

## Black English

The English spoken by African-Americans in the U.S. differs systematically from "Standard English" (SE). Known as "Black English" (a term which replaces the earlier "Non-Standard Negro English"), or as "Black English Vernacular" (to emphasize that there is considerable linguistic variation within all racial groups in the U.S.) it has a consistent syntax. Common prejudice has it that black English is necessarily inferior to white, but this view has no linguistic validity.

Source: Dillard, J. L. (1973/1972). Black English: Its history and usage in the United States. New York: Vintage Books.

### Differences in the Verb System

#### *Verb stems*

In BE the stem of many verbs is different from SE:

Not <i>fill</i> , but <i>full</i> :	<i>He fullin' de tank</i>
Not <i>leave</i> , but <i>lef</i>	<i>He lef town</i>
Not <i>heat</i> , but <i>hot</i>	Told to <i>heat the beans</i> , he ate them!
Not <i>ask</i> , but <i>aks</i>	<i>He aks me the way</i>

#### *Optional Past-Tense Marking*

In all languages verbs can be marked for either **tense** or **aspect**. Tense expresses distinctions of the position in time or duration of the action or state that the verb denotes: most familiarly, past, present, or future. Aspect expresses distinctions concerning the nature of the action that the verb denotes as to its beginning, duration, completion or repetition, without reference to its position in time.

In Standard English, marking of **verb tense** is obligatory, while marking of **verb aspect** is optional.

In Black English, the reverse is true: marking of tense is optional, marking of aspect is obligatory. Action in the past may be represented by the base form of the verb.

SE: *I fed the cat and washed the dishes and swept the floor.*

In BE the following may be either present or past tense:

*I feed the cat and wash the dishes and sweep the floor.*

When tense marking does occur, it is *non-redundant*. In SE every verb in a sequence must be marked as either present or past; in BE only one of the verbs need be marked (though more than one may be). So an alternative acceptable past-tense form would be:

*I fed the cat and wash the dishes and sweep the floor*

It is assumed, reasonably, that past-tense marking on one of the verbs is sufficient.

The number of verbs marked is free:

*The boy carried the dog dish in the house and put some food in it and bring it out and called his dog...*

Or the past occurrence of these events may be marked by non-verb lexical items:

*Yesterday, I feed the cat and wash the dishes and sweep the floor.*

So *...he go yesterday...* is grammatical.

### ***Obligatory Aspect Marking***

There is no use of the forms of the verb *be* in the present tense as a copula or 'linking' verb:

*They real fine*

*If you interested*

Instead the verb *be* is used to marks aspect as habitual or continuous, but without changing its grammatical form:

*He be goin'* marks aspect as continuous

So that absense of *be* indicates discontinuous or XX

*He goin'* (may be either present or past event)

So in SE we have:

*He be waitin' for me every night when I come home*

And: *He waitin' for me right now*

But not: *\*He be waitn' for me right now*

or: *\*He waitn' for me every night*

Compare the insult:

*He workin' when de boss come in* (He works just/only when the boss comes in)

with the complement:



## Other Syntactic Differences

### *Invariant Pronoun Forms*

The origins of Black English are unclear. One account is that its origins lie in a creole English used by the first African Americans in America.

A **pidgin** is a language with no native speakers, formed as a means of communication between people with different languages, drawing features from both but dispensing with strange or difficult features.

A **creole** is a pidgin that has become the native language of its speakers.

Pidgin and creole languages typically don't differentiate between masculine and feminine in their pronoun systems. Some of this can be found in BE:

*He a nice little girl*

*I don't know her name* (referring to a male)

There is also invariant pronoun form in possessives:

<i>me</i>	instead of	<i>my</i>
<i>he, him</i>		<i>his</i>
<i>she</i>		<i>her</i>

*me book*  
*she laundry*

And the undifferentiated pronoun may serve as a subject form:

*Me help you?*  
*Him paintin' wif a spoon*

### *Non-Redundant Pluralization*

The noun is unmarked when plurality is otherwise indicated:

*So many million dollar*  
*Forty year*

but:

*The dollars*  
Third Person Singular

We find absence of the *-s* affix for what appear to be third-person singular indicative verb forms, arguably because there is no true present tense in BE:

*John run*

Actually, two BE categories have the surface form *John run*. This can be seen from the fact that they are negated in different ways:

*John don' run*

*John ain' run*

And they form questions differently.

