INTRODUCTION

While the diverse natural data collected by sociolinguists can inform and even challenge generalizations and theories developed in psycholinguistic study, sociolinguistic research—in isolating social variation—must control for the universal processing constraints found in cognitive study. Thus informed, the present socio study—looking in particular at inverted vs. non-inverted question forms—seeks to improve both its statistical formality and explanatory capacity in adding data to the debate over the history of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). On one side of this debate, differences between AAVE and standard American English are hypothesized as obtaining from the historical influence of Caribbean Creole Englishes. The alternative view rejects such a linkage, with AAVE seen as a diachronic divergence from the standard American dialect.

POSING THE QUESTION

- Non-inversion in both AAVE and Creole question formation suggestive of an historical relationship.
- Counter (cf. Van Herk, 2000): Similarities in constraints on inversion variation suggest a direct relationship between Early Modern English (EModE) and Early African American English (EAAE), whereas no evidence for similar systematic variation has been (to date) shown for Creole Englishes.
- Present study: Are constraints observed in EModE and EAAE also operable in Creoles? Do constraints—whether cognitive or linguistic—significantly vary by (interact with) language variety?

METHOD

Data from sociolinguistic interview dialogues between native speakers of five English varieties, including three Caribbean English—Jamaican, Guyanese, and both black (AAVE) languages and both white (EModE) and white (Appalachian) American dialects. Demographic factors include age, gender, education, socio-economic status, and role in the experiment (interviewer vs. interviewee). Linguistic variables: negation, transitivity, question type, subject form, subject length, and auxiliary type. Two potential cognitive/processing effects: subject length (affects dependency processing) and question type (yes/no questioning of an entire coherent proposition has been hypothesized as being more resistant to inversion than wh extraction of a selected element; cf. Kroch, 1989). Ambiguous zero-copula cases excluded. Analysis via logistic regression using both R and Varbrul-style reporting.

RESULTS

Linguistic Artifact or Processing Constraint?

Subject Type and Subject Length are highly correlated

Similars and Differences

Constraints shown in EModE and EAAE are in fact common ... Still, one significant variation in an arguably cognitive effect

SUMMARY

AAVE is significantly non-inverted, suggestive of historical Creole influence. This has been challenged for lack of study of systemic constraints on Creole question inversion like those found in AAE. The present work reveals common constraints among Early AAE, AAVE, white varieties, mesolectal and basilectal Creoles (whether indicative of historical relationship or processing universals)? With such constraint similarity established, the greater tendency towards non-inversion in AAVE than in white Englishes remains, returning to the suggestion of Creole influence.

SELECTED REFERENCES