

Unendangered Dialects, Endangered People

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The topic that I will deal with here is a difficult one, especially in a forum devoted to the struggle to save endangered languages and support endangered dialects.¹ The other papers in this volume are concerned with the problem of how to preserve linguistic and cultural diversity throughout the world. Nothing that I will present here should be taken to diminish or undercut the importance of that program. But this report will deal with another side of diversity. I will be looking at social factors that lead dialects to diverge, develop and flourish, and with forms of cultural diversity that need no help to survive. In the final summary, I will have to say that I wish the world were otherwise.

The argument of this paper may be outlined as follows:

- African American Vernacular English [AAVE] is not an endangered dialect; on the contrary, it is continuing to develop and diverge from other dialects.
- The primary condition for such divergence is residential segregation.
- Residential segregation, combined with increasing poverty, has led to a deterioration of many features of social life in the inner cities.
- In these conditions, a majority of children in inner city schools are failing to learn to read, with a developing cycle of poverty, crime and shorter life span.
- A reduction of residential segregation will lead to greater contact between speakers of AAVE and speakers of other dialects.
- If at some future date, the social conditions that favor the divergence of AAVE are altered, AAVE in its present form may become an endangered dialect.

The unendangered dialect

Among all the nonstandard dialects that have been described in the history of linguistics, AAVE is the most closely and extensively studied. From the mid 1960s to the present, studies of its invariant and variable features have been published for urban speech communities throughout the United States (New York: Labov et al. 1968, Labov 1972; Detroit: Wolfram 1969, Edwards 1992; Philadelphia: Labov and Harris 1986, Ash and Myhill 1986; Washington DC: Fasold 1972; the Bay area: Mitchell-Kernan 1969, Rickford et al 1991; Rickford & McNair-Knox 1993; Los Angeles: Legum et al. 1972,

¹ This paper was given as a plenary address at GURT 06 on March 5, 2006. The theme of the Round table was "Endangered and Minority Languages and Language Varieties." It draws upon research on raising reading levels in low income schools supported by NSF, IES and NICH from 2001 to 2005, I am indebted to Anita Henderson and Anne Charity for their thoughtful observations on the first draft, which are reflected in the current version

Baugh 1979, 1984, 1999; Columbus (Weldon 1994). Regional differences have appeared in only a few phonological features. (In cities with *r*-ful white vernaculars, African-Americans show lower levels of *r*-vocalization than in cities with *r*-less vernaculars, Myhill 1988). AAVE emerges as a geographically uniform system with the following general characteristics.

- a) It does not participate in the regional sound changes characteristic of the surrounding white vernaculars.
- b) Several phonological constraints on leniting sound changes are aligned with those operating in other English dialects but operate at higher frequencies (consonant cluster simplification, auxiliary contraction and deletion).
- c) Several morphosyntactic features are absent (subject-verb agreement except for finite *be*: attributive possessive {s})
- d) Variable preterit marking due to high levels of consonant cluster simplification is reinforced by the use *had* as a past tense marker
- e) Unique mood and aspect markers have developed with new semantic features.

Non-participation in local sound changes

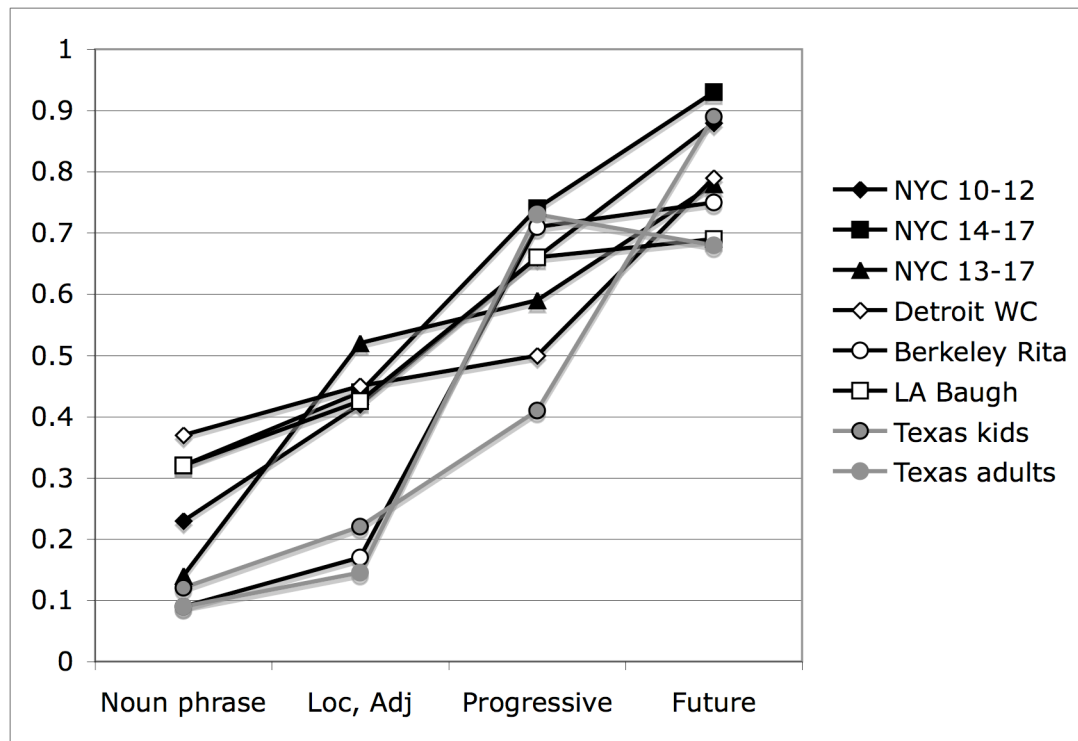
The fact that African-Americans do not participate in sound changes characteristic of the local white community has been documented from the earliest sociolinguistic studies to the most recent. In New York City, African-Americans were found to be shifting (ay) to the front, while in the white population, a new and vigorous change was moving the nucleus further and further back of center (Labov 1966, 1994). In Philadelphia, the fronting of (aw) is an absolute differentiator of white and black speech patterns, so that the controlled raising of the second formant of *out* and *house* converted the perceived identity of the speaker from black to white (Graff, Labov and Harris 1986). At Calumet College in Chicago, African Americans showed no tendency to participate in the Northern Cities Shift--the raising of (æ), fronting of (o) and backing of (e) characteristic of the white population (Gordon 2000). Such phonetic patterns immediately differentiate the speech of African-Americans from whites outside of the South.

Extensions of general sociolinguistic variables.

The alignment of AAVE with general sociolinguistic variables was first demonstrated in the study of the auxiliary and copula, where deletion was found to be governed by a second cycle of the same constraints as contraction in other dialects (Labov 1969). The major grammatical constraints on deletion have been replicated regularly in many different geographic areas, as shown in Figure 1 (Rickford et al. 1991).²

² Locative and adjectival environments are here combined, as in the original Harlem study (Labov et al. 1968) where these were found to be variable from one group to another. Cukor-Avila 1999 attributes this variability to varying proportions of stative and non-stative adjectives.