### **Clause Structure**

In SE, the clause *Can he go?* becomes an embedded clause thus:

*I don't know whether he can go*

In BE, it becomes:

*I don' know can he go*

### **Derivational Processes**

SE has ways of deriving a noun from a verb:

<i>inherit</i>	->	<i>inheritance</i>
<i>describe</i>	->	<i>description</i>

And an adjective from a noun:

<i>description</i>	->	<i>descriptive</i>
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In BE these processes work differently:

*They ain't no one to 'heritance 'em  
... for understandment...*

### **Conjunctions**

In the past it was sometimes suggested that BE connects clauses only with *and*, and that as a result supports only limited forms of logical reasoning. This is incorrect; conjunctions other than *and* exist:

For example, *time* functions not as *by the time that*, but like the SE conjunction *when*:

*Time we get there they be gone  
I made you a livin', girl, time I was free  
Time she said it he jumped up from the table*

Either X or Y (SE) becomes X or either Y (BE)

*I can go swimming or either cut yards*

Neither X nor Y (SE) becomes (*It ain'*) X neither Y (BE)

### **Relative Connectors**

BE often uses *what* where SE uses *who*:

*There was a man what aksed...*  
*We what been on the place...*

### **Prepositions**

Prepositions in BE are distributed differently:

<u>SE</u>	<u>BE</u>	
<i>out of</i>	<i>out</i>	<i>Put the cat out the house</i>
<i>over at or to</i>	<i>over</i>	<i>Over Granma's house</i>
<i>at</i>	Ø(null)	

### **Deictics**

BE uses *here go* and *there go* in a way similar to the French forms *voici* and *voilà*:

<i>Here go a table</i>	(Here is a table)
<i>There go a bus</i>	(There is a table)

## Phonological Differences

[From Dillard (1973/1972)]

# On the Pronunciation of Black English

**T**HERE are, of course, certain pronunciations characteristic of Black English at its various stages. The usual procedure is to deal with those characteristics first—and, indeed, to deal with them to the extent of omitting everything else (see, for example, Susan Houston, in Bibliography). The intention in this book has been to reverse that procedure—to slight pronunciation matters, if necessary, in order to insure that other aspects of Black English might be dealt with.

One of the disadvantages of dealing with phonology first has been that it has seemed to give some support to the “thick lips” fallacy; if phonology is the determining characteristic of the dialect, then it is only one brief misstep to the conclusion that physical characteristics of Blacks are the source of the dialect difference. Beyond that misplaced physiology, there is still the fallacy of a kind of racial “carelessness” in pronunciation—sometimes rationalized as being due to the apathy of lower-status human beings or to “not having been taught any better.” Even some dedicated Black educators have fallen victim to that error. Finally, in the current state of analysis of Black English, we must perforce deal in differences from Standard English; the result is that, even involuntarily, we tend to deal in terms of what is “lost” from Standard English. It would take a much more complete phonological analysis than now exists to enable us to deal concretely with what has been “gained”—in other words, with what Black English has that other varieties of English do not have.

309

*On the Pronunciation of Black English*

(2) The initial "th" of *the, then, that, those, though, there, this, these* is pronounced as [ð]. (This feature is "shared" with certain Northern dialects, where any but the most incidental connection is extremely unlikely.)

(3) Final "th" of *with, both, birth, mouth, truth, etc.*, is sometimes pronounced as [f]. (This is an elegantizing pronunciation within Negro Non-Standard; the less elegant form is pronunciation with [v]. White dialects have the "substitution" of either [t] or [f], but not the stylistic relationship in which [t] is inelegant and [f] elegant. The pronunciation [θ], as in Standard English, is usually about equally elegant.)

(4) Medial "th" of *mother, other, brother* (always voiced [ð] in Standard English, not voiceless [θ], is pronounced as [v]. (This results in occasional dialect spellings such as *Move of God* in a storefront church name, where mainstream culture has *Mother*.) There is something of a stylistic alternation with [d], as in (3).

