CHAPTER 2

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THE CREOLE ORIGINS HYPOTHESIS

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

In a rarely cited introduction[1] to a reprint of his two classic creolist articles (Stewart 1967, 1968), Stewart (1970) noted that a "disagreement" had surfaced among participants at a Conference on Social Dialects and Language Learning held in Bloomington, Indiana, in summer 1964:[2]

> Beryl L. Bailey and the author took the position that *American Negro dialects probably derived from a creolized form of English, once spoken on American plantations by Negro slaves and seemingly related to creolized forms of English which are still spoken by Negroes in Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean.* Bailey and the author held the opinion that, although most American Negro dialects have now merged enough with white speech to preclude their still being considered truly creole dialects, the apparent survival of some creole features in many of them was a likely explanation of their more unique (vis-à-vis white speech) structural characteristics. . . . [But] some of the participants had already come to a quite different set of conclusions. . . . In their view, *there never was any pidgin or creole stage through which the English spoken by early American Negro slaves might have passed. Instead, the acquisition of colonial English by Negro slaves on the early North American plantations was believed to have been both rapid and successful, so that within one or two generations American Negro speech evidenced the same inventory of structural features as white speech.* (1970, 352; emphasis added)

This is probably the earliest documented evidence we have of a creolist/Anglicist controversy among linguists about the origins of African American Vernacular English (AAVE),[3] with their respective positions summarized in the italicized parts of Stewart's quotation.

Fifty years later, the "disagreement" or "controversy" continues, but it has evolved, to some extent. For one thing, no current "creolist" favors the view expressed by Stewart (1967) and Dillard (1972) that there was a widespread full creole across large areas of the American South. Even in the writings of the early creolists (see Dillard 1972, 86, 98), there is some acknowledgment that there was variation in AAVE by social group, region, and century, and this is much more so in the work of later creolists like Winford (1998) and myself (see Rickford 1997, 1998), who tend to speak of creole "influences" rather than a widespread full-on creole. Moreover, no creolists worth their salt could deny English influences, since creole varieties invariably include considerable influence from their lexically derived source languages—obvious enough in the vocabulary of Caribbean English creoles, for instance, but also, to varying extents, in their phonology and grammar.

The issue has usually been whether features must be attributed *only* to English dialects (when reasonable African or creole substrate sources were also available—see discussion in Rickford and Rickford 2000, 147–57), or whether *all* possibility of creolist influence must be denied. That seemed to be the position of the earliest "Anglicists" or "dialectologists," as summarized in the preceding quotation from Stewart (1970). That, however, is not the position of Schneider, Van Herk, Winford, or Mufwene, as expressed in their chapters in this volume, who all call for hybrid or compromise positions of some sort. Even Mufwene, who is most skeptical about creole origins hypotheses for African American vernacular varieties other than Gullah, states in his conclusion that "regarding the emergence of AAVE, the evidence appears to speak against *some* creole origins" (emphasis added). To the earlier anti-creolists who would deny *all* possibility of creole influence, I would respond that if we find at least *one* feature in AAVE that *cannot* be attributed to English but only or most likely to creole origins or influence, the creolist hypothesis is sustained. As Armin Schwegler put it (2001, forthcoming), if we find a car on the moon, we can be (almost) certain that a human being brought it there.

In several publications (Rickford 1977, 1997, 1998; Rickford and Rickford 2000), I have laid out the kinds of evidence that are potentially relevant to this controversy. Table 2.1 lists the six main types I currently consider most important.

Table 2.1 Types of Evidence Relevant to the Creole Origins Hypothesis

1 Sociohistorical conditions (suitable for pidginization and/or creolization)
2 Historical attestations (literary texts, ex-slave narratives and recordings)
3 Diaspora recordings (Samaná, Liberian Settler English, African Nova Scotian English)
4 Creole similarities (between AAVE and Caribbean creoles, Gullah, Hawaiian, etc.)
5 African language similarities (between AAVE and West African varieties)
6 English dialect differences (between AAVE and British/White American dialects)

In this chapter, I will discuss in turn evidence of type 1 (sociohistorical conditions), 6 (English dialect differences), and 4 (creole similarities). I will focus on auxiliary and copula absence as I did in Rickford (1998), because it is one of the most distinctive and extensively researched features of AAVE. But I will draw on relevant work published since then, too, including Morgan (1998), Weldon (2003a, b), and Sharma and Rickford (2009). And I will also respond to relevant observations in other chapters dealing with the AAVE origins issue in this volume.

2.2 Sociohistorical Conditions

In general, in considering whether sociohistorical conditions favored prior creolization, we have to distinguish between conditions for the *development* of a creole on US soil and conditions for the *importation* of a creole (developed elsewhere) into the United States. In the thirteen original colonies (1607–1776) conditions for the *development* of a homegrown creole were extremely poor in the New England and middle colonies, where the proportion of Africans or their descendants to the total population in each territory was low (3 percent to 7 percent in 1750). But the conditions were more favorable in the southern colonies, especially in Virginia and South Carolina, where the Black percentages by 1850 were much higher (e.g., 43.9 percent in Virginia and 60.9 percent in South Carolina). Indeed, on some of the islands and along the coast of South Carolina, those percentages were as high as 79 to 93 percent, and these proportions undoubtedly facilitated the emergence in this region of Gullah, whose creole status is not in question. Even Georgia, which was only 19.2 percent Black in 1750, had become 48 percent Black by 1776, and 76 to 77 percent Black in coastal counties like Liberty and Chatham by 1790 (Franklin and Moss 1988, 61; Wood 1975; Smith 1985). Since nearly 90 percent of all Blacks in the United States were concentrated in the South from the mid-eighteenth century until they migrated north and west from the early twentieth century to the mid-1970s (Wilkerson 2010), *it is southern colonies and states that are most significant when the conditions for prior creolization on US soil are considered* (Rickford 1997, 318). And although the 40 to 60 percent Black population percentages in Virginia and South Carolina in 1750 do not quite match the 80 percent substrate language minimum for pidgin-creole genesis that Bickerton (1981, 4) had proposed, lower percentages (e.g., 35 percent in Haiti twenty-five years after its founding, and 51 percent in Martinique) have been associated with the formation of creoles elsewhere (Williams 1985, 31; Singler 1995, 210–11; Parkvall 2000). In short, the percentage of Blacks and Whites (or more generally, of second language learners to first or target language speakers) is not the only relevant demographic or contact consideration, as Singler (2008) and others have noted.

