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THE CREOLE ORIGINS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH: EVIDENCE FROM COPULA ABSENCE

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6.1 Introduction

Two issues loom large in discussions of the development of African-American vernacular English (AAVE). The first is the "creole origins issue" – the question of whether AAVE's predecessors, two or three hundred years ago, included creole languages similar to Gullah (spoken on the islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia) or the English-based creoles of Jamaica, Trinidad, Guyana, Hawaii, or Sierra Leone. The second is the "divergence issue" – the question of whether AAVE is currently becoming more different from white vernacular dialects in the US.

The creole origins issue is the older issue. The earliest linguists to suggest the possibility that AAVE had pidgin or creole roots were Schuchardt (1914), Bloomfield (1933: 474), Wise (1933), and Pardoe (1937).[1] The case was articulated in more detail by Bailey (1965) and repeated in Hall (1966: 15). It was vigorously championed by Stewart (1967, 1968, 1969) and Dillard (1972, 1992), and it was subsequently endorsed by Baugh (1979, 1980, 1983), Holm (1976, 1984), Rickford (1974, 1977), Fasold (1976, 1981), Smitherman (1977), Edwards (1980, 1991), Labov (1982), Mufwene (1983), Singler (1989, 1991a, 1991b, to appear), Traugott (1976), and Winford (1992a, 1992b, 1997), among others. Arguing against the creole hypothesis, and asserting instead that the speech of African Americans derives primarily from the dialects spoken by

1 See Reinecke *et al.* (1975: 482) and Holm (1988: 32–33, 55) for discussion of the early contributions of these pioneers on the creole origins issue. And for discussion of a previously unpublished manuscript by Schuchardt which bears on this topic, see Gilbert (1985).

British and other white immigrants in earlier times (hence the label "dialectologist") were Krapp (1924, 1925), Kurath (1928), Johnson (1930), Brooks (1935, 1985: 9–13), McDavid and McDavid (1951), McDavid (1965), Davis (1969, 1970), D'Eloia (1973), Schneider (1982, 1983, 1989, 1993b), Poplack and Sankoff (1987), Poplack and Tagliamonte (1989, 1991, 1994), Montgomery (1991), Tagliamonte and Poplack (1988, 1993), Montgomery *et al.* (1993), and Ewers (1996), among others. It should be added that positions are not always as polarized as these lists of creole proponents and opponents might suggest. For instance, while McDavid and McDavid (1951) felt that most AAVE features came from white speech, they recognized creole influence in the case of Gullah, and urged careful study of African and creole languages to see whether AAVE features in other areas might be traced to these. Similarly, Winford's (1997) paper is self-described as written from "a creolist perspective" – but it is one which allows for considerably more influence from British and other white dialects than creolists like Stewart and Dillard would concede. And Mufwene (1992: 158) argues that "neither the dialectologist nor the creolist positions accounts adequately for all the facts of AAE" and that new intermediate positions are necessary.

The divergence issue is more recent, first advanced in a 1983 conference paper by Labov and Harris (published as Labov and Harris 1986) on the basis of data from Philadelphia, and supported by other researchers from the University of Pennsylvania – Ash and Myhill (1986), Graff *et al.* (1986), Myhill and Harris (1986) – with data from the same city. Data from the Brazos Valley, Texas, and from elsewhere in the South were also introduced in support of this claim by Bailey and Maynor (1985, 1987, 1989). The issue was debated by Ralph Fasold, William Labov, Fay Boyd Vaughn-Cooke, Guy Bailey, Walt Wolfram, Arthur Spears, and myself in a panel discussion at the fourteenth annual conference on New Ways of Analyzing Variation (NWAV 14), held at Georgetown University in 1985 (Fasold *et al.* 1987). Butters (1989) is a critical book-length review of the divergence literature. Other contributions to this issue, several recognizing convergence as well as divergence in the recent history of AAVE, include G. Bailey (1993), Denning (1989), Butters (1987, 1988, 1991), Rickford (1991b) and Edwards (1992).

I will concentrate now on the creole origins issue since it is the older and better investigated one and the one which continues to inspire more controversy and new research.

6.2 Some definitions

To understand the "creole origins issue," we need to have some idea of what pidgins and creoles are, and for this, I will draw on Rickford and McWhorter (1997: 238):

> Pidgins and creoles are new varieties of language generated in situations

of language contact. A *pidgin* is sharply restricted in social role, used for limited communication between speakers or two or more languages who have repeated or extended contacts with each other, for instance through trade, enslavement, or migration. A pidgin usually combines elements of the native languages of its users and is typically simpler than those native languages insofar as it has fewer words, less morphology, and a more restricted range of phonological and syntactic options (Rickford 1992a: 224). A *creole*, in the classical sense of Hall (1966), is a pidgin that has acquired native speakers, usually, the descendants of pidgin speakers who grow up using the pidgin as their first language. In keeping with their extended social role, creoles typically have a larger vocabulary and more complicated grammatical resources than pidgins. However, some extended pidgins which serve as the primary language of their speakers (e.g. Tok Pisin in New Guinea, Sango in the Central African Republic) are already quite complex, and seem relatively unaffected by the acquisition of native speakers.

Although it was assumed for a long time that creoles evolved from pidgins, Thomason and Kaufman (1988: 147–166) and others have argued that many creoles, particularly those in the Caribbean and in the Indian Ocean, represent "abrupt creolization," having come into use as primary or native contact languages before a fully crystallized pidgin had had time to establish itself.

We also need to take into account *creole continuum* situations, like those in Guyana, Jamaica, and Hawaii, where, in between the deepest creole (the basilect) and the most standard variety of English (the acrolect), there exists a spectrum of intermediate varieties (the mesolects). In the pioneering work of DeCamp (1971) and many of his successors, it was assumed that such continua developed from earlier bilingual creole/standard situations through a process of *decreolization* in which the creole variety was gradually leveled in the direction of the standard. However, Alleyne (1971) suggested that in Jamaica, a continuum-like situation may have existed from the very beginnings of black/white contact, depending on the degree and nature of the contacts which house slaves, field slaves, and other segments of the slave community (e.g. old hands vs. the newly arrived) had with metropolitan English speakers. Subsequently, Baker (1982, 1991: 277), Bickerton (1986) and Mufwene (1996a) suggested that, given the lower proportions of blacks to whites in the founding phase of most colonies, creole continua may actually have formed "backwards," with the first generations of Africans acquiring something closer to metropolitan English, and later generations acquiring successively "restructured" or creolized varieties as they had less access to white norms and learned increasingly from each other.

The reason this issue is relevant to us is that early creolists like Dillard and Stewart tended to assume that the earliest variety of AAVE was a relatively uniform and basilectal creole which subsequently decreolized into mesolectal forms increasingly closer to English. However, more recent discussions of the

creole issue, for instance by Rickford (1997) and Winford (1997), provide more explicitly for variation across a continuum of varieties from very early on, although I (for one) contend that creole varieties were a significant part of the mix of the early contact situation, particularly in the South, and that a gradual process of quantitative decreolization must have been taking place in the USA over time, with fewer speakers using creole varieties, and more speakers using varieties closer to Standard English.

6.3 Relevant questions and evidence in relation to AAVE

From the point of view of the creolist/dialectologist debate, the fundamental question is whether a significant number of the Africans who came to the United States between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries went through processes of pidginization, creolization, and (maybe) decreolization in acquiring English (the creolists' position), or whether they learned the English of British and other immigrants fairly rapidly and directly, without an intervening pidgin or creole stage (the dialectologists' position).

Although linguists who address the creole issue typically concentrate on one kind of evidence, or at most two, there are at least *seven* different kinds of evidence which could be brought to bear on the primary question of whether AAVE was once a creole, each of them involving secondary questions of their own.

6.3.1 Sociohistorical conditions

One could ask, first of all, whether the sociohistorical conditions under which Africans came to and settled in the United States might have facilitated the importation or development of pidgins or creoles. With respect to importation, Stewart (1967), Dillard (1972), and Hancock (1986) favor the hypothesis that many slaves arrived in the American colonies and the Caribbean already speaking some variety of West African Pidgin English (WAPE) or Guinea Coast Creole English (GCCE). Rickford (1987a: 46–55) and Schneider (1989: 30–33), among others, feel that such slaves were probably not very numerous. However, the case for significant creole importation from the Caribbean in the founding period has been bolstered by recent evidence that "*slaves brought in from Caribbean colonies where creole English is spoken were the predominant segments of the early Black population in so many American colonies*, including Massachussetts, New York, South Carolina, Georgia, Virginia and Maryland in particular" (Rickford 1997: 331).

With respect to conditions for the creation or development of contact varieties on American soil, low proportions of target language (English) speakers relative to those learning it as a second language favor pidginization and creolization. The frequency of small US slave holdings and the relatively high proportion of whites to blacks in the US – in contrast with Jamaica and other

British colonies in the Caribbean (Parish 1979: 9; Rickford 1986: 254) – are thought by some to make it less likely that these processes took place in the US, particularly in the founding period (Schneider 1989: 35; Mufwene 1996: 96–99; Winford 1997). However, as Schneider (ibid.) points out, "just because a majority of plantations was small does not necessarily imply that a majority of the slaves lived on small plantations"; he cites Parish's (1979: 13) observation that "the large-scale ownership of a small minority meant that more than half the slaves [in the mid-nineteenth-century US] lived on plantations with more than twenty slaves."

Moreover, there were striking differences from one region to another. A creole is much more likely to have developed in South Carolina, where "blacks constituted over 60% of the total population within fifty years of initial settlement by the British" (Rickford 1986: 255) than in New York, where blacks constituted "only 16% of the population as late as the 1750s, one hundred years after British settlement" (ibid). When one considers that from 1750 to 1900, 85–90 percent of the black population lived in the South, and that African Americans in other parts of the country are primarily the descendants of people who emigrated from the South in waves beginning with World War I (G. Bailey and N. Maynor 1987: 466), it is clearly the demographics of the *South* rather than the *North* or *Middle* colonies which are relevant in assessing the chances of prior creolization (Rickford 1997).

To variation by region must be added considerations of variation by time period. For instance, both Mufwene (1996a) and Winford (1997) are more sanguine about the possibilities of creole-like restructuring in Southern colonies in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries than in the seventeenth century, as the proportions of blacks to whites increased. Finally, as Rickford (1977: 193) has noted, "Questions of motivation and attitude must also be added to data on numbers and apparent opporunities for black/white contact." We have striking contemporary examples of white individuals in overwhelmingly black communities (Rickford 1985) and black individuals in overwhelmingly white communities (Wolfram *et al.* 1997) who have not assimilated to the majority pattern because of powerful cultural and social constraints. This is likely to have been equally if not even more the case two or three hundred years ago, when the constraints against assimilation were more powerful. Constraints like these might have been sufficient to provide the "distance from a norm" which Hymes (1971: 66–67) associates with the emergence of pidgin/creole varieties.

Although sociolinguists have recently begun to do substantive research on the sociohistorical conditions under which Africans came to and settled in the American colonies, and the possibility that they imported or developed pidgin/creole speech in the process, there is still need for more research at the levels of individual colonies or states, counties and districts, and plantations or households.

6.3.2 *Textual attestations of AAVE from earlier times*

The second kind of evidence one might consider is textual attestations of AAVE from earlier times, or "historical attestations" for short. The known evidence of this type can be divided into two broad categories: (a) literary texts, including examples from fiction, drama, and poetry as well as those from travellers' accounts, records of court trials, and other non-fictional works (Brasch 1981); and (b) interviews with former slaves and other African Americans – many born in the mid-nineteenth century – from the 1930s onward, including the two subcategories distinguished by Schneider (1993b: 2): "the so-called ex-slave narratives" published by Rawick (1972–79), and the tape recordings made for the Archive of Folk Songs (AFS), published and analyzed by Bailey *et al.* (1991). A third source of early-twentieth-century data can be found in the interviews with 1,605 African Americans concerning "hoodoo" which were recorded by Harry Hyatt between 1936 and 1942 on Ediphone and Telediphone cylinders and subsequently published (Hyatt 1970–78) and analyzed (Viereck 1988, Ewers 1996).