(5) Final [r] is "dropped," as in many other dialects of English; but, in the Black community, this persists in geographic areas which do not have the feature otherwise. Even in the South, it is more widespread among Negroes than in the white community—leading to amusing explanations about how the Negro imitated the whites "only more so." There has long been speculation about how Plantation Creole/Black English speech habits (although not called by those names) may have been the influencing factor in the Southern dialect, and not "r-dropping" British dialects; the more reasonable answer probably prefers a combination of the two, although it is absurd to speculate in Tower of Babel style about the "first" speaker who "lost" an [r]. Afro-American dialects of English, and even of French, have this same feature. The "r-dropping" is also common in certain Northern United States dialects—which, however, often have a difference in the existence of "intrusive" [r] (*idrear of #*).

In at least some versions of Black English, intervocalic [r] is "dropped," so that

mad	[mæd]
mired	[maɪd]
married	[mæɪd]

differ only in the vowel nuclei (which are so much alike, from the viewpoint of Standard English, that distinctions are not easily made). Farrison's dissertation (p. 259) records [æʃ] 'Irish,' Jamaican English also has this "r-loss" feature (Cassidy, *Jamaica Talk*, p. 59). *Harry* differs from *hay* mainly in the articulation of the first vowel. Cassidy cites the "local pronunciation of *Carolina*" (*Cəˈlɪnə* or /kəˈlɪnə/),

Appendix

308

A thorough evaluation of phonological structures in Black English, according to current linguistic theory, can be undertaken only after more basic syntactic and morphological problems have been solved. A dissertation by Philip A. Luelsdorf (see Bibliography) has just appeared which is very strong in this theoretical sense. However, some spectrographic analysis—still too rudimentary to be reported here—has convinced me that there are differences which would not have been available to Luelsdorf's impressionistic transcription procedure, admirable as his accomplishment is in terms of such procedures.

Several features are often noted among Negro Non-Standard-speaking populations. It should be kept in mind that there is a great deal of phonological variation within those populations—much more than there is in syntax—and that these generalizations are perhaps not exclusively valid even for any one speaker.

(1) Vowels in General:

The low front vowel [a] (in addition to the low mid-to-front vowel [æ] as in *father* in most American white dialects) is present in most versions of Black English. It also occurs in Southern white dialects, and may have spread to them from Black English. This vowel is between the [a] of *bat* and the [æ] of *cat*; even when lengthened, it sounds like the vowel of *cat* or *cap* to many speakers of Standard English. A New York teacher, for example, recently commented that she had "discovered" an unexpected "new homophone pair"—*island* and *Allen*—in Negro Non-Standard. Although the homophone set of Negro Non-Standard is different from (and almost certainly no greater than) that of Standard English, these two are not examples; [a-lən] contrasts with [ælən], but some speakers of Standard English can't hear the difference. Turner (*Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*, p. 16) shows that this distribution is found in Gullah and in several West African languages.

The lengthened [aː] of *island* in Black English is, of course, [æɪ] ("long *r*") in Standard English. This "replacement" by Black English is shared with many Southern white dialects. Any theory of the direction of influence would require long and careful consideration. In some places (e.g., the Washington, D. C., Black community) there is less tendency to this phonological development before voiceless consonants [ptk] than before voiced consonants [bdg]; that is, the [aː] sound will occur in *ride* but the [æɪ] sound in *write*. The more extreme forms of Black English have the "substitution" everywhere. Black English vowels, like Southern white dialects, have a marked tendency to lengthen:

[prɜː] for [prɜ]

On the Pronunciation of Black English

311

sonant in the first two words, in other varieties of English will often strive to add that consonant. Since it is not part of their underlying system, they produce

dest  
wast

as often as they produce *desk* and *wasp*. (It is data like these which show us that the Black English forms are not merely casual style forms, like those of speakers of other varieties who produce *des* and *was* when speaking casually and *desk* and *wasp* when speaking more formally.)

In initial position [st-] and [sk-] have a slightly different articulation from that of Standard English. Code-switching, or some other process not so far examined, produces an occasional form like *skrong* for *strong*.