Conditions for the *importation* of a creole were much stronger both in the middle colonies and the South, as I have noted elsewhere (Rickford 1997), especially in the

AQ: In the use of references, such as this one, it is better to follow either alphabetical order or year of publication order. Which order do you prefer?

all-important founder populations, which, as Mufwene (1996) has suggested, can have a lasting influence on the language situation of an emerging colony. In New York, from 1701 to 1765, almost three times as many slaves were imported from the West Indies (3,324) than directly from Africa (1,201), and most of the West Indian imports were from Jamaica, Antigua, and Barbados (Medford et al. 2009).[4]

In South Carolina, this was also the case in the first twenty-five years of its founding (1670–1695; Wood 1975, 130). This was also the case in Georgia in the intensive mid- to late-eighteenth-century period in which its slave population increased (Smith 1985, 94) and in the Virginia/Maryland region known as the Chesapeake:

> Until the mid-1670s, when slaves were shipped directly from Africa, most of the Chesapeake's blacks came from Barbados and other Caribbean colonies or from the Dutch colony of New Netherland (which the English conquered in 1664 and renamed New York). (Davis 1986, 8)

> The origins of the earliest black immigrants to the Chesapeake and [South Carolina] Low Country were similar. Most came, not directly from Africa, but from the West Indies. Some might have only recently arrived in the islands from their homeland, and a few were probably born in the Caribbean, but most were seasoned slaves—acclimatized to the New World environment and somewhat conversant with the ways of whites. (Morgan 1998, 2–3)

Slaves imported to the British North American colonies from Caribbean colonies with larger Black populations, on bigger plantations, were very likely to be speaking a creole, rather than the nonstandard (but closer to standard English) dialects that indentured ser- vants and other Whites from the British Isles brought to the New World. By 1690, Blacks in Jamaica constituted 75 percent of the population, thirty-five years after the colony was settled (Williams 1985, 31), and it is likely that its distinctive pidgin/creole-like English had already begun to jell (Cassidy and Le Page 1967, xli–xlii; Cassidy 1986). The creole speech of Barbados, where Blacks were about 70 percent of the population by 1684 (Winford 2000, 220), was never as basilectal or nonstandard as the creole speech of Jamaica, although Rickford (1992), Rickford and Handler (1995), and Fields (1995) show that it has had a vibrant mesolectal English creole for some time. Cassidy and Le Page (2002, xl), noting that St. Kitts, Nevis, and Barbados "had been settled since the 1620s," believed that "by the 1650's the patterns of Creole speech in these islands were already formed."

Note that Cassidy and Le Page's statement runs contrary to the skepticism expressed by Mufwene (2004, 308) about whether creole vernaculars (basilects) were already in place at the time when slave importation from Barbados to North America was the most significant, namely in the late seventeenth and early to mid-eighteenth centuries. Also challenging that skepticism is the speech of Tituba, the Amerindian slave from Barbados who testified at the Salem Witch Trials of 1692 in Massachusetts. Her speech is creole-like in displaying a clear zero copula:[5]

> He tell me he Ø God. (1692 testimony of Tituba: Breslaw 1996, 195)

Although occasional instances of zero copula have been reported in the British Isles, it is not a regular feature of British English, as it is, for instance, of Caribbean Anglophone creoles or of fluently spoken AAVE.

Mufwene has argued (in 2000 and in his chapter in this volume) that AAVE did not emerge as a separate variety in the United States until after the post–Civil War period of Jim Crow segregation of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the Great Migration that began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He argues that AAVE emerged in the settings of tobacco and cotton plantations, which became racially segregated only after the abolition of slavery in the 1860s. And he suggests (in his chapter in this volume) that

> AAVE and WASE [White American Southern English] have common origins. They appear to have been one and the same regional variety until Jim Crow was introduced in the late nineteenth century and triggered the Great Migration of African Americans out of the South. AAVE was invented as a separate ethnolect in the North, where most White Americans were then getting their first exposure to American Southern English.

However, Virginia, like other southern states (and some northern ones too), was the source of court decisions, and then slave laws in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries that increasingly differentiated Black servants and slaves from (indentured) White servants (Schwartz 2010).[6] In 1640, for instance, two runaway White servants were ordered by the court in Virginia to serve an additional four years, because only the labor of the servant was owned, not the person. But the third runaway, a Black servant named John Punch, was ordered to serve for the time of his natural life. In statutes passed in 1669 and 1670, often based on the Barbados slave code of 1661, the Virginia House of Assembly made it clear that "bondage for life" had become the accepted rule for the Negro (Foner 1975, 193). And in 1705, Virginia consolidated its various regulations concerning Black slaves into a single slave code. As Foner (1975, 194–95) noted:

> The 1705 code . . . consolidated previous repressive laws designed to keep the Negroes under control. Such laws had declared assemblies among slaves illegal, prohibited them from carrying any weapons, and forbade them from leaving plantations without the written permission of their masters. But the 1705 code also increased punishments for slaves by providing that for petty offenses slaves were to be whipped, maimed, or branded. . . . With the enactment of the 1705 code Virginia now had a fully developed system of chattel slavery by which Black men and women were reduced to a status of abject degradation as complete as anywhere in the world.