In general, the literary texts – the primary data sources for Stewart (1967) and Dillard (1972) – take us back much further in time, to the early eighteenth century, at least; but they tend to be relatively brief and open to serious questions of authenticity (Viereck 1988: 301, fn 1; Schneider 1993b: 1–2). Of the early-twentieth-century interviews, the AFS materials – the data source for the analyses by various researchers in Bailey *at al.* (1991) – are generally considered the most reliable, but the audible recordings consist of only a few hours of speech from a dozen former slaves, and like the other nineteenth-century materials, these represent a relatively late or recent period in African-American history (cf. Rickford 1991a: 192; Wald 1995). Moreover, as Bailey *et al.* note, in their introduction (pp. 18–19), "the recordings and transcripts often lend themselves to a variety of interpretations" and their representativeness is limited both in terms of speaker type and time period (cf. also Rickford 1991a). The reliability of the ex-slave narrative materials – the primary data sources for the studies by Brewer (1974) and Schneider (1989), among others – has recently been questioned by Maynor (1988), Wolfram (1990), and Montgomery (1991) on the grounds that errors were introduced by field-workers who set down the texts by hand and by editors who subsequently over-represented certain stereotypical dialect features. However, Schneider (1993b) has made a spirited defense of these materials, arguing that their errors and distortions are detectable from comparisons with the AFS materials and by other means. The reliability of the Hyatt recordings – especially the early Ediphone recordings which required the interviewer to "repeat into a speaking-tube every word or phrase spoken by the informant" (Hyatt 1970–78: 1, xx) – is open to question. But the later Telediphone recordings (made with a microphone) and tape recordings are better, and Ewers (1996: 27) assumes that despite drawbacks, "the Hoodoo material is in principle a sufficiently reliable basis for carrying out morphological and syntactic studies."[2]

6.3.3 *Modern-day recordings from the African-American diaspora*

The third source of evidence is modern-day recordings from the African-American diaspora or "diaspora recordings" for short. These consist of audio recordings with descendants of African Americans who left the United States for other countries in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, and who, because of their relative isolation in their new countries, are thought to represent an approximation to the African-American speech of their emigrating foreparents. The first diaspora data to be examined in relation to the creole issue came from the Samaná region in the Dominican Republic, where the descendants of African Americans who emigrated there in the 1820s constitute an English-speaking enclave in a Spanish-speaking nation (Poplack and Sankoff 1987; Poplack and Tagliamonte 1989; Tagliamonte and Poplack 1988; DeBose 1988, 1994). The second source of diaspora data was Liberian Settler English, the variety spoken by the descendants of African Americans who were transported to Liberia by the American Colonization Society between 1822 and 1910 (Singler 1991a: 249–250). The third and most recent source of diaspora data is African Nova Scotian English, the English spoken by the descendants of African Americans who migrated to Nova Scotia, Canada, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Poplack and Tagliamonte 1991). Attractive though these diaspora varieties are as sources of extensive tape-recorded data on which quantitative analysis of selected variables can be performed, the significant question which they leave unanswered is whether they can indeed be taken as reflecting late-eighteenth or early-nineteenth century English, unaffected or only minimally affected by internally or externally motivated change (e.g. from contact with neighboring varieties of English or Spanish), and also unaffected by the Observer's Paradox.[3]

6.3.4 *Similarities between AAVE and established creoles*

The fourth type of evidence is similarities between AAVE and established creoles, or "creole similarities" for short. The theoretical justification for

2 While Ewers' study is substantive and very valuable, her assumption that morphological and syntactic textual analysis is not as seriously affected by poor recording quality as phonetic and phonological analysis represents a common error (cf. Schneider 1989: 49, whom she quotes). Labov's (1972b: 190, fn 9) view is the exact opposite, and corresponds more closely to my own experience: "In phonology, we can wait for the clear, stressed forms to emerge from the background noise. But many grammatical particles are reduced to minimal consonants or even features of tenseness or voicing which are difficult to hear in less than the best conditions, and many are so rare that we cannot afford to let one escape us."

3 The Observer's Paradox (Labov 1972b: 209): "the aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain these data by systematic observation."

considering this type of evidence, which has been widely applied to other cases, is provided in Rickford (1977: 198): "If a certain set of clear cases are agreed upon by everyone to constitute pidgins and creoles in terms of the standard theoretical parameters, and these cases display certain characteristic linguistic features, then other cases that also display these characteristics can be assumed to belong to the same type or class, unless evidence to the contrary is shown." The primary creole varieties with which AAVE has been compared are the English-based varieties spoken in Barbados (Rickford and Blake 1990; Rickford 1992b), Guyana (Bickerton 1975; Rickford 1974; Edwards 1991), Jamaica (B. Bailey 1965; Baugh 1980; Holm 1984; Rickford 1991c), Trinidad (Winford 1992a, 1992b), and the South Carolina Sea Islands ("Gullah" – Stewart 1967; Dillard 1972; Rickford 1980; Mufwene 1983) and Liberian Settler English (LSE, Singler 1991a, 1993). The importance of attending to intermediate or mesolectal creole varieties rather than basilectal ones has been stressed by several researchers (Rickford 1974; Bickerton 1975; Winford 1992a), and quantitative analysis of selected features has, for the last two decades at least, become the standard comparative method. Mufwene (p.c.) has suggested that connections between AAVE and Caribbean mesolectal varieties might be informative typologically, but not historically, since "there has been no historical connection established between those varieties and AAVE." But recent sociohistorical evidence indicating the importance of Caribbean slaves in the early settlement of many American colonies (Rickford 1997) helps to provide precisely this connection.

6.3.5 *Similarities between AAVE and West African languages*

The fifth type of evidence is similarities between AAVE and West African languages or "African language similarities" for short. Although the existence of lexical Africanisms might be considered of little significance, no matter how extensive, the demonstration that contemporary AAVE parallels West African languages in key aspects of its grammar might be taken as evidence of the kind of admixture or substrate influence which is fundamental to pidginization and creolization (Rickford 1977: 196). Alleyne (1980), Holm (1984), and DeBose and Faraclas (1993) have provided such evidence for copula absence in AAVE, a variable to which we return in more detail below.

6.3.6 *Differences from other English dialects*

The sixth type of evidence is differences from other English dialects, especially those spoken by whites, which we might refer to as "English dialect differences" for short. As Rickford (1977: 197) notes, "The question of prior creolization [of AAVE] has been frequently defined in terms of how different it now is from other English dialects and how different we can presume it to have been in the past." The theoretical assumption for this is that dialects involve linguistic

continuity with earlier stages or other varieties of the language, while pidgins and creoles involve "a sharp break in transmission and the creation of a new code" (Southworth 1971: 255). The principal dialects with which AAVE has been compared with respect to this criterion is white vernacular dialects in the US (Davis 1969; Labov 1972a; Wolfram 1974; G. Bailey and N. Maynor 1985), although British varieties thought to have influenced AAVE through contact in the US (Schneider 1983) have also received some attention. As we will see below, this type of evidence has been more fundamental in discussions of the divergence issue than in discussions of the creole issue, with Fasold (1981) and others warning that contemporary difference might mask earlier similarities, or vice versa. Nevertheless it is still of relevance to the creole issue.

6.3.7 *Comparisons across different age groups of African-American speakers*

The seventh and final type of evidence is that which is potentially available from comparisons across different age groups of African-American speakers, or "age-group comparisons" for short. Such evidence could provide fundamental indications of decreolizing change in apparent time (Labov 1972), but it has virtually never been invoked in relation to the creole issue. Indeed, Stewart (1970) and Dillard (1972), the principal proponents of the creole hypothesis, have argued that because of age-graded avoidance of creole forms by adults, African-American children in fact use the significant creole forms more often, the exact opposite of what a theory of prior creolization and ongoing decreolization would predict. Age-group data have, however, been considered more often in relation to the divergence hypothesis.

Table 6.1 provides a summary of the different kinds of evidence which bear on the creole hypothesis. In order to review this hypothesis further, I will now go on to survey one linguistic feature using all but the first and the last kinds of evidence (the ones which are least frequently used). Several different features have been examined in relation to the creole issue – including third person present tense and plural *s*-marking, perfect and past tense marking, habitual *be*, and completive *done* – but the one that has been considered most often, using

Table 6.1 Possible types of evidence bearing on the issue of creole origins of AAVE

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)
7 Age-group comparisons (across different generations of AAVE speakers)

the widest variety of evidence, is the absence of present tense forms of the copula *be* (e.g., "He Ø tall," "They Ø going") and I will accordingly survey the data on this feature.

6.4 Copula absence in AAVE with respect to different types of evidence

6.4.1 *Historical attestations (literary texts, ex-slave narratives and recordings)*

Let us begin first with the evidence of *historical attestations*. Although Stewart and Dillard depend more heavily on *literary texts* than anyone else, their texts include only a few examples of copula absence (e.g. Stewart 1967 cites "Me massa Ø name Cunney Tomsee"[4] from the speech of Cudjo in John Leacock's 1776 play, *The Fall of British Tyranny*), and they provide no extended analysis of this variable. For the latter, we need to turn to Repka and Evans (1986), who examined potential copula tokens in the speech of black characters in ten American literary works (six dramas, three novels, and one short story) written by white authors between 1767 and 1843.[5] Their results, shown separately for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and presented in terms of the person/number of the subject, are shown in Table 6.2. Note that in the eighteenth century, zero was the most common variant of the copula. Moreover, if the nine invariant *be*2 forms in the eighteenth-century data are excluded (as they are by most researchers on the grounds that *be*2 is typically habitual while zero and the conjugated forms are not), the rate of copula absence in the first person, third singular, and plural and second person categories rises to 100%, 100%, and 77% respectively. Categorical copula absence of this kind is virtually unheard of in modern US samples, so on the face of it, these data support the creolist position, particularly since first person copula absence does not occur in modern AAVE although it does in Barbadian, Jamaican, Trinidadian, and other Caribbean creoles (see Rickford and Blake 1990).

Repka and Evans' nineteenth-century data show considerably lower rates of copula absence, which they attribute to "convergence . . . with the speech of a dominant white society" (p. 10). This inference may be correct, but the fact that copula forms with plural and second person subjects show no copula absence whatsoever is troubling, since such forms typically show higher rates of copula

4 This is not a great example, because as Beryl Bailey (1966) has noted, *niem* ("name") is a special naming verb in Jamaican (and other creoles) which requires no predicating copula.
5 The sources include John Leacock (1776) *The Fall of British tyranny*, John Murdock (1795) *The Triumphs of Love*, James Fenimore Cooper (1821) *The Spy*, and Edgar Allan Poe (1843) "The gold bug." These are admittedly late in the evolution of African-American dialects, but they still take us further back than the ex-slave narrative recordings and Hoodoo texts, as well as diaspora data from Samaná.