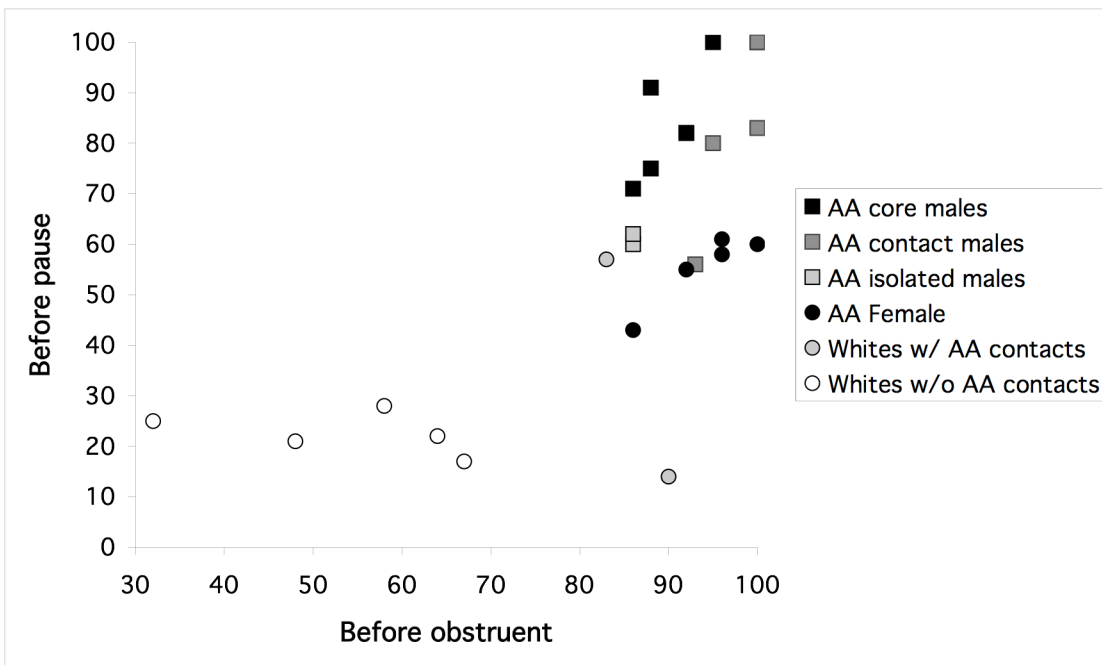
Figure 1. Proportion of deleted *is* in four grammatical environments for eight AAVE studies (adapted from Rickford et al. 1991)



A similar alignment is found with the simplification of coronal clusters. The higher quantitative level of AAVE compared to other dialects is largely due to a qualitative difference in the effect of word-final position, which behaves like an obstruent for AAVE but like a vowel for other dialects (Guy 1980). Figure 2 plots final *-t, d* deletion before obstruents versus final position for various groups of Philadelphia speakers. Before obstruents we observe a continuous range from 30 to 100%, but before pause there is a sharp break in the distribution. Whites representing the great majority with very little contact with blacks, range from 20 to 30% simplification, but blacks are concentrated in the 50 to 100% range, with all males above 70%.³

³ There is no separation here of blacks with extensive white contacts from blacks with minimal white contacts, an issue to be discussed below.

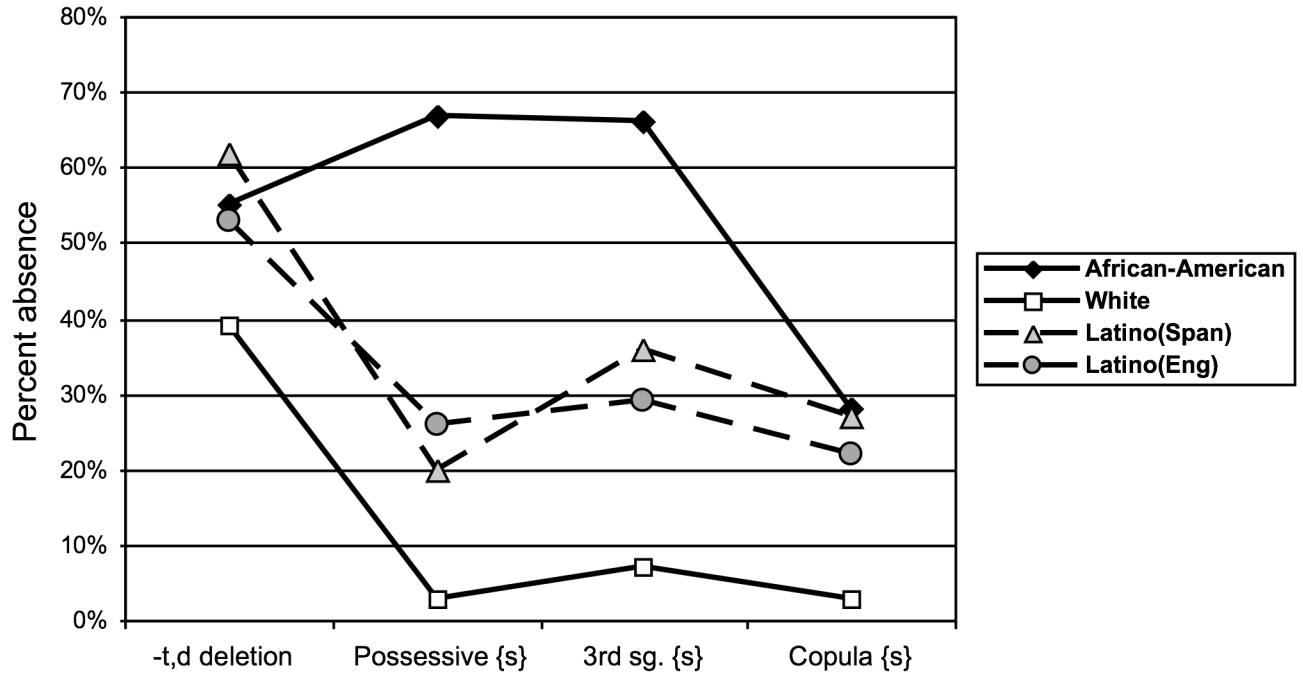
Figure 2. Frequency of coronal stop deletion before obstruents and before pause by ethnicity and gender in Philadelphia (Ash and Myhill 1986)



Absence of morphosyntactic features.

The difference between the (b) and (c) types of variables is shown in Figure 3, drawn from a recent study of 287 elementary school children in low-income schools (Labov 2001, Labov and Baker forthcoming). These children are a random sample of a larger group of 721 struggling readers. They were recorded in a relatively formal situation, in a school setting, but with sociolinguistic techniques that shift speech style towards the vernacular, differentiating this style from story-retelling. For all four variables, the vertical axis represents the percent absence of the consonant involved. The differences among the four language/ethnic groups are quantitative for consonant cluster simplification (KKL), with blacks and Latinos in the 55-65% range and whites at 40%. For the copula variable, blacks and Latinos are clustered at a much lower level, and whites are close to zero. For the type (c) variables, the attributive possessive {s} and verbal {s}, the black children are close to 70% absence, far different from Latinos and completely different from whites. This qualitative difference is coupled with features that point to the absence of an underlying morphosyntactic form in the grammar: hypercorrection and the absence of phonological conditioning.

Figure 3. Percent absence for four linguistic variables for African-American elementary school children in Philadelphia, Atlanta and California by language and ethnic-group. [N=287] Latino(Span) = Latinos who learned to read in Spanish first. Latino(Eng) = Latinos who learned to read in Spanish first.