Similar laws were passed in Maryland, the Carolinas, and Georgia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and they regulated virtually EVERY aspect of slaves' lives, including their ability to go off their plantation (forbidden, except with a ticket from their master or overseer), congregate in large numbers, carry clubs or arms, or strike a

White person (also forbidden). Also any White person was authorized to apprehend any Negro who could not give a satisfactory account of himself (Foner 1975, 220–23).

One might argue that these repressive laws did not have the same separating effect as the segregation laws of the late nineteenth century, but they *did* restrict the movements, lives, and fortunes of Blacks, and they probably fostered a sense of distinct identity sufficient to promote the emergence of a distinct Black ethnolect (as one style or code among others slaves might have possessed) long before the Jim Crow laws of the nineteenth century. As Wood (1975, 187–88) has noted, speaking about South Carolina as a whole rather than just the Sea Islands or coastal areas:

> The slaves had serious reservations of their own about the acquisition of English. Proficiency could be a means of advancement, but standard English could not, and never would, provide so simple a key to upward mobility for Blacks as it did for White newcomers. And if knowledge of good English could occasionally be used to advantage, as in eavesdropping or newspaper reading, bad English was discovered to be an equally effective weapon. *To cultivate a dialect few Whites could understand and to be able to adopt a stance of incomprehension toward their master's speech proved effectual elements of resistance.* Such things considered, colonial slaves could not have felt the same eagerness to acquire the dominant language that seized voluntary immigrants in later times. (emphasis added)

Moreover, despite Mufwene's assumptions that the language and culture of Blacks and Whites were similar or identical ("one and the same") in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries (the Blacks having acculturated successfully to White norms in homestead and similar contexts), it is striking that many respected historians, often drawing on contemporary sources, paint a different picture. For instance, Peter Wood, a leading South Carolina historian cited by both Mufwene and Winford (in their contributions to this volume and elsewhere), referred in his classic *Black Majority* book to the distinctiveness of the Black South Carolina dialect (again, not just referring to Gullah), which would have been reinforced by the fact that "after the first generation … most new Negroes learned the local language not from Englishmen, but from other slaves" (1975, 187). And Allan Kulikoff (1986, 351), a leading Chesapeake historian also cited by Mufwene and Winford, reports that late-eighteenth-century observers also referred to Black cultural practices as distinctive and different from those of Whites:

> White observers agreed that the music, dance and religiosity of Black slaves [in the Chesapeake] differed remarkably from those of whites. . . . The practice of a distinctive culture within their own quarters gave them some small power over their own lives and destinies.

Indeed, Kulikoff himself (1986, 327–28) suggests that a creole emerged in the region:

> A new creole language may have emerged in the Chesapeake region combining the vocabulary of several African languages common among the immigrants, African linguistic structures, and the few English words needed for communication with the master.

Morgan (1998, 565) feels in general that "in the Chesapeake, Africans seem to have mastered English rather more quickly than in the Lowcountry."[7] But he too points to "instances of mutual unintelligibility between whites and blacks and of distinctive black speech patterns . . . in the Chesapeake region" (1998, 572).

In sum, sociohistorical conditions for the development of a creole on US soil were stronger in the South than anywhere else, but considering this is where 90 percent of the Black population in the United States lived until the start of the twentieth century (Bailey and Maynor 1987, 466, citing Hamilton 1972, and other sources), the geographical restriction is not significant. Moreover, the conditions for the importation of creole English from the Caribbean, in the founding period up until the end of the eighteenth century, and to some extent thereafter, are very strong. Finally, the evidence of contemporary observers and some attested speech, both suggest that Blacks and Whites differed both linguistically and culturally in at least some regions, rather than exhibiting the homogeneity with White speech that others seem to have assumed.

2.3 Copula Absence: Difference from British Dialect

Whatever distinctive grammatical features of AAVE might have come from British dialects—and there are several good candidates (Schneider 1989 and this volume; Winford 1998; Van Herk, this volume)—copula absence is not likely to have been one of them. Poplack (2000, 20), introducing her edited collection on the *English* history of African American English, conceded as much: "zero copula is perhaps the only variant studied in this volume which cannot be identified as a legacy of English." Wolfram (1974, 522) found no evidence of this feature in a search of the available records of British varieties either, and as far as I know, it does not show up in transplanted varieties like Australian or New Zealand English.

Martin and Tagliamonte (1999) do report scattered British historical attestations from Visser (1970) and other sources, some contemporary examples from Scots English (the latter all involving existential constructions before __NP, as in, "There Ø a big tree at the gate," from Macaulay 1991, 59) and others from Wheatley Hill in Durham, England. But the frequencies of zero copula in the contemporary Wheatley Hill corpus are low (zero *is* + *are* = 13 percent; zero *is* = 2 percent; zero *are* = 25 percent), much lower than in contemporary AAVE, and there is no evidence that they exhibit the same patterning by following grammatical environment for which AAVE is famous.

As far as White American dialects are concerned, in general, they do not display copula absence, especially outside of the South (e.g., in New York and California, see Labov 1969; McElhinny 1993, respectively). Several southern varieties—e.g., in Mississippi (Wolfram 1974); Alabama (Feagin 1979); and Texas (Bailey and Maynor 1985; Cukor-Avila and Bailey, this volume)—do show copula absence, especially with *are*. But

apart from the fact that the effect of following grammatical environment is not always as finely differentiated as it is in AAVE (see Rickford 1998, 187–89), it is very likely that the southern White copula absence pattern represents AAVE influence rather than the other way around, as suggested by Wolfram (1974, 524). It is certainly striking that outside of the South, where most African Americans lived until the start of the twentieth century, copula absence is not found among White Americans.