Table 6.2 Black characters' copula absence in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American literary sources

	1st singular	*3rd singular*	*Plural & 2nd singular*
18th-century sources	78% (7/9)	89% (24/27)	54% (7/13)
19th-century sources	60% (6/10)	33% (25/75)	0% (0/6)

Source: adapted from Tables 1 and 3 in Repka and Evans (1986).

absence than other subjects in early-twentieth-century and modern AAVE,[6] as well as in contemporary Trinidadian English (Winford 1992a: 34).[7] This anomalous result may be an artifact of limited data (Repka and Evans found only six copula tokens with plural and second person subjects, or four if their two tokens of *be2* are excluded). Alternatively, it may reflect a genuine change in the linguistic conditioning of copula absence over time, or it may simply confirm people's fears that literary data of this type are conventionalizations rather than trustworty reflections of contemporary speech. This issue is one that could bear further examination, with an even more substantial data set of literary texts than Repka and Evans examined, and taking into account the social statuses of the characters depicted in each.[8]

Brewer (1974) presents some interesting evidence on copula absence in the ex-slave narratives, including the observation (pp. 96–98) that such narratives include several attestations of copula absence in the past tense, as in (1) and (2):

6 The early-twentieth-century evidence is in Repka and Evans (1986). In their analysis of four works written by African-American authors (Chestnutt, Toomer, Hughes, and Hurston) between 1899 and 1937, copula absence is 20% (61/310) with plural and second person subjects, 3% with first singular subjects, and 3% (20/720) with third singular subjects. For evidence on modern AAVE, see Rickford *et al.* (1991: 117), who report a .67 variable rule feature weight for copula absence with second person and plural subjects in the East Palo Alto data (as computed by the "Labov deletion" formula in which deletions are computed as a proportion of deleted and contracted forms, with full forms excluded from consideration), but a much lower feature weight (.33) for third person singular subjects.

7 The evidence of Barbadian and Jamaican is somewhat more ambiguous. Rickford and Blake (1990: 267, Table 2) found that plural and second person subjects did favor copula absence in Barbadian speech more than first singular or third singular subjects did (variable rule feature weights of .58, .47, and .45 respectively), but the difference was not statistically significant. Rickford (1991c) found that plural and second person subjects were slightly *less* favorable to copula absence in Jamaican Creole than third singular subjects, and slightly *more* favorable than first singular subjects (variable rule feature weights of .50, .54, and .46 respectively), but the differences were, again, not statistically significant.

8 Since AAVE is primarily a lower- and working-class phenomenon, fictional characters from other socioeconomic strata should not be expected to show the same frequencies of copula absence, although we might perhaps expect them to show the same kinds of conditioning if they show sufficient copula absence for conditioning to be evident.

(1) De only child I ever had died when he Ø just a baby. (Tex 72: 255)
(2) A'ter freedom Ø declare, I go to school. (SC 51: 223)

Past tense copula absence does occur in Caribbean creoles (Rickford 1991c, 1996: 369) but rarely or not at all in present-day AAVE (Wolfram 1969: 166), so on the face of it, Brewer's evidence is another potential plus for the creolist hypothesis. However, Schneider (1997) has suggested that the zero copula is among the non-standard features whose frequency was exaggerated (by field-workers and/or editors) in these narratives, and this again makes the validity of the evidence open to question.

In order to get better historical evidence on copula absence in AAVE, let us turn now to Bailey (1987: 35), who analyzes copula absence in the AFS recordings of the ex-slaves born in the mid to late nineteenth century. The first row of Table 6.3 shows the relative frequency of zero copula which Bailey found in that data set for third person singular, plural and second person subjects combined (a total of 275 tokens, including 4 tokens of *be2*) according to following grammatical environment. The hierarchical ordering of these environments certainly corresponds to the dominant pattern in modern-day samples of AAVE (see W. Labov 1972a: 86; Rickford *et al.* 1991: 121), and the fact that *__gonna* shows categorical copula absence is striking (because this is not the case in any of the ten modern US samples summarized in Rickford *et al.*, ibid.). But we also need data on the number of tokens for each subcategory and the overall percentage of copula absence, and the article does not provide either.

Poplack and Tagliamonte (1991: 319) do provide an overall percentage of copula absence for an overlapping AFS data set, designated in their paper as "Ex-Slave Recordings." (Their "Ex-Slave Recordings" came from the AFS data set, but they included Quarterman's recording, which Guy Bailey omitted, and they did not have access to the data of an additional informant – identified as "Colored Fellow" which Bailey included.) The fact that their overall percentage of copula absence is so low (16%) would certainly argue against the creole hypothesis. But unless the numbers of tokens in Bailey's subcategories with low percentages (__NP and __Loc) overwhelmingly outnumber the numbers of tokens in the subcategories with high percentages (__V+*ing* and *__gonna*), it is difficult to see how Poplack and Tagliamonte arrive at such a low overall rate.

Table 6.3 Copula absence in the AFS ex-slave recordings by following grammatical environment

	__NP	*__Locative*	*__Adjective*	*__Verb*+ing	*__gonna*
G. Bailey (1987)	12%	15%	29%	71%	100%
Poplack and Tagliamonte (1991)	.39	.69	.27	.72	.78

Source: adapted from G. Bailey (1987: 35) and Poplack and Tagliamonte (1991: 321).

Further signs that the Bailey and the Poplack and Tagliamonte analyses do not agree are the different hierarchies of following grammatical constraints which they report for this variable, depicted in Table 6.3. While they agree in showing the auxiliary environments as most favorable to copula absence (with *__gonna* in the lead), they disagree on the relative ordering of __NP, __Adj, and __Loc, with (among other things) Bailey reporting __NP as least favorable and Poplack and Tagliamonte reporting __Adj as least favorable. The incommensurability of these analyses of what is a substantially overlapping data set may be due to the fact that Poplack and Tagliamonte's analysis is based on a sample of 209 tokens, while Bailey's is based on 275 tokens; with the overall token count so low, a difference of sixty-six tokens can crucially affect the analysis. Bailey's sample includes six tokens of invariant *be2*, while Poplack and Tagliamonte's does not; but these are too few to account for the differences in their analysis. More significant, perhaps, is the fact that Poplack and Tagliamonte's figures represent variable rule feature weights or probabilities, while Bailey's represent percentages.

Moreover, Poplack and Tagliamonte compute copula absence as "Labov deletion" (Rickford *et al.* 1991: 106–107) – counting tokens of zero as a proportion of tokens of zero and contraction only, while Bailey computes copula absence as "Straight deletion," counting tokens of zero out of tokens of zero, contraction, and full forms combined.[9] Some variationists regard "Straight deletion" as more valid because it remains closer to observed data and filters it through fewer assumptions and operations. Perhaps we will need more general agreement on how to reconcile or arbitrate between these two methods before we can reliably interpret the different views of the ex-slave recordings which these two studies provide.

6.4.2 *Diaspora recordings (Samaná, African Nova Scotian English, Liberian Settler English)*

For evidence from diaspora recordings we will consider first the data on copula absence in Samaná English. Without making any connection whatsoever to the creolist hypothesis, Poplack and Sankoff (1987: 302) report that, in contrast with urban AAVE where first person *am* is absent less than 1% of the time, such absence occurs 10% of the time in Samaná English. This is in fact a plus for the creolists' side of the issue, because, as noted above, copula absence with first person subjects is characteristic of the Caribbean creoles (see footnote 7 above for relevant data) and in American literary texts from earlier periods (see Table

9 In Rickford *et al.*'s (1991: 117) study of copula absence in East Palo Alto, California, the relative positions of __Loc and __Adj in the feature weight hierarchy were reversed when the same data were analyzed as Labov deletion (__Loc: .42; __Adj: .47) and Straight deletion (__Adj: .45; __Loc: .47).

6.2 above). But what Poplack and Sankoff emphasize instead is their very different (and often-cited) conclusion that "at least insofar as its copula usage is concerned it [Samaná] bore no more resemblance to English-based West Indian creoles than modern ABE [AAVE], and indeed less." This conclusion rests, however, on two types of evidence, both of which are are subject to reinterpretation.

The first is the low overall *rate* of copula absence which Poplack and Sankoff (1987: 304, Table 3) report for Samaná English – 20% with pronoun subjects, which is slightly more than the comparable figures of 16% for Harlem adults in formal speech, 10% for Middle Class Detroit adults, and 18% for Lower Class Texas adults, which they list in the same table, but less than the figures of 51% for Working Class Detroit adults and 27% for Harlem adults in group style, which they also report. (The Detroit, Harlem, and Texas data are from Labov 1972a, Wolfram 1969, and G. Bailey and N. Maynor 1985 respectively.) However, the 20% figure for Samaná is heavily influenced by data from the first person subject category (80 tokens) and by the cases of *it*, *what*, and *that* as subjects (162 tokens). In the AAVE data with which Samaná is compared, these categories are excluded on the grounds that contraction is virtually categorical therein. If, for the sake of comparability (and because contraction in these categories in Samaná is around 80%), these categories are excluded from the Samaná data, the rate of copula deletion with pronoun subjects in Samaná doubles to 40% (71/176).[10] And since it is known that overall rates of copula absence can vary significantly by style – Poplack and Sankoff themselves (1987: 304) report an 11% difference between Labov's Harlem adults in "formal" and "informal" style; Winford (1980: 57) reports differences of 49% and 69% respectively between the careful individual and peer group styles of his Working Class and Lower Middle Class Trinidadian informants; Rickford and Blake (1990: 262) report a 74% difference in a Barbadian's speech to his peers versus the interviewer; and Rickford and McNair Knox (1994: 247) report a 30% difference between a California teenager's speech to a white versus a black interviewer – it is possible that Poplack and Sankoff's speakers have an even more creole-like and copula-free vernacular than the one they elicited. This is of course a possibility for all sociolinguists. All of our attempts to elicit vernacular varieties are subject to the methodological axioms (including Style-Shifting: "there are no single style speakers") and the Observer's Paradox adumbrated by William Labov (1972b: 208–209), and it is only through complementary methods like peer group recordings, rapid and anoymous observations (W. Labov 1972b: 210), and repeated recordings with different interlocutors (Rickford 1987b) that we can be confident that we have tapped into the

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vernacular. In this regard, it is interesting that in more recent recordings of Samaná speakers made by Stanford graduate student Dawn Hannah (see Hannah 1996, Table 3), the percentage of copula absence with pronoun subjects (including WIT subjects, i.e. tokens of *What's*, *It's*, and *That's*) was 48%, more than twice that reported by Poplack and Sankoff in 1987.

The second kind of evidence on which Poplack and Sankoff base their conclusion is the fact that the *constraint ranking* for copula absence in their Samaná data, particularly by following grammatical environment (see the first row of Table 6.4), is "similar to those attested" for urban AAVE "in Harlem, Detroit and rural Texas" but "quite different from the few creoles which have been studied quantitatively" (p. 310). Note, however, that Poplack and Sankoff's Samaná data differ quite sharply from previous AAVE data sets in showing __NP as more favorable to copula absence than both __Loc and __Adj (see Rickford *et al.* 1991: 121 for a comparison of several AAVE data sets with respect to following grammatical environment), so the "similarity to AAVE" evinced by these data is not perfect. Moreover, the copula absence pattern which Poplack and Sankoff took as their baseline creole pattern – a higher Ø rate before adjectives than before V+*ing*, for instance (based on Jamaican and Gullah data in Holm 1984) – has been shown to be spurious, the result of analytical errors in Holm 1984 (see Rickford and Blake 1990: 261; Rickford 1996: 359) and the result of reliance on copula patterns in Caribbean creole basilects rather than its mesolects or intermediate varieties, which are more similar to those of AAVE synchronically and in terms of possible diachronic derivation (Rickford 1974: 93; Winford 1992a: 23). When the errors in Holm's data are corrected, Poplack and Sankoff's (1987: 307) Samaná hierarchy of following grammatical constraints on copula absence is much more similar to that reported for Barbadian, Jamaican, and Trinidadian – especially insofar as the positions of __V+*ing* and __*gonna* at the top of the hierarchy are concerned (Rickford and Blake 1990: 268).[11] (See Figure 6.1.) Finally, when we compare the constraint hierarchy for Samaná reported by Hannah (1996) – see the second row of Table 6.4 – __NP ranks as the least favorable environment and __V+*ing* and __*gonna* as the most favorable environments, precisely as found for other sets of AAVE and Caribbean creole data.[12]

Let us consider now the diaspora data from African Nova Scotian English (ANSE), introduced by Poplack and Tagliamonte (1991). The overall rate of copula absence which they report (p. 319) for the descendants of nineteenth-century refugeee and fugitive field-slaves whom they recorded in North Preston,

11 One anomaly is the fact that a following *adjective* remains the least favorable following environment for copula absence in Samaná, but this is not the case in Hannah's more recent Samaná data (row two, Table 6.4).

