998). The general English component is a complete grammar, but the African American component is an additive. The implicit assumption that accompanies the dual components view of AAE is that speakers of AAE are bidialectal. In the first part of the paper, I explain the pitfalls of a dual components approach to the study of AAE, especially the types of predictions it makes about the status of AAE speakers as bidialectal and as codeswitchers between AAE and general American English. In the second part of the paper, I explore claims about dual components and bidialectalism from the perspective of data from the tense/aspect system of AAE. I discuss patterns in the development of the copula system and morphological marking of verbs in third person singular contexts, which raise questions about the development of variation within the AAE system, on the one hand, and shared properties with other varieties of English on the other.

The copula and morphological marking on verbs in third person singular contexts are widely studied phenomena in AAE, although research on patterns of development in these areas has been limited. They can give us some insight into important issues related to bidialectalism and variation. For instance, both \emptyset_{copula} and overt copula are taken to be part of the AAE grammar, especially given the obligatory occurrence of the overt form in some contexts. The case of morphological marking on verbs in third person singular contexts $\emptyset_s/-s$ (*He run* vs. *He runs*) is different in that there are not obligatory contexts for the marker on verbs occurring with 3rd person singular subjects. The claim is that morphological marking in third person singular contexts is not part of the AAE grammar.

In this paper, I continue the discussion of the AAE copula within the broader context of a range of copular constructions in the linguistic system, in which I also consider markers such as aspectual *be* (*be_{asp}*) (2) and *go* copula (3):

1. Those stores \emptyset_{cop} all together.
'Those stores are all together'
2. Those stores *be* all together.
'Those stores are generally all together'
3. There *go* those stores all together.
'There are those stores all together'

Finally, I discuss patterns in development of the AAE copula system and marking in third person singular contexts in child AAE based on data from elicitation tasks and spontaneous speech samples with a focus on the question about whether these patterns are part of the AAE grammar or properties resulting from contact with other varieties of American English.