2.4 Copula Absence: Similarities with Creoles

Absence of copula and auxiliary *is* and *are*, as in examples (1)–(5) below, is the most extensively studied feature of AAVE and the one that was first given a quantitative, variationist analysis (Labov 1969). It is also the feature whose parallels with creole varieties led to the first formulations of the creole hypothesis (Bailey 1965; Stewart 1969) and the one that has been invoked in many subsequent formulations (Bickerton 1971; Holm 1976, 1984; Baugh 1980; Edwards 1980; Rickford and Blake 1990; Rickford 1998; Sharma and Rickford 2009, among others):[8]

   (1) __Noun Phrase: She Ø the first one started us off. (35, S. Carolina)
   (2) __Adj: He Ø fast in everything he do. (16, Jets, Harlem, NY)
   (3) __Locative: We Ø on tape (16, Chicago)
   (4) __Verb + *ing*: . . . he Ø gettin' cripple up from arthritis (48, N. Carolina)
   (5) __ *gon(na).* Verb: He Ø gon try to get up. (12, T-Birds, Harlem, NY)

The relative frequency with which the AAVE copula[9] is absent in these and similar examples is systematically conditioned by various grammatical and phonological factors, but the one that often emerges as the strongest constraint, and the one that shows the most consistent parallels with creole varieties, is the following grammatical environment. The copula is LEAST likely to be absent before a following noun phrase, and MOST likely to be absent before a following *gon(na)*, with the other following environments ordered in as in (6):

   (6) __Noun Phrase < __Locative < __Adjective < __Verb + *ing* < __*gonna* Verb

Although this ordering is not strictly attested in every quantitative study of AAVE copula absence (the relative positions of locative and adjective show the greatest fluctuation), it is followed with amazing consistency, as shown in figure 2.1 (from Sharma and Rickford 2009, 63, based on eight AAVE data sets) and its very high average Spearman coefficient (.93) and Cronbach alpha (.969) measures.[10]

Moreover, a very similar patterning is found in copula absence in mesolectal varieties of creole English,[11] as shown in figure 2.2 (from Sharma and Rickford 2009, 64, based on seven data sets from Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, and Hawaii) and *its* high average Spearman coefficient (.84) and Cronbach alpha (.951) measures.
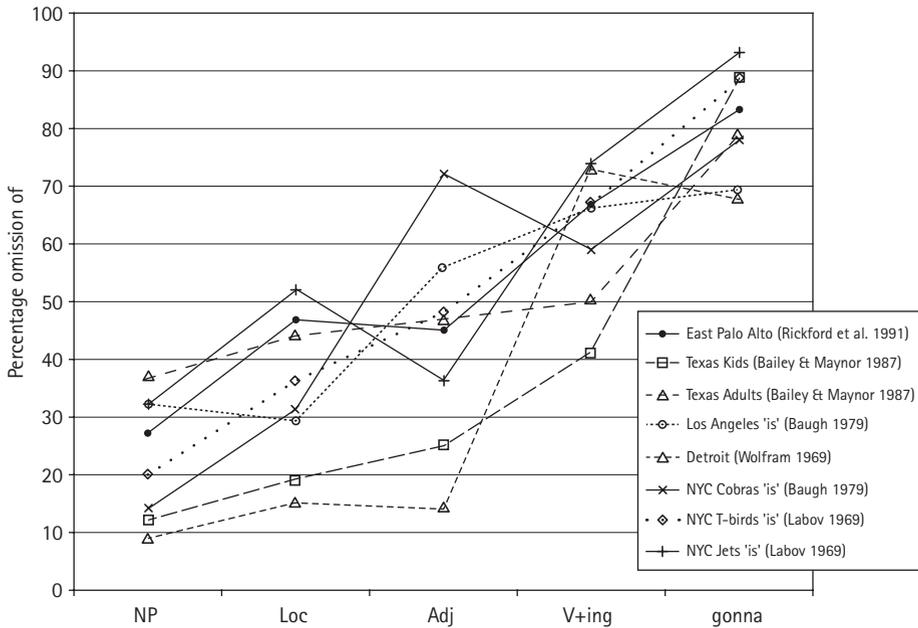
FIGURE 2.1 Copula absence in contemporary AAVE (based on table 6.16 in Rickford 1998, 190).

Notes: Average R$_S$ (correspondence to AAVE order): .93 (*p* < .05, nearly perfect correlation);
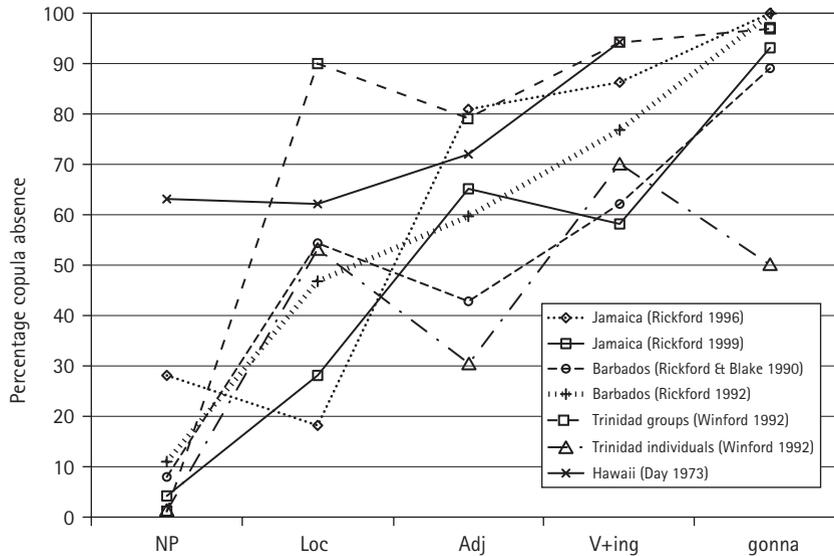Cronbach's α (internal consistency): 0.969.