12 The statistics from Hannah (1996) cited here are for "Labov deletion" (cf. Rickford *et al.* 1991), the same method used by Poplack and Sankoff (1987). Her "Straight deletion" VARBRUL weights for copula absence are: .14 __NP; .43 __Adj; .47 __Loc; .88 V+*ing*; .97 __*gon*.

Table 6.4 Copula absence (Labov deletion) in Samaná English by following grammatical environment

	__*NP*	__*Adjective*	__*Locative*	__*Verb*+ing	__gon(na)
Poplack and Sankoff (1987)	.41	.19	.23	.46	.59
Hannah (1996)	.12	.44	.42	.89	.93

Source: adapted from Poplack and Sankoff (1987: 307) and Hannah (1996: Table 4).

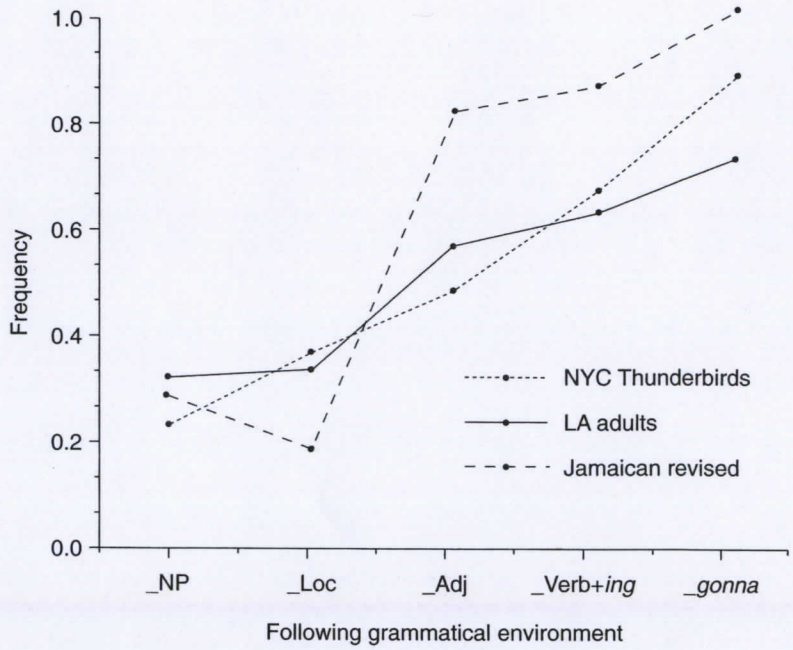

Figure 6.1 Copula absence in three African-American dialects
Source: Rickford (1996: 368). Jamaican statistics based on De Camp's (1960) data, revised.

Nova Scotia (Canada), is 20%, identical to the rate found by Poplack and Sankoff (1987) for Samaná English, and equally inimical to the creole hypothesis. However, the ANSE data set similarly includes tokens of the copula with first person subjects and with *it*, *what*, and *that* as subjects – and it is just as likely that the overall rate of copula absence would rise if these were excluded, as they were in most earlier studies of AAVE. One point worth noting – though it is not commented on by the authors – is that copula absence with first person subjects in the ANSE data set appears to be relatively substantial (feature weight of .29); in fact ANSE is more similar in this respect to Barbadian

(feature weight of .47; Rickford and Blake 1990: 267) than to Samaná English (feature weight of .06; Poplack and Sankoff 1987: 307), and certainly more so than to urban AAVE (less than 1 percent for AAVE in East Palo Alto, California; Blake 1997: 64, Table 3).

The effect of following grammatical environment which Poplack and Tagliamonte (1991) found in ANSE is shown in Table 6.5.[13] Discussing these results, the authors observe that they are similar to the findings of W. Labov (1969) for peer groups in Harlem, and "to many other studies of this variable in AAVE," and that they are "quite different from the ranking found by Holm (1984) for Jamaican Creole and Gullah" (p. 319). The counter-arguments to this claim which we expressed in discussing the Samaná data in Table 6.4 apply equally to these data, however. Poplack and Tagliamonte do mention (pp. 320–321) the evidence in Rickford and Blake that Holm's "creole" data should not be taken as archetypical, but they go on to suggest (following Holm's theoretical argumentation) that if a prior creole origin were to leave its vestiges in a decreolizing or decreolized variety, we would expect to find the following patterns of copula absence:[14]

(3) __*gonna* > __V+*ing* > __Adj > __Loc > __NP

The authors then go on to ask, *inter alia*, why the expected ordering of adjective and locative does not obtain in the ANSE and other putatively decreolized data sets (like Samaná and Barbadian). This is a valid question, and one of several about the AAVE constraint hierarchy which Mufwene (1992) has challenged creolists to explain; we shall return to it below.

For the final set of diaspora evidence, let us turn now to Liberian Settler English (LSE). Singler (1991b: 132) reports the following rates of non-past copula absence for three Settlers from different parts of Liberia: Carolina 78%

Table 6.5 Copula absence in African Nova Scotian English (ANSE) by following grammatical environment

	__NP	__Adjective	__Locative	__Verb+ing	__gonna
Poplack and Tagliamonte (1991)	.31	.46	.49	.69	.73

Source: adapted from Poplack and Tagliamonte (1991: 321).

13 Omitted from this table, as it is also from Tables 6.3 (second row) and 6.4 (first row), is the feature weight reported by the authors for a following *Wh*-clause; in all three cases it is higher than the feature weight for __*gonna*.

14 The hypothesis is also stated alternatively by the authors as follows: categorical or high frequency of copula *absence* before gonna, V+*ing*, and adjective, and categorical or high frequency of copula *presence* before locative and NP.

(n=138), Albert 58% (n=173), and Slim 54% (n=223). These rates are all high, and argue in favor of the creolist position. Another pro-creolist feature of LSE speech is the fact that copula absence occurs there in the past tense as well (compare Barbadian, Jamaican). This is particularly true of the speech of Carolina, who comes from Sinoe County, a region in Liberia which had a heavy influx of Mississippi Settlers, and is very isolated (Singler 1991b: 150).[15] An example follows:

(4) When it [Ø was] good flour, twelve cent a pound. (Carolina, Singler 1991b: 131)

In non-past environments (that is, the environments on which copula analyses in AAVE and creoles normally focus), copula absence is also common in LSE with first person subjects, occurring 64% of the time (n=53) in the speech of the three speakers examined in Singler (1991b: 134), and 54% of the time (n=150) in the speech of the fourteen Sinoe County speakers discussed in Singler (1993). As noted above, first person copula absence is common in the Caribbean creoles but not in contemporary AAVE, and its frequency in LSE suggests that the English of the African-American Settlers who set out for Liberia in the nineteenth century may have been more creole-like than contemporary AAVE is.

The effects of following grammatical environment on the copula absence of Singler's three LSE speakers is shown in Table 6.6.[16] While the LSE hierarchy follows the AAVE (and creole) copula absence hierarchy insofar as a following NP is least favorable to copula absence and a following __*gon* most favorable to

Table 6.6 Copula absence in Liberian Settler English (LSE) by following grammatical environment

	__NP	__Adjective	__Verb+ing	__Locative	__gon
Carolina	43%	93%	97%	100%	100%
Albert	32%	65%	85%	94%	100%
Slim	36%	43%	79%	91%	100%

Source: adapted from Singler (1991b: 146).

15 Singler (1993) reports data on fourteen Sinoe Settlers, including Carolina. Of these, six have overall rates of non-past copula absence between 71% and 83%, indicating that Carolina's high zero copula rate is not atypical; four others have rates between 55% and 67%; and the remaining four have rates between 33% and 40%.

16 The hierarchy of following environments holds even when a multivariate, variable rule analysis is performed (on Albert and Slim's speech only, not Carolina's, since hers is too categorical), with feature weights for copula absence (Singler 1991b: 144, Table 15) as follows: __*gon* 1.00; __Loc .86; __V+*ing* .72; __Adj .35; __NP .29; __Det-NP .13.

copula absence,[17] Carolina's pattern differs from the others', and the rates and relative orderings of the intermediate categories differ from those of AAVE in a way that deserves comment. Carolina clearly has a bifurcated pattern – some copula presence with a following NP, and (near)-categorical copula absence everywhere else. This is clearly the pattern of the LSE *basilect*, and it is similar to the one which Winford (1992) reports for Trinidadian Creole, particularly for the group sessions (p. 34) and for *are* (p. 37).[18] Albert and Slim represent points further along the continuum to Standard English, showing near-categorical copula absence only with __V+*ing*, __Loc and __*gon*,[19] and somewhat greater variability with a following adjective (65%, 43%). It is their data which establish, more firmly than Carolina's, the relative LSE ordering of __Loc as the second most favorable environment for copula absence (after __*gon*), __V+*ing* as the third, and __Adj as the fourth. Poplack and Tagliamonte (1991: 322–323) suggest that the locative > adjective copula absence ordering in Samaná and ANSE runs contrary to the adjective > locative creole pattern reported by Holm (1984). The LSE data provide additional evidence – along with that established by others for Barbadian and Trinidadian (Rickford and Blake 1990; Winford 1992) – that precisely this ordering obtains in some creole communities.[20] Why __V+*ing* should be less favorable to copula absence than __Loc is in LSE is not clear, however. This is certainly not the case in Trinidadian and other Caribbean data sets, and it would be interesting to see if the pattern is replicated with other LSE speakers.

Overall, the LSE copula absence data provide fairly strong support for the creolist position. One caveat, however, is that the high rate of copula absence in LSE may reflect the destandardizing influence of contact with pidginized Non-Settler Pidgin English (NSPE) over the years, just as the low rate of copula absence in ANSE might reflect the standardizing influence of contact with

17 Singler (1991: 143) argues, in fact, that *gon* has achieved auxiliary status in LSE and no longer co-occurs with non-past forms of the copula. This same argument could be made for __*gwine* in Jamaican Creole (it shows 100% "copula absence" in DeCamp's JC texts (see Rickford, 1996: 369, Table 6), and has already been made for creoles more genreally by Holm (1984: 298): "creole *go* was a calque for a protocreole preverbal marker indicating irrealis which was never preceded by any copula-like particle."

18 One difference is that in the Trinidadian data, copula absence with a following NP is not only low, but almost non-existent; the copula is almost always retained. See Winford (1992a: 35–37) for further discussion.

19 Following C. J. Bailey (1973), we adopt 80% as the cut-off point for (near) categoricality.

20 At the same time, pidgin/creole communities show variation with respect to the relative ordering of these environments, as do AAVE communities and data sets (Poplack and Tagliamonte 1991: 323; Rickford *et al.* 199: 121, Table 7); for Jamaican and Gullah, the ordering is indeed adjective > locative (Holm 1984; Rickford 1991c, 1996), perhaps in line with Singler's (1991b: 156–157) argument for *Non*-Settler Liberian English that *basilectal* varieties tend to show the high adjective copula absence pattern. (Jamaican and Gullah are arguably more basilectal than Barbadian and Trinidadian.)

Canadian English over the years. With respect to the LSE case, Singler (1991b: 153) argues that "while the general absence of nonsettler influence points to the conclusion that LSE's high rate of copula deletion is not a result of nonsettler influence, one cannot be certain of that."