Early disagreements on the history of AAVE have been clarified by the close study of rural Southern communities, particularly “Springville” in Texas (Bailey 1993, 2001; Cukor-Avila 1995) and Hyde County, North Carolina (Wolfram, Thomas and Green 2000) as well as the examination of recordings of ex-slaves (Bailey and Cukor-Avila 1991) and expatriate communities (Poplack and Sankoff 1987, Poplack and Tagliamonte 1991). It is now clear that the 19th century forerunner of AAVE differed systematically from local white vernaculars, with evidence of substratum effects on inflectional morphology (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes). At the same time, a number of the characteristic features of present-day AAVE were present in a less developed form or not present at all.⁴ In the 20th century, the possessive and verbal {s} in particular show a dramatic shift towards invariant absence.

New past tense marking

The most dramatic developments of 20th century AAVE are not in the morphosyntactic system, but in the semantics of tense, mood and aspect particles. The earliest studies of the 1960s detected occasional use of the past perfect as simple preterit (Labov et al. 1968). Cukor-Avila 1995 found an explosive growth of this feature in both apparent and real time. Figure 4 shows the increase by date of birth of this innovative use

⁴In an earlier view, present-day AAVE is the result of “decreolization,” the gradual incorporation of standard inflectional elements into the grammar (Fasold 1976).

of *had* for all past time marking. Speakers born before World War I showed no trace of this feature. For the youngest group, born after 1970, innovative *had* was the predominant form.

Figure 4. Increase in *had* + past as a simple past over time: innovative *had* as a percent of past forms (source: Cukor-Avila 1995). Horizontal axis shows date of birth.

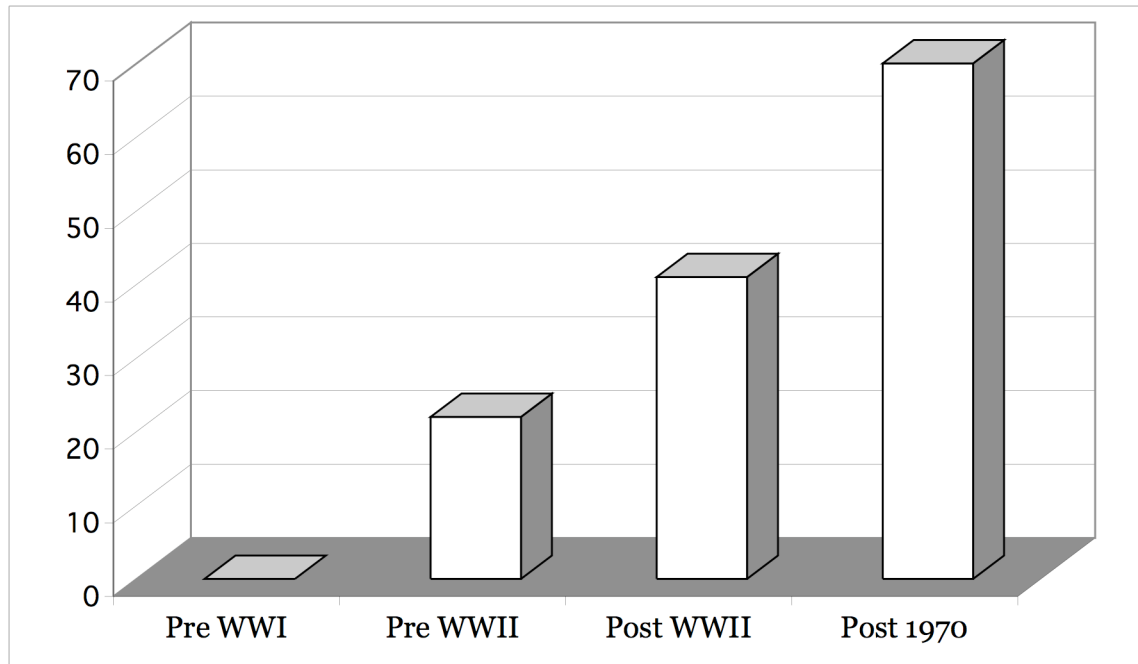


Figure 1 shows the geographic generality of AAVE; Figure 2 illustrates its separation from other dialects along a common dimension; Figure 3 demonstrates its stability for the incoming generation of new speakers; Figure 4 that its differences from other dialects are expanding. The fact that AAVE is flourishing and expanding is seen most clearly in the semantics of mood and aspect. The examples that I will use have a dual import, showing on the one hand the evolution of new semantic possibilities, and on the other hand the eloquent application of these possibilities in social interaction.

New mood and aspect categories.

THE RISE OF HABITUAL *BE*. The invariant form *be*, which does not alternate with *is*, *am* or *are*, is one of the most widely recognized surface features of AAVE. It would appear to date back to the first half of the 19th century, or earlier, since it has been noted in ex-slave recordings (Bailey and Cukor-Avila 1991). However, Bailey 1993 finds that the modern day ‘habitual’ meaning is not characteristic of these early uses. Furthermore, a striking difference appeared between the use of invariant *be* by seventy-year old men and by young children in the rural community of “Springville” that Bailey and Cukor-Avila studied over the years. Children and older speakers did not differ at all in the frequency of invariant *be* before noun phrases, locatives, adjectives and *gonna*. But

before progressive verbs with *-ing*, children showed 44% invariant *be*, and the older speakers only 4%.⁵ This was the first indication that ‘habitual’ meaning of invariant *be* was a 20th century development.

Such an habitual meaning appears in the earliest sociolinguistic studies of AAVE, as in the speech of Larry H. of the Cobras (Labov 1972:216):

- (1) An’ when they be sayin’ if you good, you goin’ t’ heaven. . .

and in the speech of Springville children:

- (2) Sometimes them big boys be throwing [the ball]. (Bailey and Maynor 1987).

The habitual character of the construction is evident in the frequent collocation with adverbs like *sometimes* and *always* but also directly by such semantic contrasts as (3).

- (3) A: Do you know where I can find Nukey?
B: She be here [most of the time] but she ain’t here now.

Any study of AAVE will show that habitual *be* is deeply embedded in a rhetoric of everyday speech that is not easily captured in translation to other dialects. Dayton’s massive archive of AAVE mood and aspect demonstrates this over and over again.

- (4) They be talkin’ about how pregnant women got pink nipples; but it all don’t be like that. (Dayton 1996)
- (5) [At a Gospel Choir]
A: Will everybody remember that?
B: Yeah but Angie, can we sing the chorus twice before we go into the other part?
‘Cause it’s like you be just about to feel Jesus then we stop.
--Dayton 1996

From the stream of yearly observations made by Penn students:

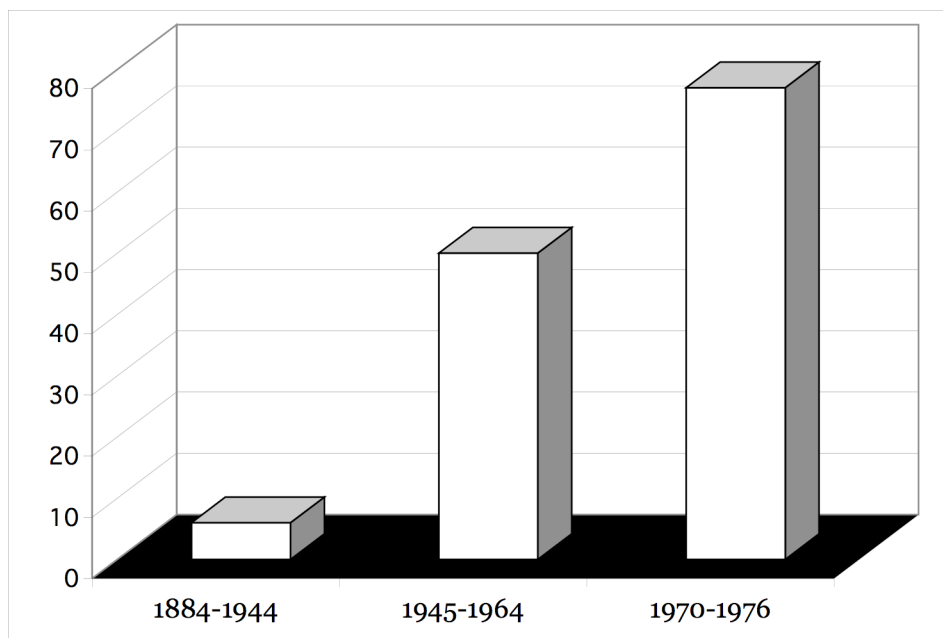
- (6) When I be askin’ my moms for money, she be trippin’ and shit, talkin’ ‘bout I need to get a job (Penn student, observing 19 year old male at bus stop).