FIGURE 2.2 Copula absence in Creoles (based on table 6.16 in Rickford 1998, 190).

Notes: Average R$_S$ (correspondence to AAVE order): .84 (very strong correlation);
Cronbach's α (internal consistency): 0.951.

It was these striking similarities, and the fact that they could not be attributed to descent from British or any other English varieties (remember that English makes no similar distinction in the form or frequency of the copula depending on its following grammatical environment), that led many linguists to link the AAVE pattern to possible creole influence. James Sledd is quoted in Labov (1982, 198) as referring to this parallelism between AAVE and the creoles as the first serious evidence for the creole hypothesis. And Winford (1992, 49), after a detailed comparison of copula absence in AAVE and Trinidadian Creole English, concluded that, "in view of the startling similarity of all these patterns of use, there would appear to be little reason to reject the view that the BEV [= AAVE] copula system owes its origin to a process of decreolization similar to that observable in the creole continua of the Caribbean." He went on to provide the model of decreolization for Caribbean English creole copula systems shown in table 2.2.

This model incorporates several of the elements present in earlier attempts to explain the relative frequency of copula absence in AAVE and/or Caribbean mesolectal creoles by reference to decreolization. For instance, the basilectal or deep creole pre-NP copula form *a* (as in *shii a di liida* "She is the leader") is replaced by invariant *is* and later by inflected *be*, rather than zero, as a way of accounting for the fact that this environment almost always shows the lowest rate of zero. By contrast, basilectal preverbal *a* (in progressives and the future) is replaced by zero in the lower mesolect and does not begin to show variable insertion of *be* until the upper mesolect, consonant with the synchronic finding that these environments are always the most favorable to copula absence in AAVE and the Caribbean Creoles.

However, Winford (1998), faced with objections from Poplack and Sankoff (1987) and Mufwene (1992) to the assumption that a model like that in table 2.2 applied also to the development of copula absence in AAVE, formulated a somewhat different hypothesis:

> My present position is that the copula pattern of AAVE is best explained as the result of imperfect second language learning, with transfer from creolized or restructured varieties playing a significant role. . . . On the one hand, many Africans must have acquired a close approximation to the superstrate copula system from the earliest

Table 2.2 Decreolization Model for Caribbean English Creole Copula Systems

	Basilect	Lower mesolect	Upper mesolect	Acrolect
__Noun Phrase	*a*	→ Invariant *is*	→ *is*/forms of *be*	→ Inflected *be*
__ Adjective	Ø	→ Ø	→ Ø/forms of *be*	→ Inflected *be*
__ Locative	*de*	→ Ø	→ Ø/forms of *be*	→ Inflected *be*
__Progressive	*a* Verb	→ Ø Verb + in	→ (*be*) Verb + *in*	→ *be* Verb + *in*
__Future	*a go* Verb	→ Ø *goin* Verb	→ (*be*) *goin to* V	→ *be goin to* V

Source: Winford 1992, 34.

stages of contact. Other groups of Africans speaking African languages, and later, creole or other forms of restructured English in which copula absence was common, shifted toward these established forms of AAVE, introducing further changes due to imperfect learning. This manifested itself in simplification (loss) of copula forms as well as substratum transfer. The latter is most clearly manifested in the patterns of copula absence according to following grammatical environment which AAVE shares to a large extent with creoles like Barbadian and its relative, Gullah. (1992, 111)

In response to this, note first that Winford still attributes some responsibility for the current patterns of AAVE copula absence to creole or restructured English influence, and with this I would concur. On the other hand, the suggestion that the AAVE patterns could be partly attributed to general patterns of simplification in second language acquisition was not supported by Sharma and Rickford's (2009) examination of several studies of the acquisition of English by speakers of other languages, including some (see Mesthrie 1992) originally referred to by Winford himself. As table 2.3 indicates, the relative frequency of copula absence in those studies is very different from the pattern consistently found in AAVE and the creoles.

Note, in particular, the high frequency of zero copula before NPs in South African Indian English and the low frequency of zero copula before V-*ing* in the Singapore English of Chinese and Malay L1 speakers.

But what is the explanation for the consistent pattern of copula absence by following grammatical environment found in the Caribbean English Creole mesolects and AAVE? The traditional explanation, for example, in Stewart (1969), is that these differences in *frequencies* reflect differences in the *forms* of the copula required for different predicates in the creole basilect (the latter ultimately going back to differences in copula forms in ancestral African varieties[12]) and in the *order* and *way* these forms change in the process of decreolization. For instance, Stewart (1969), building on Bailey's (1965, 175) observation that Jamaican Creole distinguished between "zero before adjectives, an obligatory *a* before nominals, and a ***de*** which is often deleted before locatives," noted that a similar distinction obtained in earlier, basilectal Gullah and thus argued that a hypothetical process of decreolization could explain the modern distribution of copula absence in mesolectal Gullah as well as AAVE. Rickford (1998, 173) summarizes Stewart's argument as follows:[13]

Earlier recorded forms of Gullah showed *da* as an obligatory copula both before predicate nominals (parallel to *a* in JC [Jamaican Creole]), and before unmarked verbs, so that *Dem da fish* meant both "They are fish" and "They are fishing" (p. 244). However, *da* + V then decreolized to Ø *Ving*, while *da* + NP was retained for equation, and later relexified to *iz* + NP. Subsequently, as Stewart went on to argue (although not in precisely these terms), *iz* was variably introduced in _V+*ing* environments, and zero was variably introduced in _NP environments. But the fact that zero was diachronically introduced in continuative verbal (_V+*ing*) environments earlier than it was in nominal (_NP) environments explained why copula absence was today more common in the verbal than in the nominal environments, both in mesolectal Gullah and—if the same decreolizing process were assumed—in AAVE.