6.4.3 *Creole similarities*

The earliest discussion of creole/AAVE similarities with respect to copula absence was that of B. Bailey (1965), who schematically compared the systems of non-verbal predication in Standard English (SE), Jamaican Creole (JC, through her native intuitions), and AAVE (as exemplified by Duke, the narrator in *The Cool World*), and concluded (p. 46) that there was a "deep structural relationship" between JC and AAVE, although not "an identical development of the systems." In particular, while SE requires an inflected form of *be* in all non-verbal predications, in AAVE such predicates are used without any copula, and JC "has a more complicated system, with zero before adjectives, an obligatory *a* before nominals, and a *de* which is often deleted before locatives" (ibid.). Although Bailey's claim that AAVE had *no* underlying copula was an idealization – as every quantitative study of spoken AAVE has shown – her paper was valuable for demonstrating that the nature of the following grammatical environment critically determined the realization of the copula in creoles, and for suggesting that comparisons between AAVE and creoles on this dimension might be important for the creole hypothesis.

Stewart (1969) extended Bailey's argument by postulating a hypothesis about the development of copula absence in Gullah, spoken off the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia, based on diachronic evidence. Earlier recorded forms of Gullah showed *da* as an obligatory copula both before predicate nominals (parallel to *a* in JC), 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 V*ing*, 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.[21]

21 Stewart's (1969) account predates but essentially presumes the "more=earlier, less=later" principle which C. J. Bailey (1973) articulated. Stewart's exact words (p. 244) for the final stage in his hypothetical chain of events are as follows: "Finally, with the introduction of an optional dummy /iz/ in V-ing phrases, and a partial collapse of verbal /iz/ = Ø with equative /iz/ = Ø, one

This line of argument – that decreolizing changes happen in a certain order, keyed to environment, and that the order of those changes could explain synchronic variability – was to become a mainstay of research involving comparisons between AAVE and pidgins or creoles. Fasold (1976: 80–81) extended Stewart's stages, and Bickerton (1971, 1972) unearthed evidence of similar decreolizing processes in Guyanese Creole (GC), noting that such processes could have produced the synchronic copula absence statistics in AAVE:

> There are three Guyanese copula-type verbs: *a* (equative), *de* (locative), Ø (attributive). These are now replaced by inflected *be*, the first two in that order, and fairly completely, the third much more slowly and spasmodically . . . It follows that, in the mesolect, deleted copula is found oftenest with *gon*, not quite so often with *-ing* forms, less often with predicate adjectives, yet more infrequently with locatives, and least of all with predicate NPs – which corresponds exactly with Labov's [1969] findings for Black English [AAVE]! Indeed, these findings are quite explicable on our assumption that rule changes in Black English have, in the past, followed the same course and sequence as have those in Guyanese speech; if *be* insertion took place first in __NP environments, it would by now be mandatory or almost so for some speakers, while for some, *be* insertion before __*gonna* might not yet have even begun.
>
> (Bickerton 1971: 491)

Despite the quantitativist wording of this extract, Bickerton relied on qualitative implicational patterns for his conclusions rather than quantitative data like Labov's. Moreover, Bickerton's subsequent (1986: 226) argumentation that creole continua form "backwards," beginning with the acrolect, then the mesolect and basilect, suggests that he may no longer subscribe to the kind of decreolizing scenario sketched above.

Edwards (1980: 301) did have quantitative data, which showed that in mesolectal GC, copula absence was higher before a following adjective (93%, 14/15) than before NP (0%, 0/8), as in AAVE. But the data were from a short sample from one speaker, and the sample sizes were small. The locative environment, for instance, contained only one token, so it could not be considered in the variation analysis.

The first substantive quantitative data on copula absence in a creole was provided in Day's (1973) study of Hawaiian Creole English (HCE). Day's results – shown in Table 6.7 – are rarely if ever cited in discussions of the creole origin

can see the historical process – entirely documentable – which could easily have given rise to the statistical difference in copula deletion discovered by Labov [1969]."

Table 6.7 Copula absence in Hawaiian Creole English (HCE) by following grammatical environment

	__NP	__Locative	__Adjective	__Verb(+ing)
HCE	63% (321)	62% (130)	72% (235)	94% (372)

Source: adapted from Day (1973: 111, Table 9); number of tokens in parentheses.

of AAVE, but curiously so, since, apart from the equivalence of __NP and __Loc and a relatively high __NP absence rate, the relative frequency of copula absence by following grammatical environment in HCE matches that found for AAVE in data from New York (the Thunderbirds, Labove 1972a: 86, Table 3.2), and Los Angeles (Baugh 1979).[22]

Holm's (1976, 1984) analyses of Jamaican Creole (JC) and Gullah data in DeCamp (1960) and Turner (1948) respectively provided the first substantive statistics on copula absence in the Caribbean creoles. As Table 6.8 shows, copula absence was lower in both varieties before __NP or __Loc than before __Adj (this is referred to as the "high adj" creole pattern). Baugh's (1979, 1980) separation of the __Loc and __Adj environments in his LA data and in Labov *et al.*'s (1968) NYC Cobras data allowed us to see how strikingly JC and Gullah paralleled AAVE with respect to the ordering of these three environments.

However, as Holm himself observed (1976: 5; 1984: 293–294), the low __V+*ing* percentage of copula absence in Gullah and the low __V+*ing* and __*gon*(*na*) percentages in Jamaican ran counter to the copula absence pattern of AAVE, which was typically NP < Loc < Adj <V+*ing* < *gon*(*na*). Holm attributed the disparity to the fact that non-equivalent continuum levels were being compared. This is certainly relevant, but, as Rickford and Blake (1990: 261) argued, it was also because tokens of JC *de* and *a* were being included in the counts for __V+*ing* and __*gonna* in the creole data when they should not have

Table 6.8 Copula absence in Gullah and Jamaican Creole (JC) by following grammatical environment

	__NP	__Locative	__Adjective	__Verb(+ing)	__gon(na)
Gullah	11%	22%	62%	28%	88%
Jamaican	22%	17%	66%	17%	32%

Source: adapted from Holm (1984: 293, Table 2).

22 Day (1973) also provided a qualitative implicational analysis, and, interestingly enough, that suggested a different relative ordering of __Adj and __Loc (see his Tables 4 and 5, pp. 89–99), one which he was apparently unable to explain to his own satisfaction (see p. 111). As we have noted, the position of these two environments – relative to each other – is extremely variable in studies of AAVE.

been, since they are not feasible alternants of zero and inflected *be* in those environments (**dem de/a waakin* and **dem de gon waak*). When such variants were eliminated, the percentages of copula absence in both environments climbed to the relative positions they occupy (at the top of the following environment hierarchy) in AAVE. This was true both in the DeCamp data set originally examined by Holm (Rickford 1990), shown as "Jamaican, revised" in Figure 6.1 above, and in a new data set, from two old Jamaicans, examined by Rickford (1991c).[23] The copula percentages for both JC data sets are given in Table 6.9.[24]

Copula absence data for two different sets of Barbadian speakers were also provided by Rickford and Blake (1990) and Rickford (1992b), and while these differed from each other in the relative orderings of __Loc and __Adj (see Table 6.10), they both exemplified the basic copula absence pattern of AAVE. As noted elsewhere (Rickford *et al.* 1991: 121, Table 7), copula absence is higher in __Loc environments than in __Adj environments in some AAVE data sets, but lower in others. Of all the following grammatical environments for copula absence, these two environments show the greatest variability in their relative ordering.

Table 6.9 Copula absence in two JC data sets by following grammatical environment

	__NP	*__Locative*	*__Adjective*	*__Verb(+ing)*	__gwain
JC (1960)	28% (68)	18% (40)	81% (48)	86% (21)	100% (25)
JC (1991)	4% (48)	28% (32)	59% (58)	58% (43)	93% (14)

Source: adapted from Rickford (1996: 363, Table 3) and Rickford (1991c: Table 4); number of tokens in parentheses.

Table 6.10 Copula absence in two Barbadian data sets by following grammatical environment

	__NP	*__Locative*	*__Adjective*	*__Verb(+ing)*	__gwain
1980s (n=522)	.08	.54	.42	.65	.77
1991 data	.07 (94)	.52 (45)	.71 (104)	.89 (86)	1.00 (44)

Source: adapted from Rickford and Blake (1990: Table 3) and Rickford (1992b: table 3); number of tokens in parentheses.

23 One disparity in the case of the (1960) JC data is the fact that __Loc is lower than __NP; one disparity in the case of the (1991) data is that __Adj and __V+*ing* are equivalent. Without additional data, it is difficult to know how substantive these apparent disparities are, or to pursue explanations for their occurrence.

24 The corresponding variable rule feature weights are: __NP .23, __Loc .12; __Adj .75; __V+*ing* .79; __*gwain* 1.00 (Rickford 1996: 369, Table 7); and __NP .00; __Loc .19; __Adj .52; __V+*ing* .45; __*gwain* .83 (Rickford 1991c). Both the percentages and the feature weights were computed by the "Straight deletion" method, in which deletions are computed as a proportion of all possible forms – full forms, contractions, and deletions (Rickford *et al.* 1991: 106).

Singler's (1991b, 1993) work on Non-Settler Liberian English (NSLE), a continuum ranging from a highly pidginized basilect to a Liberian Standard English acrolect, was important not only for providing the first quantitative data on copula absence in an African pidgin or creole, but also for suggesting (1991b: 155) that the basilectal copulas (locative *de*, nominal invariant *be*) were not replaced directly by *is* in decreolization (as in Model A, Figure 6.2),[25] but through an intermediate zero stage (Model B, Figure 6.2). Guyanese mesolectal data in Bickerton (1973: 652–655) had provided similar indications.

Whereas Model A predicts higher rates of mesolectal copula absence before adjectives than before locatives and nominals, Model B predicts comparable (high) rates for all three environments in the mesolect. Another way of stating it (Singler 1991b: 156) is that preadjectival copula absence should be high in the basilect and mesolect and low in the acrolect, while prenominal and prelocative copula absence should be low in both the basilect and acrolect (although the copula is instantiated by different forms at each pole) and high in the mesolect. This is illustrated by the outputs of individual NSLE speakers in Table 6.11. If we apply this prediction to the kinds of Caribbean data sets considered in this paper, it also appears to hold true, especially with respect to the orderings of __Loc and __Adj: in more basilectal data sets, like the Gullah and Jamaican data in Tables 6.8 and 6.9, copula absence is higher before __Adj than __Loc; but in more mesolectal data sets, like the Barbadian and Trinidadian data in Tables 6.10 and 6.12 (the latter below), copula absence is higher before __Loc than __Adj.[26]

	MODEL A			MODEL B				
	Basilect		Mesolect		Basilect	Mesolect		Acrolect
Loc	*de*	→	*is*	Loc	*de*	→ ∅	→	*is*
NP	*be*	→	*is*	NP	*be*	→ ∅	→	*is*
Adj	∅	→	*is*	Adj	∅	→ ∅	→	*is*

Figure 6.2 Two models of decreolization and copular distribution in Non-Settler Liberian English
Source: adapted from Singler (1991b: 155).

25 This model is represented by the quote from Bickerton (1971) on page 174

26 Of course, the prediction does not hold for the 1991 Barbadian data in Table 6.10, where __Adj shows more copula absence than __Loc, but it can be argued that the two octogenarians who are the source of these data are more basilectal than the six younger speakers who are the source of the 1980s data.

Table 6.11 Copula absence among basilectal, mesolectal, and acrolectal speakers of Non-Settler Liberian English by following grammatical environment (%)

	__Adjective	*__Locative*	*__NP*
Basilect (Gedeh Goldminer, n=100)	92	23	20
Mesolect (Charlie, n=100)	100	100	93
Acrolect (Richard, n=60)	13	0	5

Source: adapted from Singler (1991b: 156, Table 19).

