Searching for traces of contact: negation patterns in nineteenth-century African-American English – a corpus analysis

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Contact influences: the origin of AAE
• (as is known to everyone in the field): decades-long history of debates on “traces of contact” in African American Vernacular English (AAVE):
  • “anglicist” vs. “creolist” hypotheses
  • (most recently)
• some basic arguments and considerations of this debate still valid, but
• no intention of rekindling this (simplest) antagonism here

Contact influences: the origin of AAE
• more realistic recognition of complexity of influences,
• need to weigh influences from both sides, varying by region (sociodemography), feature and language level, style & context
  ➢ compromise position (e.g. Winford 1997/98)
• in addition: description & investigation of diachrony of a nonstandard variety deserves interest in its own right
  • as a linguistic system of its own,
  • as evidence of natural linguistic change
• problem: issue of sources of EAAE (types & scope, representativeness, validity?)
  • here: semi-literate letters, turned into an electronic corpus (> opens methodological toolkit of corpus linguistics)

Theoretical background: degrees of creoleness - ?
• “deep” (radical) creoles (e.g. Sranan) vs. “light” creoles (e.g. Bajan)
• “cline of creoleness”: applied to Caribbean creoles in Schneider 1990; cf.
  • notions of “semi-creoles”, “creoloids” (problematic)
  • “differential creolization”
  • notion by Cooper 1979
  • applied to EAAE in South Carolina: Kautzsch/Schneider 2002
• CLL vol. Degrees of Restructuring (Neumann-Holzschuh/Schneider 2002)
• “partial restructuring” (Holm 2004)
• assessing degrees of contact influences from competing sources (substrate, superstrate, universal strategies?, …)

Available sources on Earlier AAE
• 1970s: scant documentation, largely speculative debate
• literary attestations, travelers’ reports: questionable
• WPA ex-slave narratives: analyzed in Schneider 1989; validity contested
• ex-slave recordings (Bailey et al. 1991): small number, poor quality, representativeness contested
• speech islands (Samana recordings, also Nova Scotia; Poplack, Sankoff, Tagliamonte); results have been challenged
• Hyatt’s Hoodoo recordings (Ewers 1996, Kautzsch 2000)
• early blues lyrics (BLUR, Miethaner 2006)
• Liberian letters (Kautzsch 2000), Civil War veterans’ letters (Montgomery et al. 1993)
• OREAAC (van Herk & Poplack 2003; Liberian letters from ACS archives)
  ➢ growing body, but in need of supplementation
  ➢ methodological concerns

Introducing The Corpus of Older African American Letters (COAAL):
• letters written by semi-literate African-Americans;
  • motivation: “functionaries, "desperadoes", "lonelyhearts" (in Montgomery’s 1999 scheme)
• currently: 1291 letters (ultimately: 1530); 442.000 words
  • from published and microfilm collections (35%) and archival manuscripts (65%)
  • corpus building 2007-2010, finishing touches ongoing
• ca. 900 writers
• time span: 1763-1919, mostly 1860s
• compiled in collaboration with Prof. Michael Montgomery, Univ. of South Carolina, and Dr. Lucia Siebers, Univ. of Regensburg (Principal Investigator)
• funded by DFG 2007-2010 (project number SCHN 388/12-1)

Goals of this paper
• contribute to description of diachrony of African American English (AAE)
• by investigating a sample of Earlier AAE (EAAE)
• specifically: analyse negation patterns in (EAAE)
• employing a corpus-linguistic methodology
• requires consideration of some methodological concerns
• assess contact influences, likely sources of structures observed

Overview
• 2. Creole studies meets corpus linguistics
  • existing sources on EAAE
  • Introducing COAAL
  • methodological considerations
• 3. Negation in creoles
  • The cline of negation patterns in Caribbean Creoles
  • Negation patterns in (E)AAE
  • Methodology: finding negation patterns in a nonstandard corpus
• 4. Results & discussion
  • preverbal no
  • ain’t
  • never
  • negative concord
• 5. Conclusion
unpublished manuscripts from archives (ca. 700): usu. identified by source information of collection, or contents unpredictable and inconsistent capitalization

6 published collections (ca. 630 letters), minimal or lacking punctuation, “semi-literate” status of writer: criterion needs to be clear, consistent, no relation to the linguistic features of Lucia Siebers’ field tour of 18 (!) archives, Feb.-April 2008

Negation patterns in modern AAVE

• classic analysis of structure types: Labov 1972
• documentation of ongoing change: Weldon 1994
  • finds increase in usage of preverbal negator ain’t, but only in past tense (38% of all past tense full verb contexts), e.g. (pp. 384, 387): And Mike Tyson didn’t rape that girl. I’m down with Mike. He ain’t rape that girl. You ain’t expect to find her over here, did you?
  • ain’t is “not a tense-aspect neutral auxiliary”, “ain’t and didn’t are alternative realizations of the same underlying category” (388)
  • in modern AAVE: present-tense ain’t, negation of be or have past-tense ain’t (increasingly) full verb negator

Sample application: cline of creoleness in negation patterns of Caribbean English-based creoles

