

## Regional Variation of Verbal -s in Earlier African American English

Nandi Sims  
*The Ohio State University*

Conference: North American Research Network in Historical Sociolinguistics (NARNiHS)  
21-23 July 2017 – University of Kentucky

This paper explores the patterns of distribution of verbal –s in the present tense paradigm of the early African American Vernacular English (AAVE) represented in the written Federal Writer’s Project ex-slave narratives. The widespread use of verbal –s with various subjects in early AAVE has led to a great deal of discussion and disagreement concerning the sources of the patterns of s-marking. One widely accepted view is that the verbal –s paradigm of earlier AAVE varieties reflects the Northern Subjects Rule (NSR) typically associated with the English varieties spoken in northern Britain (Poplack and Tagliamonte 2004; Walker and van Herk 2002).

Schneider showed that the frequency of s-marking in these same ex-slave narratives varied by state (1983, 1989). British sociohistorical migration data demonstrates that the area from the Appalachian to Ozark mountain ranges (henceforth known as the *mountain* region) experienced the highest percentage of migration from northern Britain and, thus the language varieties spoken there should have had the most influence of the NSR. Other regions (*gulf*, *upper-south*, and *lower-south*) experienced migration from East Anglia, Southern England, and other British colonies, such as Barbados, which were characterized by different s-marking patterns (Winford 2015).

This study tests variation in the early AAVE spoken in the four abovementioned regions using data from 134 of the FWP ex-slave narratives (1983, 1989). My dependent variable was the presence or lack of –s in tokens of regular verbs, *do*, *have*, and *go* in simple present and present perfect, present-reference constructions. In addition to the region, I coded each token for the type of subject (pronominal or non-pronominal), third singular (third singular or non-third singular), and adjacency (adjacency or non-adjacency between subject and verb) as per the NSR (Pietsch 2005). Other variables included preceding segment, following segment, and verbal aspect, shown by others to be relevant to s-marking.

There was no significant difference in s-marking for type of subject, adjacency, or the interaction between the two either overall or within any of the regions. My results showed a significant difference only in the marking of verbal-s in non-third singular subjects between the regions. The two coastal regions had almost 100% marking of –s with both third-singular and non-third singular subjects. The mountain and gulf regions showed almost 100% s-marking with third-singular subjects and only about 50% s-marking with non-third singular subjects.

None of the patterns of s-marking in this data set align with the distinctive NSR predictions. The high amount of s-marking in the coasts may reflect a different s-marking paradigm: that of Southern England, characterized by variable –s marking on all persons and numbers. Though further research needs to be done to compare these varieties of AAVE to antebellum varieties of Anglo, southern English to test this neo-Anglicist hypothesis.

### References

- Pietsch, Lukas. 2005. “Some do and some doesn’t”: Verbal concord variation in the north of the British Isles. In Bernd Kortmann, Tanja Hermann, Lukas Pietsch and Susanne Wagner (eds) *Agreement, Gender, Relative Clauses*: 125-210. De Gruyter.
- Poplack, Shana and Sali Tagliamonte. 2004. Back to the present: Verbal -s in the (African American) English Diaspora. In R. Hickey (ed.) *The Legacy of Non-Standard Colonial English: The study of transported dialects*: 203-223. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schneider, Edgar W. 1983. The origin of verbal -s in Black English. *American Speech* 58(2):99- 113.
- Schneider, Edgar W. 1989. *American Earlier Black English: Morphological and syntactic variables*.
- Walker, James A. and Gerard Van Herk. 2002. “We labors under a great deal of disadvantages”: Verbal -s in Early African American English. *Actes de l’ACL 2002/ 2002 CLA Proceedings*.
- Winford, Donald. 2015. The Origins of African American Vernacular English: Beginnings. In Jennifer Bloomquist, Lisa J. Green, and Sonja L. Lanehart (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of African American Language*.