Table 2.3 Frequency of Copula Absence by Following Environment in Creoles, AAVE, and Various Studies of the Acquisition of English by Speakers of Other Languages

Data set		Ordering of predicate contexts (lowest to highest rate of zero copula)								
A	AAVE	NP	<	Loc	<	Adj	<	V-*ing*	<	*gonna*
B	Creole	NP	<	Loc	<	Adj	<	V-*ing*	<	*gonna*
C	Indian English (Indo-Aryan Lls)	gonna	<	Adj	<	NP	<	Loc	<	V-*ing*
D	South African Indian English (Mesthrie 1992, Indo-Aryan L1s)	Loc.	<	Adj	<	NP	<	V-*ing*		
E	South African Indian English (Mesthrie 1992, Dravidian L1s)	Loc	<	Adj	<	V-*ing*	<	NP		
F	Singapore English (Platt 1979, Malay-medium)	V-*ing*	≈	NP	<	Adj	<	Loc		
G	Singapore English (Platt 1979, Chinese-medium)	V-*ing*	≈	NP	≈	LOC	<	Adj		
H	Singapore English (Platt 1979, English-medium)	Loc	≈	NP	<	V-*ing*	<	Adj		
I	Singapore English (Ho 1986, Chinese L1)	Loc	≈	NP	<	Adj	≈	V-*ing*		
J	Spanish Learner of English (Butterworth and Hatch 1978)	NP	≈	Adj	≈	LOC	<	V-*ing*		
K	Spanish Learners of English (Shapira 1978)					PredP	<	V-*ing*		

Source: From Sharma and Rickford 2009, table 4, 76.

Interestingly enough, Stewart had no synchronic quantitative evidence that copula absence by following grammatical environment in mesolectal Gullah followed the general Caribbean/AAVE pattern in AAVE. That would not come until Weldon (2003a, b).

The preceding explanation for the parallelisms between mesolectal English creoles and AAVE has not been without its challenges, discussed and responded to in Winford (1992, 48–49; 1998, 111) and Rickford (1998, 179–85). Space will not allow me to repeat the discussion, but to the extent that there is relevant new data or argumentation, I will mention it here.

For instance, in response to Mufwene's (1992) query about why AAVE showed higher rates of copula absence before NP than Caribbean creole mesolects generally do (contrast figure 2.1 above with figure 2.2), there is now the evidence of Weldon (2003a, 66; 2003b, 182) that mesolectal Gullah shows higher copula absence rates before __NP (27 percent for *is*-absence, 30 to 56 percent for *are*-absence) than does Trinidadian (1 percent) or Jamaican (3 percent), as tabulated in Rickford (1998, 190). And since Gullah is geographically and historically closer to AAVE than the Caribbean varieties, that is perhaps the more relevant comparison. But this finding allows us to note that the pre-NP copula absence rates for some other creole Englishes are also high (JC in DeCamp's 1960 texts: 28 percent; Hawaiian 63 percent), and to make the general variationist point (cf. Poplack 2002, 14, on rates vs. conditioning) that it is not the absolute levels of copula absence that matter, but their relative levels compared with other following grammatical environments. In both the Gullah and the other seemingly "aberrant" cases, the "high" pre-NP rates are generally lower than the rates before __Adj, __Ving, and __gon.

Weldon (2003a) is also revealing with respect to another detraction that Mufwene (1992) and others have raised: Shouldn't __Adj copula absence be consistently higher than __Loc, if adjectives never require a copula in the creole basilect, while locatives do (*de*)? Rickford et al. (1991, 121) had already shown that while the "high __Adj" pattern was generally followed in AAVE, the __Loc and __Adj predicates were more likely to be reversed than any other two adjacent predicates in the following grammatical hierarchy for copula absence. To this, Rickford (1998) added the observation that the "high Adj" pattern was more likely to be followed in creole mesolects that were closer to or surrounded by deep basilects (like Jamaican) than those that were not (like Barbadian and Trinidadian). The "mesolectal to upper mesolectal system" that Weldon (2003a, 68) analyzes in Gullah corroborates this analysis, since it is more similar to Barbadian and Trinidadian in showing higher copula absence before __Loc than __Adj (55 percent vs. 41 percent, respectively, for *is* absence, 75 percent vs. 56 percent, respectively, for post vocalic *are* absence).[14] This may lend some support to decreolizing models like those in Singler (1991) and Winford (1992, see table 2.3 above) in which the pre-locative creole copula (*de*) goes to zero before *be* forms variably come in, blurring or wiping out the basilectal distinction between pre-adjectival and pre-locative predicates.

Turning now to the distinction between copula environments and auxiliary environments in the strict sense (see note 6)—the most robust part of the hierarchy of copula absence by predicate or following grammatical environment, and a pattern that is also found in *some* cases of L1 or L2 acquisition (D, I, J, K in table 2.3 above)—Sharma and Rickford (2009, 84–85) have proposed an explanation:

> This may be attributed in part to the perceived redundancy, on the part of the learner, in using an auxiliary with a verbal predicate. Auxiliary uses of *be* with V-*ing* and *gon(na)* involve verbal content or inflection . . . at a minimum of two points in the

clause—the auxiliary and the progressive verb—whereas copula sentences with non-verbal predicates require morphological inflection at only one point. . . . This perception of redundancy can explain high rates of auxiliary *be* omission insofar as speakers perceive progressive and *gon(na)* future predicates as bearing sufficient marking of verbal features, while non-verbal predicates require an overt bearer of verbal information in the form of a copula.[15]