⁵ These figures are for plural and second and third singular (Bailey and Maynor 1987: Figure 3. For the first person singular, children used invariant *be* over a third of the time, and the older speakers only 10%.

- (7) [Penn student, observing outside of MacDonald's:]
 Homeless: You got any change?
 Me: No. Sorry.
 Homeless: A'ight, maybe when you come out.
 Me: Maybe.
 [after I come out]
 Homeless: You got any?
 [hand him some change]
 Homeless: Thank you man. People be tellin' me when they come out they still don't have change and I KNOW they be lyin'. Thank you.

Figure 5 traces the dramatic rise in the use of habitual meaning as a percent of all progressives with habitual meaning, from speakers born in the 19th century to modern times (Bailey and Maynor 1985). This quantitative development has been confirmed in the study of East Palo Alto by Rickford and his colleagues (Rickford and McNair-Knox 1993).

Figure 5. The rise of habitual *be*: *be* + *V-ing* as a percent of all progressives with durative/habitual meaning. (adapted from Bailey 1993).



BE AS ESSENTIAL AND PERMANENT STATE. Despite the rapid expansion of the habitual meaning of *be*, the semantics of this invariant *be* are not fixed. New possibilities are also emerging, as first noted in Labov et al. 1968, where the meaning is not habitual, but a permanent and steady state, an essential characteristic of the subject. From two observations of my own:

- (8) [in a hospital emergency room, a middle-aged woman talking to a younger woman]: Her Father be your Father.
- (9) [a man leaning out of a pick-up truck, to a woman on the sidewalk]
Hey baby! This be Heywood!

This use, a minor pattern in every-day discourse, is efflorescing in hip-hop lyrics.

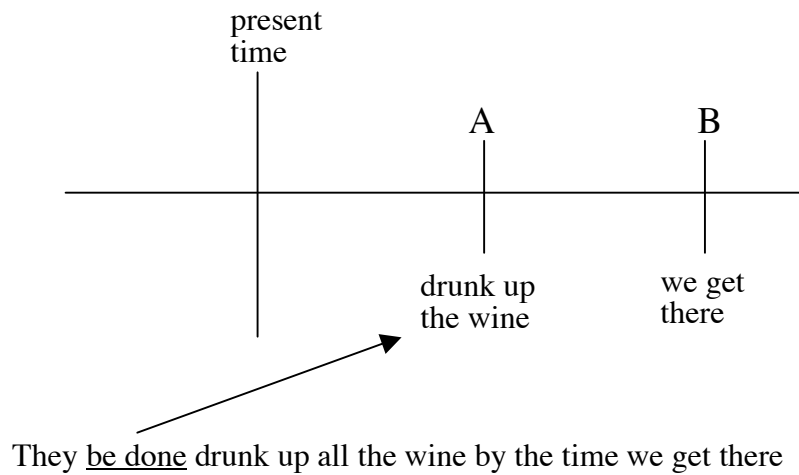
- (10) We be the Funk, Four mind as one umm, Crumbs umm
he told us peace, it was against his beliefs
--The Roots I'm Out Deah/Organix
- (11) Through the nine-six, I be that nigga that be priceless
Always blowin' up your spot, bringin more surprises
...
HAH! I be the number one chosen just to keep you open
Chill with your thoughts I got your brain frozen
--Busta Rhymes, Do My Thing/The Coming

THE DEVELOPMENT OF *BE DONE*. The combination of (*will*) *be* with perfective/intensive *done* has been co-opted in AAVE to signal the compound tense equivalent to the future perfect (*will have*) of other dialects. Perfective *done* is well established in the South and in Caribbean Creoles (Satyanath 1991, Winford 1993). It is combined with *be done* as a transparent equivalent of the future perfect.

- (12) 'Cause I'll be done put—so many holes in him he'd a wish he hadn't said it. . . (Labov et al. 1968)
- (13) My ice cream's gonna be done melted by the time we get there. (Dayton 1996)
- (14) So they can be done ate their lunch by the time they get there [the vacation Bible school] (Dayton 1996).
- (15) I should be done lost 70 pounds by the time we get there. (Dayton 1996)

Figure 6 shows how this *be done* marker of the future perfect is normally attached to the first of two future events, indicating that it occurs before the second, just as with the future perfect of other dialects.

Figure 6. Semantics of the future perfect *be done*

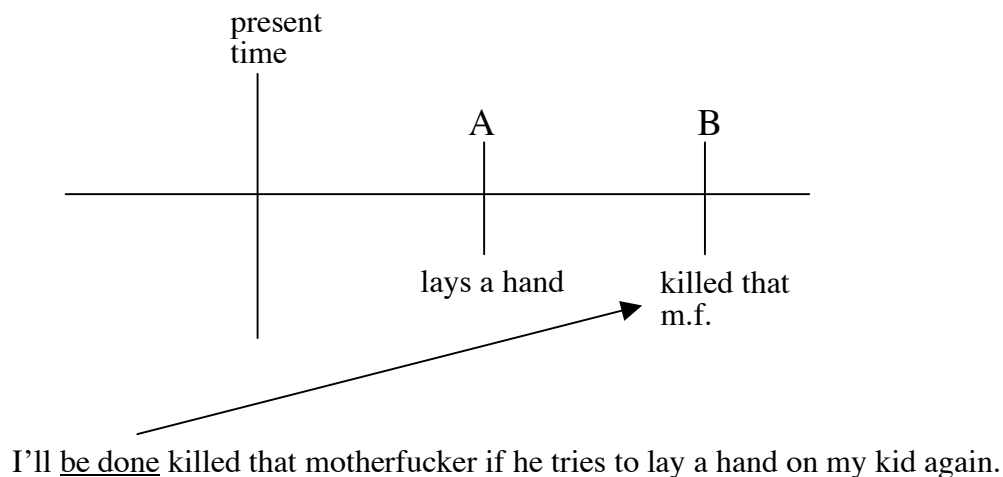


Some time in the mid 20th century, a remarkable change took place. The fused *be done* was detached from its position before the first of the two future events and attached to the second. In 1983, Baugh observed a confrontation in Pacoima where an angry parent threatened a pool guard who he thought had manhandled his son:

(16) I'll be done killed that motherfucker if he tries to lay a hand on my kid again.