A phonological characteristic of Plantation Creole, found still in Gullah and sporadically in other forms of Black English, is the voiced bilabial fricative written [β] by phoneticians. This sound is very unusual to most English speakers (although they may have heard it between vowels in some varieties of Spanish), and it has caused endless difficulties to writers who have attempted to represent Black English in conventional orthography. Machine analysis reveals a more complicated sound, in some environments, which can be written [βββ]. Dialect fiction writers traditionally varied in their rendering of Black pronunciations of a word like *heavy*: reacting to the fricative characteristics of the first and last of the three elements [β . . . β], they sometimes wrote *heawy*; perceiving the closure feature of the medial element [b], they sometimes wrote *heaby*; and sometimes they simply gave up and wrote it the Standard English way, *heavy*. (The fact that Black English speakers, in code-switching, sometimes pronounced the word in the Standard English way didn't make their tasks the least bit easier!) Many writers, over a period of something like two hundred years, have represented Black English pronunciations in this way, and many of the citations in this book show that practice. At times, it has caused confusion and has led to the conclusion that the writers were simply distorting Standard English. In the case of the minstrel show writers and a few other less responsible ones, this may very well be true. There is, however, a more respectable basis for the practice as systematically handled. Farrison's dissertation, *Phonology of the Iltter-ate Negro Dialect of Guilford County, North Carolina* (1936) shows such pronunciations as [βɛɪ] for *very*, [ouβa] for *over*, [ɪβɪtweɪt] for *heavyweight*, [ɪmʌβmɛnt] for *movement*, etc.

Appendix

310

apparently as proof that American white dialects do the same thing; however, the shwa vowel [ə] was very probably "lost" before the [r] in that local white pronunciation, making it a simple case of "r-dropping" before consonant [l]. There has yet to be advanced any convincing proof that the Southern English "dropping" of pre-consonantal [r] has anything to do with the U. S. situation. Of course, it is possible to treat this phenomenon in more detail than simple talk of "r-dropping" (there are various degrees of retroflexion of the tongue or of other structures which are more accurate designations than mere "loss"); these phenomena are subject to exact phonological study, but the studies have not so far been performed.

(6) The plural -es following a final -s (pronounced as a vowel plus [z] in Standard English), will have a plural which is a long [s]: [wɔs] 'wasp' will have the plural [wɔs:] (or [wɔss:]). This is a feature of some white Southern dialects (including my own small-boy dialect). It is essentially grammatical, not automatically phonological, in scope; i.e., it does not occur with verbs like *races* but only with nouns like *races*.

(7) Stress patterns differ from those of Standard English. Thus, Joe sent mé

which in Standard English would mean 'me especially' or 'me and not someone else', has no special emphasis on the object pronoun in Black English. The function of stress (prominence—even loudness—on given syllables) is different from that of Standard English, but has not been seriously investigated.

(8) The range of vocal pitch, excluding falsetto, is probably greater. No more has been done on this, so far, than the collection of a few impressionistic statements.

Several features often referred to pronunciation are really matters of lexicon rather than of phonology. Thus, the base forms of Black English are

des'  
was'  
aks

(the apostrophes in the first two words are used only because the reader may not be used to seeing *des*, etc., in print) rather than

desk  
wasp  
ask

Basilect speakers who are aware of the existence of an extra con-

Pronunciation "problems" of Black children have motivated some of the greatest pedagogical blunders of all. Speech correctionists, mistaking the pronunciation patterns of Negro Non-Standard for the genuine deficiencies of the physiologically handicapped (cleft palate, etc.) children with whom they are qualified to work, have extended their own practices to areas in which they are not applicable. Black children who already do so quite well are "taught" to make sounds like "Oom" in weekly practice sessions. The *Washington Post* for December 22, 1968, pictured a little boy, six years old at the most, with his cheeks puffed full of wind, enthusiastically participating in the weekly session. It is to be hoped that the children derive some pleasure from this activity, since it has no practical language value. There is no phoneme of English which requires that the cheeks be puffed full of wind, and it is unlikely that there is any other language which utilizes such an articulation in its structure.

It is also to be observed that pronunciation, more obviously variable than any other part of language except perhaps vocabulary, is less consistent on a nationwide scale than the other features of Black English. In New Orleans, for example, Black English speakers, like lower-class white speakers, have "boïd" [boïd] for *bird*; there is no evidence I am aware of that Negro speakers in Brooklyn do the same thing, but social relationships between Black and white are quite different there. In many places, Black English pronunciation has obviously been influenced by white non-standard dialects. Yet the ethnic differences remain; one of my earliest memories of Negro dialect pronunciation is of a group of barbers in a small-town Texas shop who loved to encourage the Negro shoeshine "boy" to talk about a certain football game in order to ridicule his pronunciation *penalty* (penalty). The poor fellow joined in happily with them, thinking that they were laughing with him over the perfidy of referees.