

A-Prefixing in Appalachian English: Archaism or Innovation?

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A hallmark feature of modern Appalachian English (AE) usually considered to be an archaism is *a*-prefixed to verb present participles, as in 1-2:

- 1) Wilford was kind of sick his last years *a*-teachin'.
- 2) I got out there in the creek, and I went to slipping and *a*-falling and *a*-pitching.

A-prefixing is recessive but widespread in American English (*DARE* s.v. *a prep*¹ cites it as "throughout US, but esp freq in Midl, SW; less freq Sth, NEng"), but it is today most common in AE.

The prefix developed from erosion of an original preposition *on/an* in Old English (see *OED a prep*¹ 13a, 13b), observable today in such alternations as *afire/on fire*. This clear historical pathway and two other facts argue that the prefix in Appalachian and other varieties of English is governed primarily by phonological factors. First, it occurs on a variety of forms other than present participles, including nouns (3), adjectives (4), adverbs (5), and prepositions (6):

- (3) I went back down *a*-Sunday.
- (4) I had some to die off *a*-young, too.
- (5) She looked *a*-straight at me.
- (6) The bear, it made a pass *a*-toward him.

Second, as observed by Wolfram and Christian (1976), *a*- rarely occurs either on unstressed syllables or on syllables beginning with a vowel. Nonetheless, the hypothesis that the prefix is a phonotactic or phonological phenomenon has never been investigated in detail, as researchers have instead considered three other hypotheses, that it is 1) a syntactic marker of present participles rather than formally indistinguishable gerundives (Wolfram 1980); 2) a semantic marker of habitual aspect (Stewart 1967); or a pragmatic marker of dramatic style (Wolfram 1982). None of these have been examined quantitatively.

Using the 400,000-word Corpus of Smoky Mountain English of 136 speakers born in southern Appalachia between 1843 and 1915, this paper finds significant evidence for the syntactic and phonological hypotheses, but not for the semantic and stylistic hypotheses. It explores the phonological dimensions of the prefix, which occurs on approximately 750 of the corpus' 4,000 present participles, all of which have been coded for stress and segment type of preceding and following environments. The paper finds evidence that occurrence of the prefix is governed by a sonority hierarchy,

Briefly the paper also examines three possible Old World origins for the prefix: 1) England; 2) southern Ireland (where it has been argued to reflect a verbal noun construction in Gaelic), and 3) Ulster/northern Ireland (where antecedents of many other Appalachian grammatical features may be found). >From both the historical record and from contemporary variation only the first of these origins is supportable. Taken together, the historical and modern-day perspectives show that a grammatical form has evolved into a phonological one.

References

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