The change in temporal relations from Figure 6 is indicated in Figure 7. But while the the future perfect *be done* is a marker of tense, indicating only temporal relations between A and B, the new resultative *be done* is a marker of mood, indicating the high degree of certainty with which B follows A. The sentence (16) is not easily translated into any tense, mood or aspect combination used in other dialects. The semantic content of this combination is not simply that B will follow A, but that B will *inevitably* follow A.

Figure 7. Semantics of the resultative *be done*



This future resultative is not simply a member of the compound tense system, but partakes of the semantics of mood, having to do with the degree of certainty of an event. Like many of the newly developing members of the AAVE system, the *be done* marker indicates events whose likelihood of occurrence is greater than that signaled by the indicative. While *irrealis* markers indicate lesser probabilities of occurrence, such *surrealis* markers indicate a truth that is more than *true*, a reality that is more real than *real*. They are inserted in the flow of a highly interactive rhetoric that is highly interactive, as shown by a sampling of the many examples from African-American women in Dayton 1996:

- (17) He [a nephew] knows best not to talk back to me 'cause I be done slapped the little knock kneed thing upside the head.
- (18) The readin' of the scriptures, all that's gonna be done done.
- (19) If you love your enemy, they be done ate you alive in this society.

There are many other new elements in the mood and aspect system of AAVE which add to the richness of its expressive semantics: the development of *done* as an intensifier, remote perfective *been* along with *been done* (Rickford 1973), *steady* as an intensifier of habitual *be* (Baugh 1984), the *come* of moral indignation (Spears 1982). These often appear in rapid succession in agonistic interaction, as in (20).

- (20) [Two women preparing fish at the Thriftway
A: Marcene been getting those welfare checks. . .
B: Uh-uh. That a shame. How he gon come asking for somethin' like she got money?
A: Lord, he needs Jesus.

AAVE develops complex combinations whose semantics remain to be deciphered.

- (20) I'm gonna be done hafta went back and finished in eight years (Dayton 1996).

As noted above, most of these emergent features are in the domain of mood and aspect rather than tense. Indeed, Dayton 1996 argues that all AAVE grammatical particles are free of tense, and can be used in past, present or future context. There is furthermore a connection between the absence of subject-verb agreement and this new mood system. The sentences formed with habitual *be*, remote perfective *been*, sequential *be done* do not participate in the general English syntactic movements that center upon the element attached to INFL: inversion in *wh*- and *yes-no* questions, negative inversion, tag formation, negative placement. These syntactic operations are defined on the left edge of the verb phrase, which hosts the tense marker. We must infer that in this large sub-

class of AAVE constructions, the tense node is empty, although particles may be attached to mood and aspect nodes in an exploded INFL model (Green 1994).

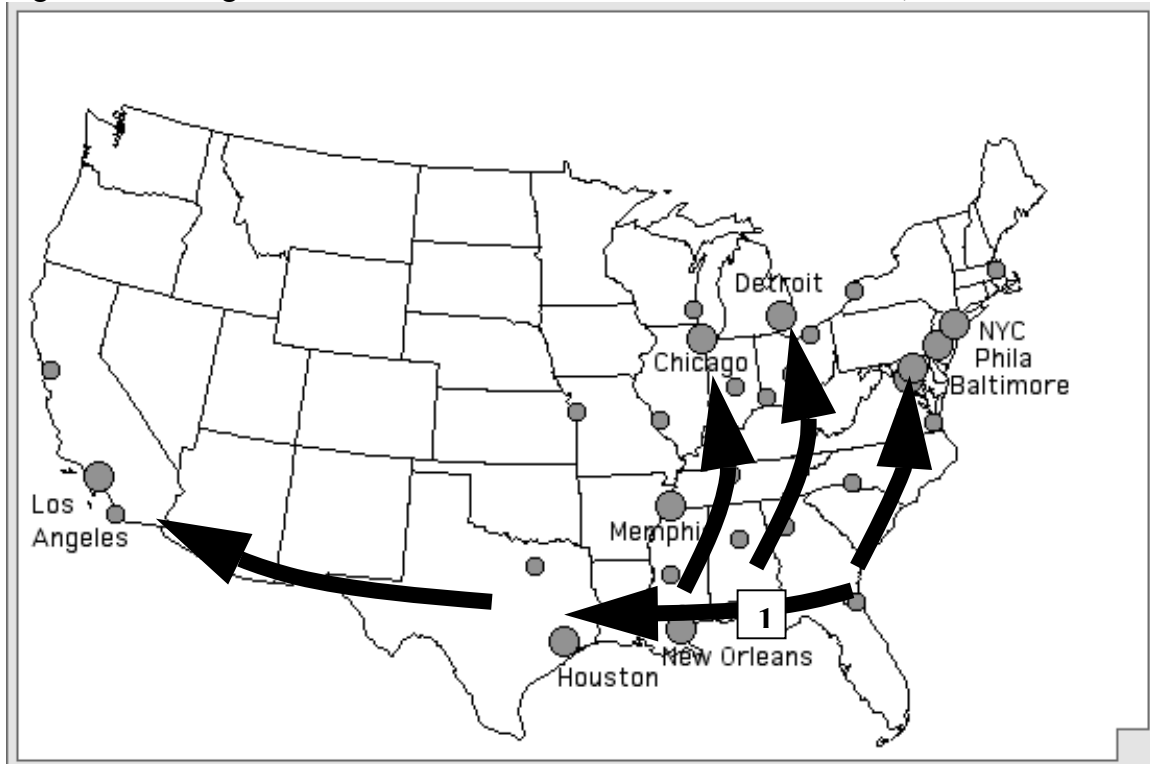
This brief discussion has touched on some of the ongoing changes that mark AAVE as an increasingly rich and vigorous dialect of English. (Labov 1998). The next section considers the social conditions in which this dialect has flourished.

The Great Migration and residential segregation

Bailey 1993 shows that the development of modern AAVE is contemporaneous with the great migration of African Americans from the rural south to large cities, primarily in the North. The grammatical developments we have traced are essentially characteristics of large urban.

Figure 8 shows the geographic pattern of African-American migration within the United States. The arrow labeled “1” indicates the initial expansion of slavery in rural areas, from the rice-growing region of the Southeast to the Gulf States (Bailey 2001). Following the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, the institution of slavery expanded tenfold, spreading from the Southeast westward as far as Texas to provide the labor force for cotton-growing plantations. The vertical arrows indicate the Great Migration that began during World War I, when rural blacks moved from the Carolinas and Georgia to Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York, from Alabama to Detroit, from Mississippi and Louisiana to Chicago. The further westward movement populated the ghettos of Los Angeles and then north to the Bay Area.

Figure 8. The migration of rural African-Americans to Northern cities, 1914-1970



It is generally thought that residential segregation is a by-product of the initial stages of immigration to large cities, and that an immigrant group will follow a natural path of decreasing concentration over time as they obtain jobs, sometimes intermarry, and generally assimilate to American society. This has the case for many immigrant groups, as shown in Table 1, taken from Hershberg's studies of the history of Philadelphia (Hershberg et al 1981). Irish, Germans, Italians and Poles all show a regular decline in the *index of dominance*, which is the proportion of a person's census tract that consists of the same group. The trajectory of African-Americans is just the reverse in Hershberg's data. Starting in 1850, the index of dominance steadily rises to its maximum in 1970, the last year reported on. This pattern is not peculiar to Philadelphia.⁶ Table 2 shows the spectacular rise in residential segregation for eight major American cities from 1930 to 1970. Here residential segregation is measured by Massey and Denton's index of *isolation* (1993): the extent to which blacks live within neighborhoods that are predominantly black. Although there is some variation in 1930, there is no city that does not show such extreme segregation in 1970. The cities in italics are the three cities from which the data of Figure 3 are drawn.

