

Temporal Structure of Ex-Slave Narratives: Marking Events in the Distant Past

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Linguists have tapped into ex-slave narratives as a resource for morphological and syntactic properties used in discussions about the historical origin of African American English (AAE) (e.g., Schneider (1989), Poplack (2000), Poplack and Tagliamonte (2001)). However, the temporal and event structure of these narratives has not been addressed. This is an important topic of research because it can provide insight about special narrative strategies in early AAE and the development of the tense and aspect system—especially that of past marking—in current AAE.

This paper focuses on narrative strategies used in talking about specific and generic events in ten Texas ex-slave narratives. These narratives consist of four Library of Congress recordings (also transcribed in Bailey, Maynor and Cukor-Avila (1991)) and six from the Works Progress Administration Records in the Center for American History, University of Texas (CAH-UT), which have not been discussed extensively. In order to check for reliability, we compared the CAH-UT narratives to the ex-slave recordings and calculated frequency of AAE features such as copula form, concord and relative markers along the lines of that in sources such as Schneider (1989), Bailey et al. (1991), Poplack (2000) and Kautzsch (2002).

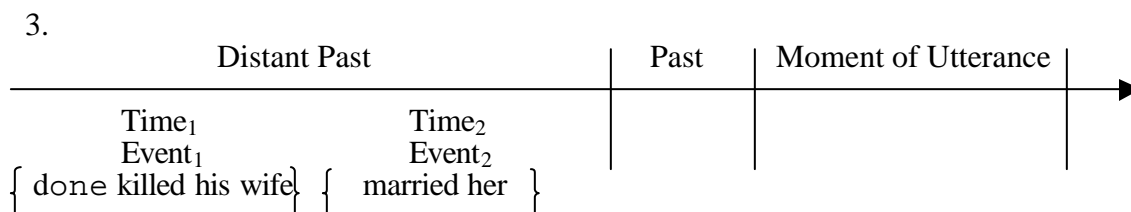
The narratives were classified using the definition of narrative in Labov (1972) and analyzed using Smith's (2003) notion of discourse modes in texts. Analysis of these narratives shows that *done*, which indicates that an event is in its resultant state and which occurs in current AAE and other varieties of English, is also used in ex-slave narratives:

1. The people done changed up from singing you know. (Laura Smalley, ex-slave recording)

In these narratives, *done* is also used in recounting specific events in the past before the past by linking events to each other. In the following excerpt of a narrative within the larger narrative, the killing event, which is marked by *done*, is established as happening in the distant past, and the marrying event, in the simple past, is introduced as being subsequent to the killing event:

2. An' uh after she killed this woman 'bout her husband then uh he went on and married her after she done killed his wife. (Laura Smalley)

The narrative *done* (2) is different from the resultant state *done* (1) in that it indicates that an event is over *and* marks it as occurring farther in the past than some subsequent event. The two distant past events in (2) are illustrated on the following time line:



Schneider (1989) notes that *had/done* + past participle and *had done* + past participle are used to mark perfective aspect in early AAE; however, data show that *done*

is also used without *had* to refer to an event in the past before the past. This research is useful in determining the extent to which strategies for marking past have changed to the system used in current AAE. Finally, it is useful in determining how other tense markers such as verbal *-s* and those in existential constructions are used to move narratives along.

Keywords: AAE, ex-slave narratives, temporal and discourse structure

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