Another creole data set for which quantitative data on copula absence have recently become available is Trinidadian Creole (TC, Winford 1992a), which, like Barbadian, has the advantage of being a mesolectal variety well-suited to comparisons with AAVE (ibid., p. 29). Winford first provides vernacular data from peer-group recordings (some surreptitious) with Working Class (WC) and Lower Middle Class (LMC) subjects. Copula absence in such data is very high (see top row of Table 6.12) – suggesting that the copula is underlyingly absent in all but nominal environments – but it still resembles the AAVE pattern, this time with __Loc higher than __Adj:[27] Copula absence in the individual interviews (Table 6.12, second row) is much lower overall, and much more similar in its absolute values to the frequencies reported by W. Labov *et al.* (1968) for the NYC Jets; and with the exception of an anomalous *__goin* percentage which may be attributed to limited data, the relative values are also more similar to those of AAVE.[28] On the basis of this and other evidence, Winford concludes (p. 49): "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

Table 6.12 Copula (*am, is, are*) absence in Trinidadian Creole (TC) by following grammatical environment

	__NP	*__Adjective*	*__Locative*	*__Verb+ing*	__goin
Group sessions	1% (489)	79% (208)	90% (108)	94% (678)	97% (39)
Interviews	1% (280)	30% (175)	53% (66)	70% (275)	50% (14)

Source: adapted from Winford (1992a: 34, Table 6); number of tokens in parentheses.

27 The group data in this table are summed from Winford's (1992a: 34) Table 5 data on first person singular, third person singular, and plural and second person forms. In Table 6 (ibid.), Winford provides the corresponding VARBRUL feature weights for copula absence: __NP .00; __Adj .64; __Loc .80; __V+*ing* .85; *__goin* .88.

28 The interview data in this table are summed from Winford's (1992a: 41) Table 7 data on first person singular, third person singular, and plural and second person forms. Winford does not provide VARBRUL feature weights for these data.

the creole continua of the Caribbean." That process is sketched by him, in an expansion of Singler's Model B, as in Figure 6.3.[29]

Overall, if one simply compares the quantitative patterns of copula absence by following environment in the creole varieties and in AAVE, one is struck by the parallels between them (with one or two exceptions), and it is this parallelism which has provided one of the main planks for the hypothesis that AAVE might have been the diachronic outcome of a decreolization or variation process similar to that synchronically evidenced in the Caribbean, the Sea Islands, and Liberia.[30] But there are two sorts of challenges which one might pose to these comparisons between creole (primarily Caribbean) varieties and AAVE.

The first are general, theoretical challenges. Mufwene (p.c.) has suggested, for instance, that the comparisons might be typologically insightful but diachronically inconclusive because of the absence of a demonstrated sociohistorical connection between the Caribbean varieties and AAVE. However, recent evidence (see Rickford 1997) that Caribbean slaves constituted a substantial portion of the founding black populations in several American colonies helps to provide the missing link. Mufwene (ibid.) has also suggested that one must first prove that the continuum variability in Trinidadian, Guyanese, and other Caribbean varieties can be attributed to decreolization (here meaning the replacement and loss of basilectal creole features over time) before suggesting that the parallels between these and AAVE argue for prior decreolization in AAVE. But even if one assumes that mesolectal variability of the current

	Basilect		Lower mesolect		Upper mesolect		Acrolect
NP	*a*	→	Invariant *is*	→	*is*/forms of *be*	→	Inflect. *be*
Adj	∅	→	∅	→	∅/forms of *be*	→	Inflect. *be*
Loc	*de*	→	∅	→	∅/forms of *be*	→	Inflect. *be*
Progressive	a V	→	∅ V+*in*	→	(be) V+*in*	→	*be* V+*in*
Future	*a go* V	→	∅ *goin* +V	→	*(be) goin to* V	→	*be goin to* V

Figure 6.3 Model of decreolization in the Caribbean English Creole copula system
Source: adapted from Winford (1992a: 48, Figure 6).

29 Note that while the nominal copula is replaced by zero in Singler's NSLE model, it is replaced by invariant *is* in Winford's Caribbean English Creole (CEC) model, in line with evidence that the CEC mesolect shows very low rates of prenominal copula absence.

30 As W. Labov (1982: 198) notes, this parallelism was said by James Sledd (p.c.) to constitute "the first serious evidence for the Creole hypothesis."

Caribbean type was present from the earliest periods of black/white contact (Alleyne 1971) and was *not* the product of (qualitative) decreolization, the similarities between the Caribbean and African-American speech communities in the United States would still support the possibility that the latter were subject to creole influences. One reason for this is that the mesolects, even if present from the start, are still creole-related. Another is that the extent and patterning of copula absence in African-American speech communities are unparalleled among the British populations from which Africans acquired their English, so that we cannot assume the direct transmission and smooth acquisition process which the alternative dialectologist position requires. A final theoretical issue, raised by Don Winford (p.c.), is whether we can treat copula absence as a uniquely creole feature rather than a general feature of untutored second language learning or substratal influence in language shift. Winford (forthcoming) cities Mesthrie (1992: 67–70) and points to the incidence of copula absence in South African Indian English and other New Englishes. However, the patterns of non-phonological copula absence by following grammatical environment in South African Indian English (SAIE) are quite different from those in AAVE and the creoles. In the SAIE basilect, copula absence is highest (33%) before __NP, and lower before __Adj (15%) and __PP (11%); in the mesolect and acrolect it is non-existent (Meshtrie 1992: 50, Table 2.6). Whether similar differences would show up in other ESL varieites, and the extent to which we can draw a firm line between second language acquisition/shift and pidginization/creolization (cf. Andersen 1983) remains to be determined. At present, the typological similarities and sociohistorical links between AAVE and the Caribbean/West African creoles suggests strongly to me that they were subject to similar creolizing (if not decreolizing) influences.

The second set of challenges to creole/AAVE comparisons has to do with queries about details. If one asks, for instance, *why* the AAVE patterns should be as they are, given the creole patterns, or *why* the mesolectal creole patterns are as they are, given the basilectal creole system, the answers are not always clear-cut.[31] In particular Mufwene (1992) has raised the following challenges to the creole similarities evidence:

(a) Why does AAVE typically show non-negligible percentages of copula absence before nominals (e.g. 23% *is* absence for NYC Thunderbirds), given that the creoles typically have a copula (*a* in GC and JC, *da* in Gullah) rather than zero before __NP?
(b) Why is copula absence in AAVE lower before adjectival predicates than in progressive and future constructions, given that none of these contexts requires a copula in the creoles?[32]

31 This is part of a larger problem in variation studies (both quantitativist and implicational) – the tendency to be satisfied with describing rather than explaining the patterns.

(c) Why is copula absence in AAVE not consistently or significantly higher before __Adj than before __Loc, given that, in the creoles, adjectives are like stative verbs and never require a copula, while locatives (optionally) take a copula (*de*)? This question was raised as well by Poplack and Tagliamonte (1991: 322–323).

Winford (1992: 48–49) dismisses these questions by noting that Mufwene and Poplack and Tagliamonte presuppose direct influence from the basilect, while it is the mesolectal copula systems which provide the "proper reference points" for AAVE. This response is certainly valid, particularly in regards to (c), where, as suggested by Singler (1991), the creole locative copula (*de*) is replaced by zero in the mesolect en route to the acrolectal use of *is*. This means that in the stage immediately prior to the upper mesolect or near acrolect represented by modern AAVE, adjectival and locative predicates are *not* distinguished in terms of the copula they require, and one would not therefore expect consistent or significant differences between them in terms of copula absence. It is significant that, as noted in this chapter, mesolectal samples that are closer to the basilect – like the Jamaican Creole samples analyzed by Holm (1984) and Rickford (1991c, 1996) – *do* show the "high adj" zero copula pattern (relative to __Loc) which Mufwene and Poplack and Tagliamonte all expect. These are the varieties which could be expected to show the influence of the creole basilect distinction along the lines Holm (1984: 298) hypothesized.[33] As we go further away from the basilect, however, into mid-mesolectal varieties like TC, or upper mesolectal/near acrolectal varieties like Samaná, ANSE, and AAVE, we find minimal copula absence differences between __Adj and __Loc, and more fluctuation in their relative ordering, suggesting that the "high adj" pattern of the basilect is not a major influence.

There are some cases in which copula absence for __Loc is significantly higher (20% or more) than it is for __Adj, for instance, by .42 in the cases of the ex-slaves in the second row of Table 6.3 above, by 29% and 48% in the case of Albert and Slim in the LSE data of Table 6.6, by 23% in the case of the individual TC data in Table 6.12, and by .34 in the case of Baugh's (1979: 189) data for *are* absence in Los Angeles. But in general, when copula absence for

32 It is not true that progressives and futures require no "copula" or auxiliary in the creoles. The basilectal progressive is (*d*)*a* or *de* V, with a clear preverbal marker or auxiliary; the basilectal future is either *go* V or *a go* V (see discussion below), the former never requiring a copula at higher levels of the continuum (where it surfaces as *gon* in some varieties), the other sometimes doing so (where it surfaces as *gwain*/*goin tu*).

33 "Copulas preceding *adjectives* and those preceding *locatives* could be expected to delete at substantially different rates in BEV [AAVE] were they to be calculated separately, since in the protocreole there was a copula for location (*de*) whereas adjectives were a subclass of verbs requiring no copula. The deletion rate for copulas preceding adjectives could be expected to be several times greater than that of copulas preceding locatives."

__Loc is higher than it is for __Adj, it is minimally so, for instance, by .04 in the Samaná data in the top row of Table 6.4; by .03 in ANSE, Table 6.5; by .12 in the 1980s Barbadian data, Table 6.10; by 11% in the TC group data, Table 6.12; by 3% in the Detroit WC data (Wolfram 1969: 172); by .01 and .06 in the Texas adult and child data respectively (G. Bailey and N. Maynor 1987: 457); by .02 and .05 in the East Palo Alto data, depending on whether one uses Straight deletion or Labov deletion methods respectively (Rickford *et al.* 1991: 117).

At the same time, appealing to the mesolect does not answer all the relevant questions, partly because our understanding of the variation paths and processes in copula variability is not complete. With respect to question (a), for instance, it certainly seems to be the case that the Caribbean creoles abhor copula absence in nominal environments to an extent that AAVE and its immediate congeners do not; compare the prenominal copula absence statistics for TC (1%, Table 6.12 above) and Barbadian (.07, .08, Table 6.10) with those for Samaná (.41, top row, Table 6.4), ANSE (.31, Table 6.5) and AAVE in NYC (.23 Thunderbirds, .32 Jets) and East Palo Alto (.27 or .29, Rickford *et al.* 1991: 117). Although we do find comparably high prenominal copula absence figures for some of the Creole data sets (28% JC, Table 6.9; 32–43% LSE, Table 6.6; 20–93% NSLE, Table 6.11), it must be admitted that we simply do not know *why* these differences exist. Some of them may be due to statistical fluctuations due to limited data, particularly in analyses based on the speech of one individual, but we need more study to determine in which varieties and why a basilectal copula goes to zero before being replaced by inflected forms of *be* (as in Singler's Model B, Figure 6.2 above), and in which varieties and why a basilectal copula is directly replaced by a non-basilectal copula (as in Winford's model, Figure 6.3). At present we cannot say definitively which of these decreolization paths AAVE followed, although the LSE-based Model B seems more promising.[34]

It should also be admitted that we don't have a watertight answer to Mufwene's question (b), about why __V+*ing* and __*gon*(*na*) consistently show higher copula absence rates than __Adj. Winford's (1992a: 56, fn 17) answer to this is that the former two are actually auxiliary environments, subject to stronger constraints against copula insertion than copulative __Adj, since "suffixal *-ing* and future *gon*(*na*) are tense aspect markers which require no *be* support." This raises some interesting issues, but essentially restates the question. For in the basilect, adjectival, progressive, and future environments are all