Table 1. Indices of dominance for five ethnic groups in Philadelphia from 1850 to 1970 (proportion of a person's census tract that consists of the same group). Source: Hershberg et al. *Philadelphia: work, space and family* 1986, Table 8.

	1850	1880	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970
Blacks	11	12	35	45	56	72	74
Irish		34	8			5	3
German	25	11			5	3	
Italian		38			23	21	
Polish		20			9	8	

- from Hershberg et al. *Philadelphia: work, space and family* 1986, Table 8

⁶ Nor is it peculiar to the city. Increasing patterns of racial segregation have been found to be characteristic of the suburbs of Philadelphia and other cities.

Table 2. Indices of black isolation within neighborhoods (the extent to which blacks live within neighborhoods that are predominantly black). Source: D. Massey & N. Denton 1993, Table 2.4.

<i>City</i>	<i>1930</i>	<i>1970</i>
<i>Atlanta</i>		88.0
Boston	19.2	66.1
Chicago	70.4	89.2
Detroit	31.2	77.1
<i>Los Angeles</i>	25.6	73.9
New York	41.8	60.2
<i>Philadelphia</i>	27.3	75.6
San Francisco	1.7	56.1

Tables 1 and 2 terminate in 1970. Residential segregation has not decreased since then; in most areas it has reached a maximum level and stayed at that level. Massey and Denton argue that the high level of residential segregation is a root cause of the many other social problems that afflict the African-American community. Table 3 is their projection of the interrelationship between poverty rate, residential segregation, and three neighborhood conditions in the African-American community. As the poverty rate rises from 20% to 30%, the major crime rate rises, the percent of female-headed families rises, and the percent of high school students in the lowest 15th percentile rises. The table shows that these increases are greatly exaggerated if we move from a condition where there is no racial segregation to one in which segregation is total.

Table 3. Effects of a shift in the black poverty rate on neighborhood conditions experienced by blacks at different levels of segregation. Source: --Massey & Denton 1993, Table 5.3.

	Poverty rate	
	<i>20%</i>	<i>30%</i>
Major crime rate (per 1,000)		
No racial segregation	57.8	61.8
Complete racial segregation	68.3	84.2
Percent female-headed families		
No racial segregation	19.2	22.2
Complete racial segregation	33.5	45.5
Percent high school students scoring below 15th percentile		
No racial segregation	32.6	35.3
Complete racial segregation	47.1	57.8

Residential segregation and the core speakers of AAVE

As we have seen, Philadelphia is one of the many highly segregated cities in the United States. In the 1970s, we studied linguistic change and variation in the white community (Labov 1980, 2001). The available evidence indicated that African-Americans did not participate in the new and vigorous sound changes that characterized the Philadelphia vernacular. From certain incidents, I came to believe that behind the scenes, there might be more contact between blacks and whites than appeared on the surface. In the 1980s, we conducted research in North Philadelphia that looked closely at linguistic contact between blacks and whites, and the results showed that was not true. We found a linguistic segregation that matched the high level of residential segregation we have just seen (Labov and Harris 1986).

The speakers who consistently showed the defining features of AAVE were those who in their daily lives lived with blacks, worked with blacks, and talked with blacks, and rarely had face-to-face conversations with speakers of other dialects.⁷ In the adult social networks of North Philadelphia we found a certain number of speakers who did not follow the AAVE pattern, but they were all people who, for one reason or another, had different social histories. We constructed an index of cross-racial contact that divided speakers into two clearly separate groups: the majority with minimal white contacts and those with extensive white contacts. This second group sounded very much like the first on the surface, and used the same vocabulary and phonetics, but clearly showed in their inflectional variables the influence of contact with other grammars. A few were raised near white neighborhoods and had white friends when they were young. Some were musicians who had daily contact with white musicians. A small number were involved in the informal economy, engaged in confidence games with extensive cross-racial contacts. Still others were political activists, involved in antagonistic but frequent interchanges with whites.

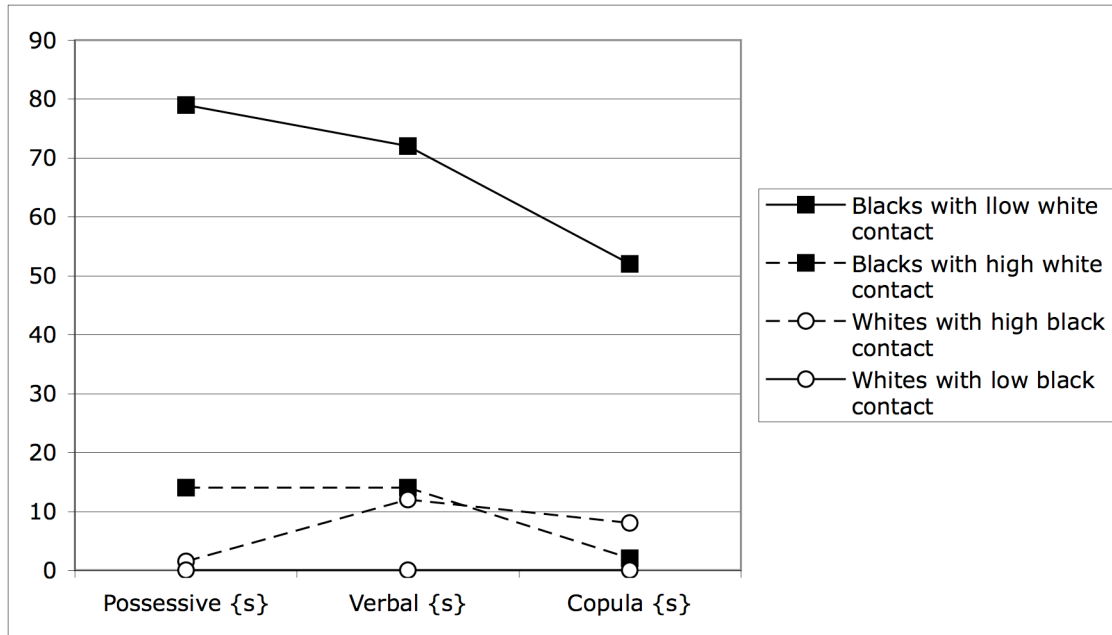
We also studied a half dozen white speakers of both middle and working class background who had extensive contacts with the African-American community. These were whites who were married to blacks or who had a long history of intimacy with black friends. Figure 9 shows the level of absence of three grammatical inflections for four groups of speakers. The majority of blacks with minimal white contacts show a very high degree of inflectional absence. There is good reason to believe that third singular {s} or possessive {s} is not present in their underlying grammars,⁸ and they show a high level of copula deletion. In these respects there is a great gulf between this core group and those (black and white) with extensive cross-racial contacts. (The fourth category, representing the majority of whites who rarely talk to blacks, shows no inflectional absence at all. The consistency of the core group reflects the general findings of Milroy (1980) that speakers engaged in dense multiplex social networks resist linguistic change from outside, while those with many weak ties to other social groups are subject to the influence of those groups. The other side of the coin is that within the core group, linguistic change has

⁷ See also Baugh 1983 for a characterization of the vernacular on these dimensions.

