

## When did Southern American English Really Begin?: Testing Bailey's Hypothesis

Michael Montgomery (*University of South Carolina*), Brandon Cooper (*University of South Carolina*)  
and Michael Ellis (*Missouri State University*)

In several papers Guy Bailey (1997, &c.) has argued that the Southern American English (SAE) of the mid-20th century developed largely after the Civil War, i.e. that phonological features like the *pen/pin* merger and monophthongal /ai/ did not occur before 1875 and that grammatical features like *fixin to* and *you all* occurred only sporadically. Bailey would no doubt describe his argument as overarching and preliminary, requiring further exploration. However, close reading identifies concerns about his data and their treatment. Here are four of them:

1 Bailey's general statement about SAE (by which he means that of the Lower South), is based only on white speech in Texas, which had been a state for only fifteen years before the War, most of whose Anglo population arrived in the 1850s.

2 Few of the "new resources" Bailey identifies (1997: 260-61) as revolutionizing the historical study of SAE relate to Texas in any way. The primary exception is Texas interviews conducted by the *Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States* in the 1970s. Four Texas LAGS speakers were born in the 1880s, a dozen in the 1890s.

3 Bailey (1997: 262) charts the occurrence of 23 phonological and 10 grammatical features for three time periods (before 1875, 1875-1945, and 1945-80), but identifies no sources or records used for pre-1875 evidence. These would inevitably seem to be written documents of some kind, but Bailey notes only that "with a few exceptions most of our written documents come from better educated communities and thus include few vernacular structures" (267).

4 Bailey uses the notations -, -/+, and + to indicate the relative occurrence of features, but crucially does not define the second of these, making it difficult to track features from being "sporadic" to "widespread."

Exploring features of any variety of American English, not only that of the South, prior to the last quarter of the 19th century must rely on written documents due to the dearth of recordings from people earlier. That evidence from those born before mid-century is far more problematic (especially for Texas) suggests that Bailey's claims are premature, a concern which prompts the present paper. Has he interpreted the absence of evidence as the evidence of absence? To explore Bailey's case we utilize data from a body of material being developed since 2007, the Corpus of American Civil War Letters. At present CACWL comprises the transcriptions of more than 4000 letters from less-educated soldiers and family members during the conflict. Correspondents were all born before the 1850s and include writers from every state east of the Mississippi River. To begin testing and refining Bailey's claim, this presentation compares letters from North Carolina and Alabama, representing 1000 and 700 letters respectively.

This initial analysis focuses mainly on four grammatical features that Bailey claims were non-existent or sporadic before 1875 (*you all*, inceptive *get to/go to*, *fixin to*, and multiple modals), for the first two comparing their occurrence quantitatively to semantic equivalents. It also makes observations on selected phonological features such as the *pen/pin* merger.