Aspectual Markers in African American English

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African American English

• There is a rich history of research about African American English (AAE)
  – Labov et al. (1968), Wolfram (1969), Fasold (1972)
  – Rickford (1975, 1999), Baugh (1979, 1983)
• Including research specifically about the aspectual system
Aspect in African American English

• Agreement on the fact that AAE has aspectual constructions that are not found in Mainstream American English (MAE)
  – These include habitual be, remote time BIN, perfective done, preterit had, preverbal steady

• Beyond looking at individual features, recently, scholars have been using multiple dialect features which form a list:
  – Van Hofwegen and Wolfram’s (2010) Dialect Density Measure
  – Craig & Washington (2006) (and colleagues)
AAE Aspectual System

• Green’s (2011) work on child AAE discusses what a feature list misses:
  – To what extent these features cluster together or are related to each other and why
  – Doesn’t give a clear picture of complex structures beyond morphosyntax
AAE Aspectual System

• Labov (1998) describes AAE in relation to MAE
  — Overlap, but aspectual markers are more prominent
  — Coexistent System for AAE speakers
    • MAE component and AAE component.
    • What is less understood, is how the unique AAE component meshes with MAE to form a system.

Figure from Labov 1998; Green 2013
Constructions

• Today, we’ll focus on three constructions in AAE
  – Invariant habitual *be* (be2)
  – Remote time (stressed) BIN
  – Unstressed *done* (completive/perfect/perfective)

• They share syntactic properties that distinguish them from MAE auxiliaries (Labov 1998):
  – Do not accept negative affixation
  – Do not form tag questions
  – Do not participate in auxiliary inversion
Invariant habitual *be*

- “I be playin’ horseshoes and stuff” (1039, PHS)
- Often called *be*₂ (Dayton 1996, Fasold 2011, Alim 2004) or nonfinite *be* (Labov 1998)
- Expresses habitual or iterative aspect (Fasold 1972)
- The assumption in the literature is that there isn’t reduction, but this hasn’t been looked at (Labov 1998)
Remote time stressed BIN

• “I BIN like the [Miami] Heat before Lebron got there, other people just like teams cause they start winnin’, but it just so happens that all the teams I like all winners though but…” (1085, PHS)
Remote time stressed BIN

- “I BIN like the Heat” (1085, PHS)
- Aspect is expressed in two ways “‘A long time ago’ and ‘have for a long time and so do now’” (Dayton 1996).
- One of the features that needs acoustic information
  - distinguished from been (semantic equivalent of past/present perfect in MAE) on basis of stress alone (Fasold and Wolfram 1970; Rickford 1975, 1977).
  - Otherwise, just based on the form, there two sets of homonymous constructions (BIN and bin).
Unstressed *done*

- “And they *don’t* didn’t know his real name or something” (1019, PHS)
- Labov (1998) calls this the perfect particle, which precedes a verb and makes reference to an action completed in the recent past
- Claims about grammaticalization in AAE? (Edwards 2001; Labov 1998)
- Does this make AAE *done* different than the perfective *done* in Southern English varieties (e.g. Wolfram & Christian 1975; Feagin 1979)?
Research Questions

• Today, we explore approaches to aspect in a unique corpus of spoken AAE.

• Are these aspectual constructions unrelated or related to the point that they form a system?

• If these aspectual constructions do comprise a system, we might expect:
  – Similar patterning over time for individuals/groups
Variables and Constructions

• *Variables* that don’t fit into the traditional sociolinguistic (circumscribable) variable definition
  — Tagliamonte 2006; Wolfram 1993
• Raw counts are often employed
• Our methodologies here utilize corpus-based techniques
  — Normalizing raw counts in several ways
Frank Porter Graham

• Longitudinal study of AAE in central North Carolina (primarily Durham and Chapel Hill) (see Van Hofwegen & Wolfram 2010)
• Looking at G6 (age 11), G8 (age 13), G10 (age 15) and Post-High School (age 19/20)

• 545 transcripts (of varying lengths) with audio
• 170 speakers (68 “longitudinal”=all four timepoints)
• 450,000+ word corpus (transcribed spoken data)
  — Transcribed into “Communication Units” (over 56000 communication units)
Other aspects?

• In Van Hofwegen & Wolfram’s (2010) list based (DDM) analysis with a portion of the current data, be2 is much more frequent than BIN/done, which are two of the least frequent vernacular forms (out of 29 morphosyntactic forms) in their dataset.
Methodology

• Isolate the “AAE” constructions within the larger number of (MAE) constructions within the form of be, been, done

• Coding differed by construction, with acoustic components playing different roles
  – Be: Structural
  – Done: Structural/Acoustic?
  – BIN: Acoustic/Structural
FPG Descriptive Stats

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AAE Tokens</th>
<th>MAE Tokens</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>be</td>
<td>748 (0.013)</td>
<td>2108 (0.037)</td>
<td>2856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIN</td>
<td>42 (0.0007)</td>
<td>311 (0.005)</td>
<td>353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Done</td>
<td>43 (0.0007)</td>
<td>171 (0.0003)</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>833 (0.015)</td>
<td>2590 (0.046)</td>
<td>3423</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Raw count (normalized by communication unit)

Example Types:
- AAE Tokens: be2, Remote Time BIN, unstressed \textit{done}
- MAE: Auxiliary+ be (e.g. I’ll be there), perfect+been (e.g. I’ve been eating), adj. done (e.g. I would have done the same thing)
Features by age/grade

- Normalized by communication unit
Features by age/grade

- Normalized by communication unit
- BIN/done scaled by a factor of 10 to make patterns more visible
AAE Const. / Total Construction

AAE feature by Grade

Grade

0.05
0.10
0.15
0.20
0.25
0.30
0.35

G6
G8
G10
PHS

AAE Form/Total Form

be
BIN
done
BE Constructions

BE Construction by Grade

![Graph showing BE Constructions by Grade](image)
Discussion

• How do we determine to what extent these constructions form an aspectual system in AAE?
  – There are structural/syntactic reasons to group them together (e.g. no negative affixes)
  – But, patterns over time are distinct

• What does the frequency of *be*2 (in the speech here and in previous sociolinguistic analyses) tell us about these three constructions?
Discussion

- We are using a large corpus of spoken AAE
- Reiterates the common difficulty with studying these aspectual constructions
**Implicational Scale?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construction(s)</th>
<th>Speaker # (% total)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>be only</td>
<td>30 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be/done</td>
<td>11 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be/bin</td>
<td>10 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be/BIN/done</td>
<td>6 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIN only</td>
<td>1* (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>10 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>68</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the “longitudinal” speakers only
Discussion

• By isolating the AAE constructions within the corpus as a whole and compared to the MAE constructions, we can deal with low frequency forms in a quantitative way

• How do speakers behave over time (proportion of AAE to MAE constructions)?
  – Individual differences?
Continuing work

- Assuming these constructions form some kind of system, what can we learn about the semantic and syntactic roles of these AAE constructions with respect to MAE?
  - Comparing verb types with *be*, BIN and *done* (e.g. stative/eventive)
    - How do these relate to each other?
  - Overlapping constructions with Southern (Anglo) English?
  - Do acoustically encoded aspectual constructions result from the AAE intonational system organization?
Selected References


Acknowledgments

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