⁸ As shown not only by the high level of absence of these inflections, but most crucially in the absence of phonological conditioning of the variation. When underlying forms are subject to such conditioning (such as the effect of a following vowel in preserving final consonants), we can infer the presence of the element being deleted in the underlying representation.

accelerated, in both the tense/mood/aspect system and the morphosyntactic reflections of grammatical categories. Dense and multiplex networks are of course a concomitant of residential segregation.

Figure 9. Percent absence of three morphological features of standard English by race and degree of contact across racial groups in North Philadelphia. Source: Ash and Myhill 1986.



One might argue that the African-American youth in these core areas are not isolated from other dialects: that they are exposed to more standard speech through the mass media or from their school teachers. But a great deal of evidence indicates that passive exposure of this type does not affect speech patterns or underlying grammars (Labov, Ash and Boberg 2006). As far as we know, language changes occur in the course of verbal interaction among speakers who track each other's utterances for appropriate responses at possible sentence completion points (Sacks 1992). African-American children in the core area do not have the opportunity to engage in such conversations with speakers of other dialects..

The Minority Gap in Reading

The figures on low high school performance in Table 3 show only one facet of the effects of residential segregation on education. The first research on AAVE that we conducted in 1965-8 was supported by the Office of Education to find out what connection there was, if any, between dialect differences and the minority gap in reading. Figure 10 shows that from 1971 to 1992, there was no essential change in the relations of white and black reading scores. Nor has there been any substantial change in this

relationship since 1992. Figure 11 shows the difference in the percent of proficient readers in the NAEP reports from 1992 to 2000. While there has been a small increment overall, the relations of black and white readers remain constant. The graph indicates that only a small proportion of African-American 4th graders—13%--are proficient enough to use reading as a tool for further learnin.

Figure 10. The minority gap in 5th grade reading scores: 1971-1992. Source: NAEP 1992.

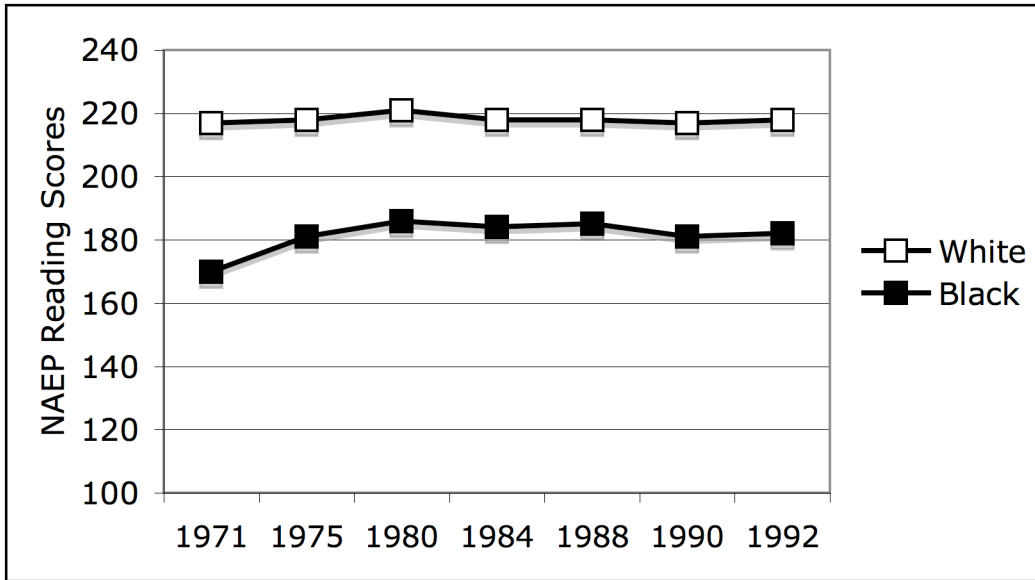
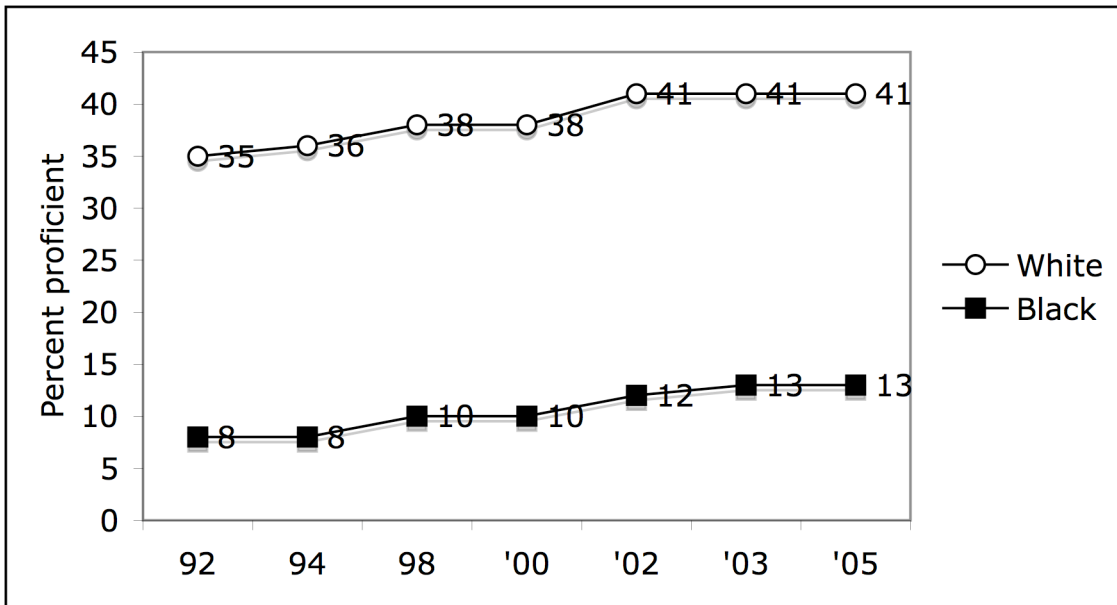
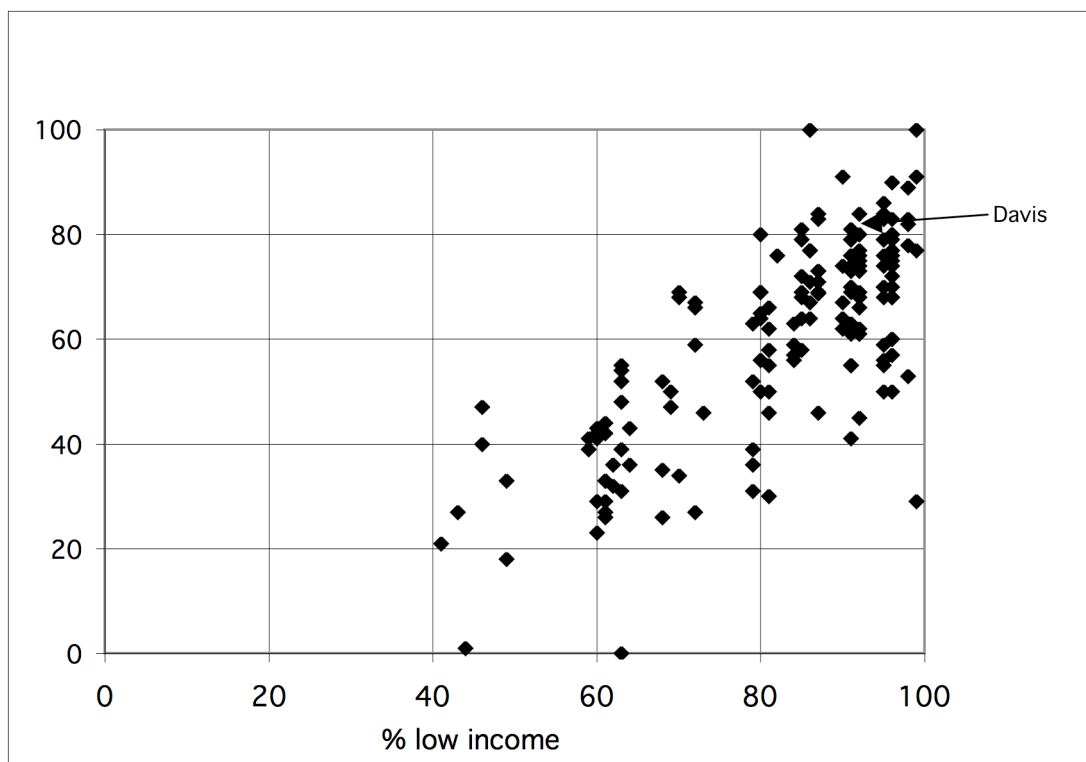