34 One problem with Model B is that it posits simultaneous replacement of the basilect forms in all environments by zero, something which Singler himself admits (1991b: 155) may need refining. Differential timing of decreolization processes by environment – as in Winford's model, and in the empirical work of other continuum scholars (Day 1973; Bickerton 1973; Rickford 1979) – seems theoretically more plausible.

auxiliary environments (to the extent that adjectives behave like stative verbs in the basilect), and the question of how decreolization proceeds in each of these environments and ends up distinguishing them, is, in my opinion, far from settled. Considering only the future environment, for instance, is the starting point indeed *a go* + V, as Winford's model (Figure 6.3 above) suggests? What of basilectal *go* + V, whose alternation with *a go* + V (paralleling SE variation between non-prospective *will* V and prospective *is going to* V) has never been systematically studied by anyone? For Holm (1984: 298), AAVE *gonna* is a descendant of creole *go*, itself "a calque for a protocreole preverbal marker indicating irrealis [*go? sa?*] which was never preceded by any copula-like particle." But *go* as a strictly copula-less auxiliary varies in the continuum with forms like *gon* and *will*, which never require a copula. If AAVE *gonna* is the product of decreolization, it is likely indeed to have come from *a go* + V, as Winford hypothesizes, but it is likely to have had some influence from the copula-free *go* + V and *gon* + V, because of their phonological and semantic similarities, and this might explain the very high rates of copula absence before __*gon*(*na*) in AAVE and __*gwine* or __*goin tu* in the mesolectal creole varieties.[35]

In any case, the relationship between *go* and *gon* on the one hand, and *gwain* and *goin to* in the creoles deserves further study, much as the relationship between *gon* and *gonna* in AAVE does. Rickford and Blake (1990: 261) report preliminary evidence that *gon* as in "He gon tell" shows a higher proportion of copula absence than *gonna*, as in "He's gonna tell," and Winford (1992: 55, fn 8) asks whether these two forms are equally accommodating of auxiliary *be*, given that *go* in TC and *gon* in GC never take *be*, while *gwain* and *goin to* in both varieties do take *be*. When we have a clearer idea of the synchronic variation and diachronic evolution of these future markers in the creoles and in AAVE, we will have, I believe, a surer answer to Mufwene's question.

One other demurral which must be raised in relation to the creole similarities evidence is that if we consider *preceding grammatical environment* – in particular, the effect of an NP vs pronoun subject – there is not as much parallelism between the creoles and AAVE. Fewer studies of creoles report data on this environment than for following grammatical environment, but Table 6.13 summarizes the available evidence from Barbadian, Jamaican, and Trinidadian, compared with several varieties of AAVE, and with Samaná and ANSE. The first thing to note is that the relation between an NP and a personal pronoun subject is absolutely regular in AAVE: the latter favors copula absence more than the former does, by substantial margins (20–43%). By contrast, in three of the creole data sets (Barbadian 1980s, Jamaican, and plural NPs vs pronouns in

35 For further discussion of the relationship between the future tense markers in creoles, see Mufwene (1996b: 8–11).

Table 6.13 Copula absence by preceding grammatical environment in Caribbean creoles, AAVE, and other varieties of New World Black English

	NP__	*Personal Pro__*	*Other Pro__*
Barbadian, 1980s data (Rickford and Blake 1990: 267)[a]	.84	.19	.45
Barbadian, 1991 data (Rickford 1992b: 192)	.48	.52	
Jamaican (Rickford 1996: 369)[a]	.70	.60	.23
Trinidadian group sessions (Winford 1992a: 34)[b]	.42 / .46	.49 / .60 / .64	.39
Liberian Settler English, Albert and Slim (Singler 1991b: 145)[a, f]	.43 / .89	.24 / .51 / .51	. 22 / – / .63
AAVE, NYC Thunderbirds, zero *is* (Labov 1972a: 84)[c]	12% / 42%	51% / 60%	
AAVE, NYC Cobras, zero *is* (Labov 1972a: 84)[c]	18% / 42%	51% / 60%	
AAVE, NYC Jets, zero *is* (Labov 1972a: 84)[c]	18% / 27%	61% / 58%	
AAVE, Detroit WC (Wolfram 1969: 170)[d]	30% / 18%	63% / 41%	
AAVE, East Palo Alto (Rickford *et al.* 1991)[a, e]	.42 / (.54)	.62 / (.51)	.46 / (.44)
Samaná (Poplack and Sankoff 1987: 307)[f]	.81	.06 / .28 / .90	.06 / .43 / .53
ANSE (Poplack and Tagliamonte 1991: 321)[f]	.89	.16 / .52 / .91	.29 / – / .37

Notes

a "Other pronouns" includes forms like *this*, *there*, and *somebody*.

b NP figures are for Sing NP/Plural NP respectively; Personal Pro figures are for *I / he, she / we, you, they* respectively; Other Pro figures are for *it, what, that* subjects.

c First figure in each column = single or individual style; second figure is for group style.

d First figure in each column = Lower Working Class; second figure = Upper Working Class.

e First figure in each column = Straight deletion; second figure = Labov deletion (parentheses indicate Labov deletion results were insignificant for this factor group).

f Personal Pro figures are for *I / he, she / we, you, they* respectively; Other Pro figures are for *it, what, that / them, those, these, this / here, there, where* respectively.

LSE), the ordering is reversed, with a nominal subject favoring copula absence more than a pronoun subject; in the case of the LSE and Barbadian 1980s data sets, the margins are substantial (.38, .65). In the other creole data sets, the Pro > NP ordering does hold, but the margins are smaller than in the AAVE data sets, and in the case of the Barbadian 1991 data, virtually non-existent. This is bad news for the creole hypothesis, but the data for Samaná and ANSE provide little comfort for the dialectologist position either, since in these varieties an NP subject favors copula absence more strongly than most personal pronoun subjects, and a lot more than comparable NP subjects in AAVE.[36] I don't think we have worked enough on this aspect of copula absence to be able to say why the subject effect obtains and why it seems to vary so significantly in

varieties other than AAVE,[37] but the data in Table 6.13 do help to restrain the enthusiasm which creolists and dialectologists usually express about creole/AAVE similarities and differences on the basis of evidence from following grammatical environment alone.

6.4.4. *African language similarities*

The case for African substratum influence on AAVE copula usage – via an intermediate creole stage – is most strongly associated with Holm (1976, 1984), although it must be acknowledged that both Berdan (1975) and Dennis and Scott (1975) had presented similar arguments and evidence earlier, and that Alleyne (1980) and DeBose and Faraclas (1993) have presented other relevant data. The starting point for all arguments of this type is that AAVE copula absence statistically distinguishes between nominal, adjectival, locative, and verbal predicates (in terms of the different frequencies of zero in each, attested above). Standard and vernacular varieties of English provide little or no basis for this distinction (see section 6.3.5), insofar as they use the same form (an inflected form of *be*) regardless of following grammatical environment. But English-based creoles and a number of West African languages do, insofar as they employ different copula forms (including zero) in these different environments. Holm (1984: 297), drawing on Rowlands (1969), sketched the relevant facts for Yoruba, a language which was a part of the African-American substratum:

> __V: Yoruba ń is a preverbal marker of the progressive aspect corresponding roughly to English IS *going*, WERE *going* (Rowlands 1969: 60).
>
> __Adj: Most Yoruba adjectives are a subclass of verbs which require no copula; however some "phonoaesthetic" adjectives require the copula *rí* . . . (Rowlands 1969: 122, 155).
>
> __Loc: Yoruba *wà* (with stylistic variant *mbe*) expresses existence or location, as does *sí* after the negative (Rowlands 1969: 154).
>
> __NP: Both *jẹ́* and *ṣe* are used before nouns, but *jẹ́* is used when we are thinking of natural, in-born, permanent characteristics while *ṣe* is used of what is accidental, acquired or temporary (Rowlands 1969: p. 152).

36 This is not the case in Hannah's (1996) analysis of more recent Samaná data, however. The VARBRUL weight for copula absence (Labov deletion) is .038 for an NP subject, and .239 to .806 for various pronoun subjects.

37 Don Winford (p.c.) suggests that it may involve phonological constraints peculiar to AAVE. However, as the data in W. Labov (1972a: 104) and other studies indicate, the pronoun effect cannot simply be attributed to the fact that most personal pronouns end in vowels, since Pro__ has a consistently favoring effect on copula absence, while a noun ending in a vowel does not (except in the case of the NYC Thunderbirds). Beyond this, no one has given *any* explanation, much less a convincing explanation, as to why pronoun subjects should favor copula absence more than full NP subjects.

Figure 6.4 (adapted from Holm's 1984: 305, Figure 1) shows how some of these Yoruba distinctions were merged in the Caribbean English creoles and AAVE, although the four broad categories were still separated (via different forms or percentages of copula absence).[38]

While the distinction between these four primary copula environments in West African languages seems likely to have influenced the development of the creole copula system, and, ultimately the patterns of AAVE copula absence, there are, as in virtually every other kind of evidence we have considered so far, considerations which argue against attaching *too* much influence to this distinction. One is the fact that the match between the African language categories and the creole/AAVE categories is not perfect: the different kinds of adjectival and nominal predicates distinguished in Yoruba are not distinguished in the creoles nor in AAVE, while the creole/AAVE distinction between progressives and futures does not seem to come from Yoruba and other African languages. Furthermore, Yoruba may have had little to do with the emergence of Sranan or Jamaican. Mufwene (1992: 157) and others have also argued that substratist arguments of this type do not account for variation among African languages, and would need to be supplemented by "universal selective principles" which "would explain why the features of some West African languages would have been selected over those of other languages." Holm himself (1984: 296) acknowledged that copula absence in AAVE and the creoles did correspond to some of the universals of simplification (or second language acquisition) identified by Ferguson (1971), although he felt that the African substratum was more important.[39] Finally, if McWhorter (1995)

	Yoruba	Sranan	Jamaican	BEV	Standard English
___V	ń	e	de	(ɪ)z ~ ∅	(ɪ)z
___Adj	∅ / ri	∅	∅		
___Loc	wà / sɪ	de	de		
___NP	ṣe / jẹ́	de / a	a ~ ɪz		
Emph	ni	a	a ~ ɪz	ɪz	(it's)

Figure 6.4 Merger of copular categories
Source: adapted from Holm (1984: 305).

38 Salikoko Mufwene (p.c.) argues that *ní*, *ṣe*, and *jẹ́* are the only real copulas in this list, since Yoruba *ń* is really the counterpart of English progressive *-ing* as the future marker.

39 From the point of view of the creole hypothesis, of course, universals of simplification and substrate influence are not necessarily in conflict, since both could be elements in the prior pidginization and creolization of AAVE.

is right in his suggestion that the earliest (pidgin) forms of New World Black English lacked copulas altogether, this would also reduce the likelihood of African influence (admixture) in the development of copula forms and categories in the Caribbean creoles as well as AAVE.

6.4.5 *English dialect differences*

The available evidence from English dialects provides support for the creolist hypothesis insofar as most English dialects outside of AAVE or creole-speaking areas do *not* show copula absence. This is particularly true of the British dialects which, according to the dialectologist hypothesis, are assumed to have influenced AAVE. Wolfram (1974: 522) reports that he was unable to find evidence of copula absence in a selective search of the available records of British varieties,[40] and to the best of my knowledge, no such evidence has yet come to light. Moreover, studies of the copula in white American dialects outside of the South – for instance in New York City (W. Labov 1969) and in California (McElhinny 1993) – have similarly found no evidence of copula absence. Of course such dialects do show copula contraction, and Labov (1969) has argued that copula absence in AAVE is an extension of copula contraction in white vernaculars and Standard English and shows similar conditioning. However, this has been challenged on empirical and theoretical grounds (Rickford *et al.* 1991; Mufwene 1992; McElhinny 1993).