• ranked across a scale, quantified by occurrence in several varieties (based on sample sentences published by Hancock) (Schneider 1999, 1999; SCL Barbados 1992):
  • preverbal no – generic creole negator, basilectal
  • Eni eh / ain’t: preverbal, generic, or negation of be/have only (?)
  • Never / neva / neba: dialectal single event negator, or neg. of completive done (Hancock?)
  • Doun / don / don’t: mesolectal, monomorphemic (?)
  • Didn’t / didn’t: mesolectal, tense-marked = more removed from basilect
  • Etclictic –en / mods, mesolectal
  • Multiple negation: widespread also in creoles, not diagnostic of lectal level

Creole studies meets corpus linguistics: COAAL corpus compilation

• Two principal sources:
  • unpublished manuscript letters from archives (ca. 700):
    • Michael Montgomery’s collection as initial input
    • Lucia Siebers’ field tour of 18 (!) archives, Feb.-April 2008
  • 6 published collections (ca. 630 letters), edited by historians
    • (Wiley, Storarob, Blasingame, Miller, Ifye, Berlin)

Two main criteria:

• African American ethnicity of the writer:
  • usu. identified by source information of collection, or contents
  • attention given to the exclusion of dictated letters
• “semi-literate” status of writer:
  • criterion needs to be clear, consistent, no relation to the linguistic features of the documents being analyzed (to avoid circularity) and representing an unambiguous indication of marginal literacy; identified by:
    • minimal or lacking punctuation,
    • unpredictable and inconsistent capitalization

Creole studies meets corpus linguistics: data mining

• Corpus-linguistic procedure builds upon specialized software (current market leader: Wordsmith) and automatic retrieval procedures,
• yields large numbers of attestations of search forms upon a keystroke, usually in the format of a KWIC-concordance; example: preverbal no in COAAL:

Negation and creolization: some theoretical background

• negation does not feature prominently in typological discussion on creole status,
  • “Negation, then, stands as yet another creole feature which does not coherently lend itself to analysis as a close ‘approximation’ …of lexifier grammar.” (McWhorter 2011: 90)
  • negative concord (near-categorical, ca. 70-100% of the time)
  • negative postposing:
    • negative concord extending to verb in subordinate clause (rare)
  • preverbal
  • NP negation after
  • multiple negation
  • discontinuous neg. (not in E-based creoles)

Negation patterns in Earlier AAVE

• Analysis of WPA ex-slave narratives (Schneider 1989):
  • documents and analyzes most of the types found by Labov 1972; e.g.
    • negative concord (near-categorical, ca. 70-100% of the time)
    • negative concord to preverbal position / negative attraction (never didn’t / never las’n)
    • negative postponing: had no (StE; rare but attested)
    • negative concord extending to indefinites in subordinate clause
    • negative concord extending to verb in subordinate clause (rare)
    • NP negation after without
    • negative inversion: Warn’t nobody …, Couldn’t nobody …
  • preverbal never to negate single past time event (rare)
  • ain’t for be/have + negation
  • ain’t as preverbal negator (for don’t, didn’t)
  • preverbal no (very rare)
Negation patterns in EAAE: further studies

- no aint in Liberian letters, > acrolectal (Kautzsch 2000)
- Kautzsch 2002 (various southern US 19th c. sources):
  - aint for behave not: common, for don’t: rare but firmly attested, for don’t: very rare
- modern AAE past negator aint’s is “not an invention but an early twentieth century rediscovery of an old low frequency function” (87)
- negative concord: decreasing in frequency with time (63)
- Howse 1997, Howse & Walker 2000 (diapora speech, ex-slave recordings):
  - aint: common for behave not, very rare for don’t: didn’t
  - negative concord within clause: 66-89%

Results: Negation patterns in COAAL (preliminary methodological notes)

- preverbal no:
  - exclusion of homographs (you no her, 89a4, 1864)
  - exclusion of idiomatic phrase no doubt
  - exclusion of dubious instances: but no pay (#802, 1867), and if no help (#1431, 1838; preverbal or [more likely] prenominal?)
  - but: inclusion of pattern which suggests prev in main clause: which I no doubt that you can (#201, 1860)
- aint:
  - exclusion of homographs (en ’and’, ’an’)
  - exclusion of chance products of spaces within words, e.g. en ney ’any’, en-joy, Mary ene, sang ent, work en ’working’, ord ained

Results: Negation patterns in COAAL (preliminary methodological notes)

- no evidence of generic creole preverbal negator function
- no evidence of ‘modern’ past tense full verb negator function
- all present tense, all 1
- 29 tokens of preverbal no:
  - all American man no do so he no eat them. (#486, 1850)
  - You no feel bad for that, dear friend (#674, 1841)
  - I no forget Mr. Tappan for ever and ever; and I no forget God (#672, 1842)
  - We no say this place no good, but we afraid of cold. (#626, 1841)
  - tokens from 8 different letters, by 5 writers, of these:
    - 2 letters / 4 tokens from Liberia
    - 6 letters / 3 writers / 25 tokens from Amistad captives (!)
- Discussion
  - 1 preadjectival token: creole pattern (verbal role of stative adjectives)
  - all tokens with some “African connection”?
  - doubtful whether this documents regular usage of preverbal no among slaves on southern plantations
  - where did the Amistad Africans acquire preverbal no? (enslaved Mende, transported to Cuba, sailed to Massachusetts. >WAPE7)