2.5 CONCLUSION

In closing, I must emphasize the tremendous need for new research, both synchronic, on present-day AAVE use in areas that have been studied minimally if at all, and on sociohistory. Research on *synchronic linguistic variation* in the use of the copula and other features by African Americans and Whites is badly needed, especially in the vast areas of the South that have not been covered by others, for example, Cukor-Avila (1999), Weldon (2003a, b), and Wolfram (this volume), as well as by Wolfram and his colleagues and students (Wolfram and Thomas 2002). Kautzsch and Schneider (2000), for instance, using ex-slave narrative data from different regions of South Carolina with varying densities of Black populations, have suggested that there were varying degrees of "creolization" in those regions, as represented in the number and kinds of "creole" features in the kinds of AAVE attested there. This innovative diachronic research now needs to be accompanied by good synchronic, present-day sociolinguistic, variationist research in the various regions of South Carolina. And we need comparable research in Florida, Mississippi, Tennessee, Virginia, and other areas of the South that have been the site of few if any community studies.

We also additionally need new *sociohistorical research* on language, culture, and the interactions of Blacks (and Whites) in America, from the seventeenth century to the present, colony by colony, state by state, and at the level of counties and plantations and homesteads at which linguistic interactions and acculturations take place. Among linguists, Dillard, Mufwene, Winford, and I, inter alia, have made helpful initial forays into this area, but much more remains to be done.

We all agree, I think, that variations by region and time period in demographic and ecological conditions, attitudes, and source language inputs would have influenced the kinds of English that African, Caribbean, and African American peoples developed in colonial and post-independent America. Given such variation, some Blacks would indeed have come to approximate the speech of indentured and other immigrant Whites closely, but others would *not* have, retaining substrate African or creole languages for a while, and leaving their influences in the distinctive English they spoke and bequeathed to subsequent generations. We also agree that the South—especially colonial Virginia and Maryland, Georgia, and North and South Carolina—should be the primary focus of future research and that documentary evidence is almost nonexistent for the seventeenth century, better (but still limited) for the eighteenth century, and best for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Mufwene and Winford are both more sanguine about the extent to which Black speech was influenced by White speech than I am,[16] but Winford seems more open to acknowledging creole influences on AAVE than Mufwene is. I support Winford's closing observation (in this volume) that "it is high time we recognize that the different positions [Anglicist and creolist] complement each other, and that together, they offer the most comprehensive view of AAVE origins." What I would resist (cf. Rickford 2006, 99) is a return to the pre-Herskovits (1941) position that the acquisition of English language and culture in America by Black people was influenced only or overwhelmingly by the models they encountered from Whites, with little or no impact from the languages they brought with them from Africa and the Caribbean or without adaptations on American soil. Some Anglicists seem to have held such positions, but none of those representing the Anglicist position in this volume, including Mufwene, Schneider, and Van Herk do.

I also believe that we should not treat absence of evidence as evidence of absence (i.e., in relation to the absence of linguistic records in the seventeenth century), and, remembering how *late* in the evolution of AAVE are the periods they represent, that we should not dwell excessively on Hoodoo records, ex-slave narratives, and other texts from the twentieth century (or at best the late nineteenth century). While there *are* difficulties in using literary and other attestations from earlier periods (pointed out by Schneider and others in this volume), there are strategies for dealing with those difficulties (cf. Rickford 1986; Schneider 2002; and others), and we simply cannot afford to differ from all other historical linguists by dismissing them out of hand. I am confident that there *is* more sociolinguistically relevant evidence in the historical archives and historiography of colonial America—including commentary on and attestations of Black "English," than linguists have yet discovered or used. I hope future researchers prove me right, and that, in mining it, they take our discussion of the earliest roots of AAVE considerably further than we have been able to so far.

Two aspects of Black language use in earlier periods strike me as particularly in need of further research. One is the extent to which Black slaves and freedmen had *repertoires of styles or varieties* between which they could switch, much as most African Americans do today (hence Winford's definition of AAVE in this volume—adopted by me [see note 2], as referring to the variety spoken in informal contexts). So much of what we have written and said about their speech in earlier times implies that Blacks had only one variety so that if they were able to develop a pattern closer to White speech, we assume that they did not simultaneously have access to a more distinctly "Black" style as well. But Morgan (1998, 575), whose work I find extremely revealing, suggests otherwise:

> Although significant differences existed between these two regional speech communities, slaves in the Chesapeake and Lowcountry used language in similar ways. In both regions, slaves switched between different varieties of language, employed words in artful and inventive ways, and pronounced words in similar fashion.
>
> Slaves employed varieties of language in different contexts. They switched registers within the same language and switched codes—that is, between languages. . . .

That many slaves, particularly in the Chesapeake, spoke an English that whites could readily understand cannot, therefore, preclude the possibility that they spoke a creole among themselves. In short, the languages both Chesapeake and Lowcountry slaves spoke among themselves might have been far more alike than the ones they spoke to whites.

Another is the way in which *convergence* between various African American speech styles (regional, African vs. creole, and so on) came about. Morgan (1998, 670–71) attributes cultural convergence among different regional Black traditions to the mixing of peoples on the frontier, as people moved south and west, for example, to the Natchez District east of the Mississippi River, and to trans-Appalachian territories like Tennessee and Kentucky. He also sees the rise of King Cotton in the nineteenth century as a major innovative and converging force. The role of the internal slave trade by which slaves were moved from the Chesapeake into upcountry Georgia and eastern Texas is yet another lacuna in study of the origins of AAVE that requires new sociolinguistic research.

