

## **Structural Ambiguity and the Evolution of African American Vernacular English** Patricia Cukor-Avila (*University of North Texas*) and Guy Bailey (*Texas Tech University*)

In volume 3 of *Principles of Linguistic Change*, Labov notes that “the heart of the study of language change is the search for causes” (Labov 2010:90). Nevertheless, in spite of recent research on the actuation problem in sound change and substantial work on grammaticalization, the triggering events for most linguistic changes, and especially for most grammatical changes, are not well understood. This paper contributes to that understanding by exploring one of the triggers that has led to grammatical changes in African American Vernacular English (AAVE). AAVE is a rich source for the study of grammatical change since some of the most prominent morphosyntactic features (such as invariant habitual *be* and *had+past* used as a simple past) are developments within that vernacular that cannot be traced either to its origins or to borrowing from other vernaculars.

While most research on contemporary AAVE focuses on distinctive morphosyntactic forms such as invariant *be* and *had+past*, the most striking feature of the earliest data on AAVE (recordings of African Americans born during the 19<sup>th</sup> century) is the large number of unmarked verbs that have several possible readings. The following passage, taken from the former slave recordings housed in the Library of Congress, is illustrative:

*I didn't see them scal' but that what they told me, they scal' them out you know, for children. An' uh, young children eat out of that, that, that thing, an' tha's with wood spoon, an' on, if one reach his spoon ove in the other's han', over in the other's plate, he gonna hit him. Hit him you know, knock that, knock that there spoon back, you know, on his side, on his side. An' that was when we was children you know, **wasn' able to, to ten'to, uh, ten' to no other children. And uh, you know, jus' sit them down over in a corner, an' put this chil' between his leg, an' then hold his han' 'roun' this chil'. Tha's the way he nursed him.***

These unmarked verbs may represent either simple past forms without an overt past marker or past habituais with a preceding *would* deleted. Among our oldest informants, some 20% of all verb forms are unmarked in this way. They derive from one of our sources: (1) deletion of past tense suffix on weak verbs (e.g. *walk* for *walked*); (2) unmarked preterits of strong verbs (e.g. *come* for *came*, *fun* for *ran*); (3) absence of verbal *-s* on third singular verbs (e.g. *she fix food for the children*); and (4) deletion of *will/would* (e.g., *they'd wash them...they scald them for the children*). This paper shows that the grammatical ambiguity resulting from the large number of unmarked verbs in early AAVE is the trigger for the emergence of several innovative grammatical features and that during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, much of the ambiguity in AAVE verbs is resolved as duplicative forms take on new functions and as unmarked forms become largely restricted to third person singular