For Southern dialects of American English, the picture is less clear. Williamson (1972) pointed to examples of copula absence in spoken and written samples of Southern white English, although she provided no quantitative evidence of their occurrence relative to contracted and full forms. Of the white Atlanta fifth graders studied by Dunlap (1974: 77–79), the Upper Middle Class and Lower Middle Class *never* deleted the copula, while the Lower Class deleted it only 1% of the time;[41] corresponding zero copula percentages for black Atlanta fifth graders were 1% (Upper Middle Class Black), 9% (Lower Middle Class Black), and 27% (Lower Class Black), so the difference between the two ethnic groups on this feature was qualitative, as it was also with respect to invariant habitual *be* (used by blacks but not whites). The whites from rural Franklin County, Mississippi, studied by Wolfram (1974) – primarily children and

40 As Wolfram (1974: 522) goes on to note: "Of course, it must be admitted that the inability to find copula deletion in British varieties does not necessarily mean that it doesn't occur; but since copula deletion is a rather noticeable phenomenon, one would suspect that if it had occurred, there would be some report of its existence in the major sources."

41 Of the 8 instances of zero copula which comprise this 1%, 7 are with plural or second person subjects – that is, they are instances of *are*-deletion rather than *is*-deletion, as reported for other Southern dialects (Alabama, Mississippi, Texas).

teenagers – showed considerably more *are*-absence (58%), but fairly limited *is*-absence (6.5% overall). In fact, 30 of the 45 white informants whose speech was analyzed by Wolfram showed no *is*-absence at all, and those who did delete *is* did not show the same grammatical conditioning evidenced in studies of *is*-absence in AAVE. For instance, although a subject pronoun did favor copula absence slightly more than a preceding NP (15.6% vs 12.6% respectively), the difference was negligible, and in terms of following grammatical environment, the distinction was essentially a binary one, between nominal (8%) and non-nominal (16–18%) environments (see Table 6.14.) At the same time, the conditioning for *are*-absence was quite similar to that reported for copula absence in AAVE, both in terms of a robust pronoun versus NP subject effect (64% vs 33% respectively) and in terms of the role of following grammatical environment (see Table 6.14). In terms of *is*-absence, then, the difference between the white Mississippi pattern and that of AAVE was sharp, and qualitative; the *are*-absence pattern was essentially similar, or only quantitatively different.

This is also the case in Feagin's (1979) study of Anniston, Alabama. Feagin does not provide data on the conditioning of copula absence among her white speakers, but their overall patterns resemble those of Wolfram's Mississippi informants. For *is*-absence, the percentages are low: 1.7% for the Upper Class, 5.8% for the Urban Working Class, and 6.8% for the Rural Working Class. For *are*-absence, however, the figures are higher: 17.9% for the Upper Class, 35.3% for the Urban Working Class, and 56.3% for the Rural Working Class.

Finally, we have data on copula absence in the speech of white folk-speakers (over seventy-five years old, with a grade school education or less) from East-Central Texas, as reported in G. Bailey and N. Maynor (1985), and compared with the data of black folk-speakers. The white folk-speakers do show considerably more *are*-absence (36%, 148/411) than *is*-absence (2%, 26/1311), but data from black folk-speakers from the area show a similar discrimination between the two forms, although copula absence higher in both cases: *is*-absence = 6%, 46/734; *are*-absence = 58%, 159/274. The effect of following grammatical environment is similar for the whites and the blacks, too, who primarily distinguish auxiliary (__V+*ing* and __*gonna*) and non-auxiliary environments, as shown in Table 6.15.

Table 6.14 Copula (*is*, *are*) absence in rural white Mississippi English by following grammatical environment

	__*NP*	__*Adj/Loc*	__*Verb*+ing	__gonna
Are-absence	31% (35)	49% (218)	66% (140)	86% (69)
Is-absence	8% (65)	16% (115)	18% (40)	18% (22)

Source: adapted from Wolfram (1974: 507, 514, Tables 3 and 7); number of tokens in parentheses.

Table 6.15 Copula (*is*, *are*) absence among folk-speakers from East-Central Texas by following grammatical environment

	__*NP*	__*Adjective*	__*Locative*	__*Verb*+ing	__gonna
Whites	2% (861)	10% (339)	8% (99)	34% (159)	54% (79)
Blacks	9% (436)	14% (209)	15% (85)	73% (92)	68% (14)

Source: G. Bailey and N. Maynor (1985: 210, Table 5); number of tokens in parentheses.

In sum, we find no copula absence outside of the South, but of the four Southern varieties for which we have quantitative data, at least three show copula absence patterns comparable in their rates and conditioning with those of AAVE, particularly insofar as *are*-absence is concerned. The fact that the British dialects whose historical antecedents were the source of Southen white dialects show no copula absence makes it extremely unlikely that this feature was inherited from them. Although it is possible that this feature was independently innovated in white Southern speech, it is more likely that, as suggested by Wolfram (1974: 524), "copula absence in white Southern speech may have been assimilated from decreolizing black speech." Thus the similarities between Southern white dialects and AAVE with respect to this feature do not work against the creolist and for the dialectologist hypothesis, as one might have assumed from the general principles outlined in the introductory section.

6.5 Summary, concluding remarks, directions for research

Table 6.16 summarizes the quantitative data on copula absence by following grammatical environment which have been the mainstay of our discussions of the evidence provided by historical attestations, diaspora recordings, creole similarities, and English dialect differences with respect to the creole origins of AAVE. What it excludes, of course, is the pros and cons raised by each piece of evidence and the questions which remain, topics pursued in more detail above.

It is impossible to conclude with a balance sheet of pluses and minuses which would add up to a final decision on the creole origins issue. To my mind, there is enough persuasive evidence in these data to suggest that AAVE did have some creole roots. The very fact that copula absence is widespread both in AAVE and in mesolectal creoles, but not in white Englishes outside of the American South (where it can be argued that whites adopted the speech patterns of blacks) strongly suggests that at least some of the predecessors of modern AAVE arose from a restructuring process similar to that which produced the English-based creoles. The fact that the constraint hierarchy for following grammatical environment is so similar across the varieties shown in Table 6.16 further reinforces

Table 6.16 Summary of copula absence rates by following grammatical environment in historical attestations, diaspora recordings, creole varieties, white American English, and AAVE

	_NP	_Adj	_Loc	_V+ing	_gon
Historical attestations					
Ex-slaves (G. Bailey 1987)	12%	29%	15%	71%	100%
Ex-slaves (Poplack and Tagliamonte 1991)	.39	.27	.67	.72	.78
Diaspora recordings					
Samaná (Poplack and Sankoff 1987)	.41	.19	.23	.46	.59
Samaná (Hannah 1996)	.12	.44	.42	.89	.93
ANSE (Poplack and Tagliamonte 1991)	.31	.46	.49	.69	.73
LSE (Singler 1991b) Carolina	43%	93%	100%	97%	100%
LSE (Singler 1991b) Albert	32%	65%	94%	85%	100%
LSE (Singler 1991b) Slim	36%	43%	91%	79%	100%
Creole varieties					
Hawaiian Creole (Day 1973)	63%	72%	62%	94%	[No data]
JC 1960 (Rickford 1996)	28%	81%	18%	86%	100%
JC 1991 (Rickford 1991c)	4%	59%	28%	58%	93%
Bajan 1980s (Rickford and Blake 1990)	.08	.42	.54	.65	.77
Bajan 1991 (Rickford 1992b)	.07	.71	.52	.89	1.00
NSLE (Singler 1991b) basilect	20%	92%	23%		
NSLE (Singler 1991b) mesolect	93%	100%	100%		
NSLE (Singler 1991b) acrolect	5%	13%	0%		
Trinidadian groups (Winford 1992a)	1%	79%	90%	94%	97%
Trinidadian individuals. (Winford 1992a)	1%	30%	53%	70%	50%
White American English					
White Mississippi *are* (Wolfram 1974)	31%	49% (_Adj/Loc)		66%	86%
White Mississippi *is* (Wolfram 1974)	8%	16% (_Adj/Loc)		18%	18%
White East-Texas (G. Bailey and N. Maynor 1985)	2%	10%	8%	34%	54%
African-American vernacular English					
is, NYC Thunderbirds (Labov 1969)	.2	.48	.36	.66	.88
is, NYC Jets (Labov 1969)	.32	.36	.52	.74	.93
is NYC Cobras (Baugh 1979)	.14	.72	.31	.59	.78
is+are, Detroit WC (Wolfram 1969)	37%	47%	44%	50%	79%
is, Los Angeles (Baugh 1979)	.32	.56	.29	.66	.69
are. Los Angeles (Baugh 1979)	.25	.35	.69	.62	.64
is+are, Texas kids (G. Bailey and N. Maynor 1987)	.12	.25	.19	.41	.89
is+are, Texas adults (G. Bailey and N. Maynor 1987)	.09	.14	.15	.73	.68
is+are, East Palo Alto (Rickford *et al.* 1991)	.29	.47	.42	.66	.77

this conclusion.[42] The fact that AAVE varieties which might be considered closer to their creole origins on historical grounds (eighteenth-century varieties, Samaná) also behave more like creole varieties in some respects (for instance in permitting some deletion of first person *am* and/or in permitting some degree of past tense copula absence) is also a plus for the creole origins hypothesis.

At the same time, our review of the available evidence with respect to copula absence has turned up various challenges to the creole hypothesis, which can be broadly characterized as being of two types. The first is inconsistencies in data from two or more sources, for instance, the difference between analyses of the ex-slave recording data provided by Guy Bailey (1987) and Poplack and Tagliamonte (1991), or the difference between analyses of Samaná as analyzed by Poplack and Sankoff (1987) and Hannah (1996). More serious is the absence of convincing explanations for certain recurrent effects, like the differences between pronoun versus NP subjects on copula absence in AAVE and the creoles, or the reason why the following grammatical constraint hierarchy should pattern as it does, and future work should be dedicated to the pursuit of such explanations.

There is also the issue of intermediate positions on the creole origins issue, like those of Winford (1992b: 350–351), who is now willing to accept that a "creole substratum" did play some role in the history of AAVE, but not that it was once a fully fledged creole like Gullah. Similarly Holm (1988, 1992) is willing to see early AAVE as a "semi-Creole" and Mufwene (1992: 144) to recognize it as having been a separate language variety, derived from neither a creole nor any white American non-standard language variety, although structurally related to both. These are interesting new positions, but they are not inconsistent with the kinds of evidence reviewed in this chapter, and they agree

42 Guy Bailey (p.c.) offered the following helpful remarks after this chapter was written, and it seems most relevant to insert them here: "First, the exact order of the constraints of the following predicate on copula deletion is not really crucial to the creole hypothesis. The fact that the following environment matters at all is sufficient to prove that this comes from something other than English. In English the form of the verb always depends on the subject. Even in those dialects that do not have subject–verb concord, the form of the verb is determined by whether the subject is an NP or PRO. It is not surprising that there should be some discrepancies among AAVE and various creoles in regard to the exact effects of the following environment. After all, they've had several centuries of independent development. Second, I think the differing effects of a preceding NP or PRO on zero copula has a simple explanation: it reflects the grafting of an English constraint onto a creole process. This constraint manifests itself in a number of ways in earlier AAVE, and with several centuries of contact, it is only reasonable to assume that other dialects of English affected AAVE just as AAVE affected them. Third, I'm convinced that African and Creole influence not only extended throughout the entire period of slavery but that the period from 1790–1840 saw a real reinfusion of these element. More than half of the slaves imported to the US were imported after 1790 (most of these after 1793 and the invention of the cotton gin). With the westward expansion of the cotton kingdom, this was the most dynamic period of slavery."

at least in denying the validity of the pure dialectologist's argument – that AAVE simply represents the transfer and acquisition by Africans and African Americans of English dialects spoken by British and other white immigrants to America in earlier times.

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Part III

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