Notes

1. I am grateful to my former co-author Jerome Handler (Rickford and Handler 1994), currently at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, for very helpful feedback on the sociohistorical section of this chapter, and to the editors of this volume for their comments and suggestions. Since I have not always heeded their wise counsel, they should not be held responsible for any errors or infelicities that remain.
2. For historiographers, the papers from that conference appeared in Shuy (1965), but Stewart noted (1970, 351) that the origins debate "does not appear in the published papers from that conference." He also notes that the disagreement surfaced in discussion following a paper by Beryl Bailey. Of course, as Rickford (1998, 154) notes, others had raised the possibility of a pidgin or creole origin for African American vernacular speech even earlier, including the aptly named Wise (1933).
3. Like Winford (this volume), I use the term *African American Vernacular English* to refer to the nonstandard (or vernacular) forms of English used by African Americans in casual everyday conversation. The "Vernacular" qualification is necessary to distinguish these vernacular varieties from the full range of English varieties—including standard varieties—used by African Americans ("African American English"). Rickford and Rickford use Brown's (1968) term *Spoken Soul* for AAVE. I am sympathetic to the innovative use of "African American Language" by the editors of this volume and others, which may help to overcome the negative associations some people have when they think of the variety discussed in this volume as a "dialect" of English as a "language" in its own right. But "African American Language" might also include at least the creole forms of French spoken in Louisiana, and in the broader sense of "American," other forms of French, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and Coromanti spoken by descendants of African peoples in the Caribbean, Central, and South America. "AAVE," by convention, restricts our focus to the distinctive varieties of English spoken in African America (in the United States) and acknowledges that the bulk of AAVE's lexicon is from English.

4. These totals were calculated from the year by year list of African imports into New York, 1701–65, in table 3 in Medford et al. (2009, 45, who cite Donnan 1969 as their source). From table 5, Medford et al. (2009, 47, citing Donnan 1969, 3:462–511), it appears that 900 of the Caribbean imports to New York were from Jamaica, 334 from Antigua, and 183 from Barbados. Other territories do not even come close.

5. Mufwene himself (2000, 239) says that "it is true that CANDY and Tituba, two slaves recently imported from Barbados by the time of the Salem Witch Trials in Massachusetts in 1692, spoke creole/pidgin-like idiolects (Cassidy 1986)." So he does not seem to be disputing the creole-like nature of the features they exemplify. But he goes on to say, "However, we do not know for sure that these were not interlanguages nor how representative they were of Barbadian slaves in general."

6. For some of the main laws, accompanied by statistics about the growth of the Black population in Virginia, see: http://www.history.org/history/teaching/slavelaw.cfm. Many of Virginia's slave laws like those of South Carolina, were modeled on the slave codes of Barbados. Mufwene (in this volume) does note the institutionalization of racial segregation in South Carolina in 1720, but he does not appear to recognize it in other southern states until the late nineteenth century.

7. The core colony of the Chesapeake, as discussed by Morgan (1998, xvii), is Virginia, but the region also includes "Maryland and northern North Carolina." The core colony of Morgan's (ibid.) "Low Country" is South Carolina, but this region also includes "Georgia, East Florida, and southern North Carolina."

8. In tribute to Labov (1969), the first quantitative study of the AAVE copula, these illustrative examples are all from that source (716–17). The age and geographical location of the speakers who provided his examples are indicated in parentheses.

9. Strictly speaking, the term "copula absence" should only be used of examples (1)–(3), where the predicates are noun phrases, locatives, and adjectives, and the term "auxiliary absence" should be used for examples (4) and (5), where the predicates are verbs. However, there is a long tradition of referring to both copula and auxiliary *is/are* absence broadly as copula absence or zero copula, with the finer distinction only being made where necessary.

10. As Sharma and Rickford (2009, 61) explain: "The Spearman rank-order correlation coefficient (Spearman's rho, R_S) is a common nonparametric measure of the strength and direction of correspondence between two sets of ranked data (Siegel and Castellan 1988). . . . Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach 1951; Miller 1995) . . . [is] a statistic used to judge the reliability of tests by quantifying the extent to which they provide the same results on repeated trials." The Spearman coefficients below figures 2.1 and 2.2 measure the extent to which the data depicted there match the order of following grammatical environments depicted in (6).

11. In creole continua, like those found in the Anglophone Caribbean, the *basilect* refers to the deepest, furthest from standard English variety (sometimes an idealization, as in Bailey 1966), the *acrolect* to the variety closest to standard English, and the *mesolects* to varieties in between (DeCamp 1971; Rickford 1987). For example, in Guyana: ▨ (basilect), *(h)e Ø goin* (mesolect), *he is going* (acrolect).

12. For instance, as Holm (1984, 19▨ted, the Yoruba copula system distinguishes between predicative adjectives ("a subclass of verbs which require no copula"); locatives (which take "*wà*" [with stylistic variant *ǹ*▨ and noun phrases (which take either *jé* or ▨. So, speakers of Yoruba, and perhaps other African languages acquiring English in the

New World, would have been sensitive to differences in predicate type or following gram-matical environment in a way that speakers of English (which makes no distinctions in form by following grammatical environment) would not have been. Incidentally, we need research on the other main (West and Central) African languages that Black indentured servants and slaves coming to the United States and the Anglophone Caribbean brought with them, and we also need more research on quantitative variability in copula use in West African English, along the lines pioneered by John Singler.

13. It may be helpful to refer to table 2.2 when reading this, although table 2.2 represents Winford's slightly different assumptions about decreolizing developments, in a different locale.

14. Note that Weldon's (2003) 9 post-vocalic *a* variants include 3 tokens of '

15. To illustrate the point: "He *is* a man" involves verbal content or inflection at only one point (*is*), while "He *is* walk*ing*" involves verbal content or inflection at two points (*is*, *-ing*).

16. Even where a vernacular feature, for example, *th*-stopping or consonant cluster simplifica-tion, could have British dialect sources, I continue to wonder (cf. discussion in Rickford and Rickford 2000, 147ff.) why it MUST be attributed to British sources when it could equally have come from African and/or creole substrates.

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