Results: uses of aint

- 6 tokens (only!), e.g.
  - if I aint gone (#1368, 1863)
  - I riten to amos an I anthe hearde from him (#1122, 1894)
  - I aint got them (#1012, 1873)
  - I Would like to Know Wheather I amoer get Eny or not If I aint get enfer (#106, 1889)
- observations & discussion:
  - surprisingly rare;
  - all present tense, all 1st person singular (subject)
  - functions: 4 tokens ‘have not’ + 22 tokens ‘am not’, both before go
  - fully in line with genesis from nonstandard English
  - no evidence of ‘modern’ past tense full verb negator function
  - no evidence of generic creole preverbal negator function
  - all examples rather late (1860s/70s/80s one each, 3 from 1890s - !?)

Results: functions of never

- 307 tokens
- several distinct meanings / meaning-form pairings:
  - ‘not at any time’ (= Standard English meaning), e.g.
    - your assistance to me will never be forgotten by me (#938, 1834)
    - if I never moore see you all in this world (#1027, 1875)
    - we shall never be en able to pay all expeences (#1336, 1839)
  - negation of single past time event (=widespread nonstandard usage)
    - when he got home from school he never eat any super and went wine to bead he said he was … (#906, 1865)
    - Well I had a very tedious journey I never Reáched Washington until yesterday a bout one oh clock (#1123, 1865)
    - I lay fule 3 ours is never that shalt my Eys for any sleep (#1416, 1797)
    - David said to you that he had to spend one hour every day in teaching me it is true that he use to teach me but he never spent one hold hour with me the hold winter at a time (#560, 1842)
  - ‘not for now’, ‘not for then’, with present perfect, past or present tense form:
    - sience we have been in the service we have never had is much is a Forlough
    - Sir this plac has Bin a Public plac for thirty yers and has never Bin fenc in Be for now (#770, 1867)
    - Alec is better but has never left town. (#366, 1807)
    - Sir i was Boarn [] hear in this City and Lived hear untill 1863 and never was arrested nor acused for Eny thing befour in my life (#783, 1866)
    - please excuse my bad writing as I never wont to school a day in my left (#918, 1862)
    - he owe me and never Paid it tho he Sead (#724, 1867)
    - master say that mistres answer my letter but I never get it (#543, 1838)
    - the reason why we never sign any of the contraction (#133, 1795)

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Results: functions of never

• a few interesting attestations, borderline cases:
  - generic present tense negator:
    - Dear Sir, I return to you the proposed Point of argument please at your leisure have them. Ready as I never know when I will be down to Sign them. (#1000, 1871)
  - 'not on any of several occasions in the past':
    - we have been with you in Battles and never flinched (#1435, 1865)
  - (not time frame but series of specific instances implied; negation of StE 'perfect of experience')

• interesting intermediate instance:
  - Sir, I am colored man, was enrolled for Co K, 1st Michigan, now U.S. Colored troops, at Ypsilanti in November 1863. I was sworn but never mustered into service. I went into camp near Detroit immediately, and remained there till May 1864. (#830, 1865)
  - ('should have been then, on single occasion, but so far it has not happened')

Discussion: remarkably low!

Results: negative concord

• quite common; examples (of rule application and non-application):
  - we hadnt anything stoll (#911, 1866)
  - it will not need no more plowing (#213, 1848)
  - we have not had any rare (#222, 1850)
  - I Didnt no any abc (#444, 1864)

• Frequency by types of verbs and indefinites:

| Type of Verb | Indefinite | Indefinite
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hadnt</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>will</td>
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<tr>
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<td>negation</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion: remarkably low!

References


Results: functions of never

• Frequencies:
  - 'not at any time'
  - negation of single past event
  - 'not up to now'
  - past tense verb form
  - 'not up to now/then', present tense verb form

• Discussion:
  - genesis: clearly alocreal (standard + nonstandard usage!
  - perfective negative ('not up to now/then');
  - not discussed in reference sources (grammars, dictionaries)
  - not really standard usage ('better': not rather than never)
  - but also not really ungrammatical (cf. examples from oral corpora)
  - colloquial
  - emphasis
  - [topic for future enquiry? (though not specifically in creole studies)]

Conclusion

- Negation patterns found in COAAL are mixed in origin, reflecting different contact influences:
  - marked by some pidgin / creole impact (prerebal no)
  - but astonishingly acrolectal (English-derived) on the whole:
    - rarity and dialectal functions of never,
    - rarity of negative concord,
    - lack of typical AAE patterns such as negative inversion
    - cause: literacy?
    - (issue of representativeness of letter writers of AA antebellum community at large - ?)

- need to recognize heterogeneity of source (corpus!)
- practical usefulness of corpus approach (COAAL) also for nonstandard varieties and creole studies; but
- pay attention to sub-corpora, and
- their respective sociolinguistic conditions of origin