Figure 11. Minority gap in percent proficient readers in the 4th grade: 1992-2005. Source: NAEP 2005.



When we examine the situation at the local level in Philadelphia, a further relationship appears between poverty and low reading levels. Figure 12 is a scattergram of all Philadelphia schools at the time when we first began our efforts to raise reading levels. Each point registers on the vertical axis the percent of students performing at the lowest quartile of the state-wide PSSA reading test, and on the horizontal axis, the percent of students who qualify for free lunch because their family income falls below the poverty line. The symbol labeled “Davis” is the elementary school where we have worked most consistently in the period since 1997. It is evident that there is a direct relation between poverty and reading achievement.

Figure 12. Percent readers in the bottom quintile of PSSA reading scores in the 5th grade of Philadelphia schools (1997) by percent of low income students.



The relation between speech and reading

The data for Figure 3 was drawn from an analysis of the spontaneous speech of 287 struggling readers in the 2nd through 4th grades who were the subjects of our interventions in three regions of the United States. The same data can be used to examine the relationship between the use of AAVE variables in spontaneous speech and decoding success in oral reading. We can expect of course that there will be a correlation between the realization of each of these variables in speech and in oral reading. Table 4 shows that this is the case to a moderate but significant degree. The first column shows the

correlation between the absence of each feature in spontaneous speech and absence in oral reading of a diagnostic text. However, the fact that there is such a correlation underlines the fact that the absence of an inflectional /t, d, s, z/ tells us little about reading errors, since it is difficult to distinguish between a reading error and the vernacular deletion of the underlying forming pronunciation. However, the third column of Table 4 shows that the same degree of correlation exists between the AAVE speech variables and decoding errors as a whole. These figures correlate the rate of absence of the particular AAVE feature with the mean error rate in decoding orthographic aspects of onsets, nuclei and codas.⁹ This indicates a global relationship between the use of AAVE and decoding problems. The relationship is not necessarily a direct one, as there are many intervening factors which are likely to be responsible for a high use of AAVE and low performance in decoding. Before we explore these, we must consider an unexpected finding on regional differences.

Table 4. Pearson correlations between spontaneous speech and reading for four AAVE variables. N = 287. * = p < .05; ** < .01; *** p < .001.

	with grammatical variable in oral reading	with mean phonological error rate
Consonant clusters	.16*	.10*
Third singular {s}	.15*	.18**
Possessive {s}	.28***	.14*
Copula {s}	.15* .21***	

Differences by region

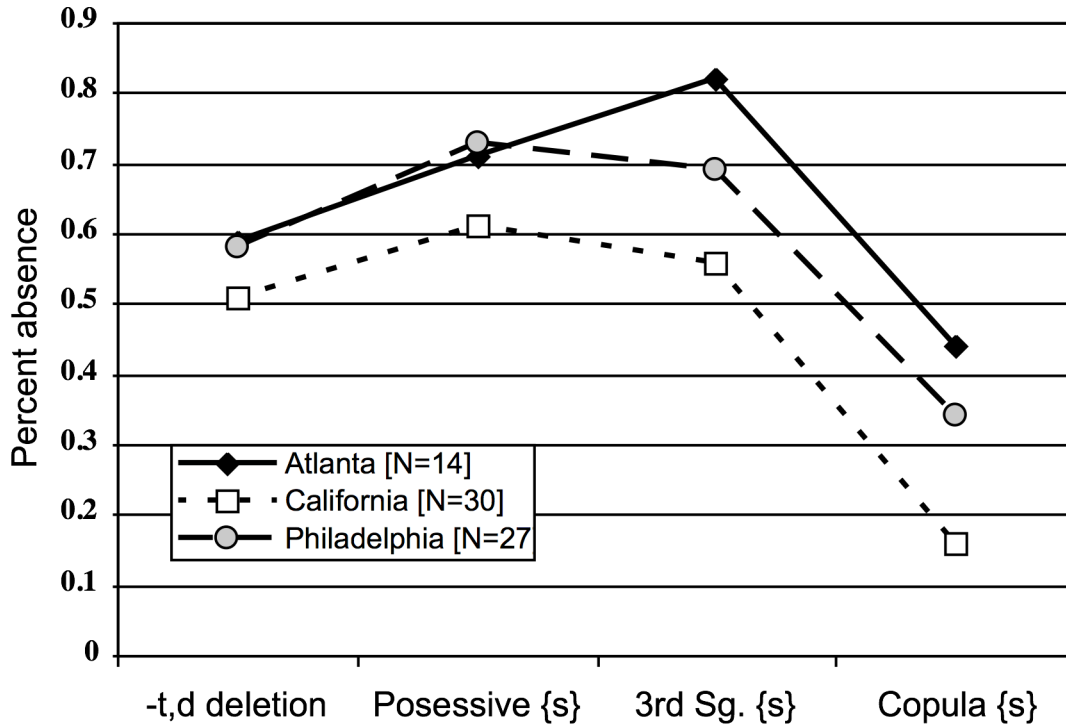
In the many studies of AAVE published so far, no major regional differences in the grammar have appeared (Labov et al. 1968, Baugh 1983, Rickford et al. 1991).¹⁰ However, if we break down the data for African-Americans in Figure 3 into three regional groups, some surprising differences appear. Figure 13 shows that Atlanta and Philadelphia have highest simplification of consonant clusters and absence of possessive attributive {s} and that Atlanta has even higher absence of third singular {s} and copula {s} than Philadelphia. On the other hand, the California students are considerably lower than the other two regions for all four variables. If residential segregation were an essential component for the full development of the vernacular, we would expect to find a lesser degree of segregation in the West. However, Table 2 shows that Los Angeles is not less segregated than any of the other large cities, and all schools were selected by the same socioeconomic criterion—the percent of low income families who qualify for the

⁹ These mean values are based on the error rates for 20 problematic relations of phonemes to graphemes in onsets, nuclei and codas of a diagnostic reading.

¹⁰ Regional differences in pronunciation are not uncommon, principally in the degree of r-vocalization, and moderate reflections of the Southern Shift (Labov, Ash & Boberg 2006: Ch. 22). See Myhill 1988 and Hinton and Pollock for regional differences in (r).

federal free lunch program. Why then should our California sample show a lower frequency of the defining AAVE features?

Figure 13. Four morphosyntactic variables of AAVE for African-American struggling readers by region



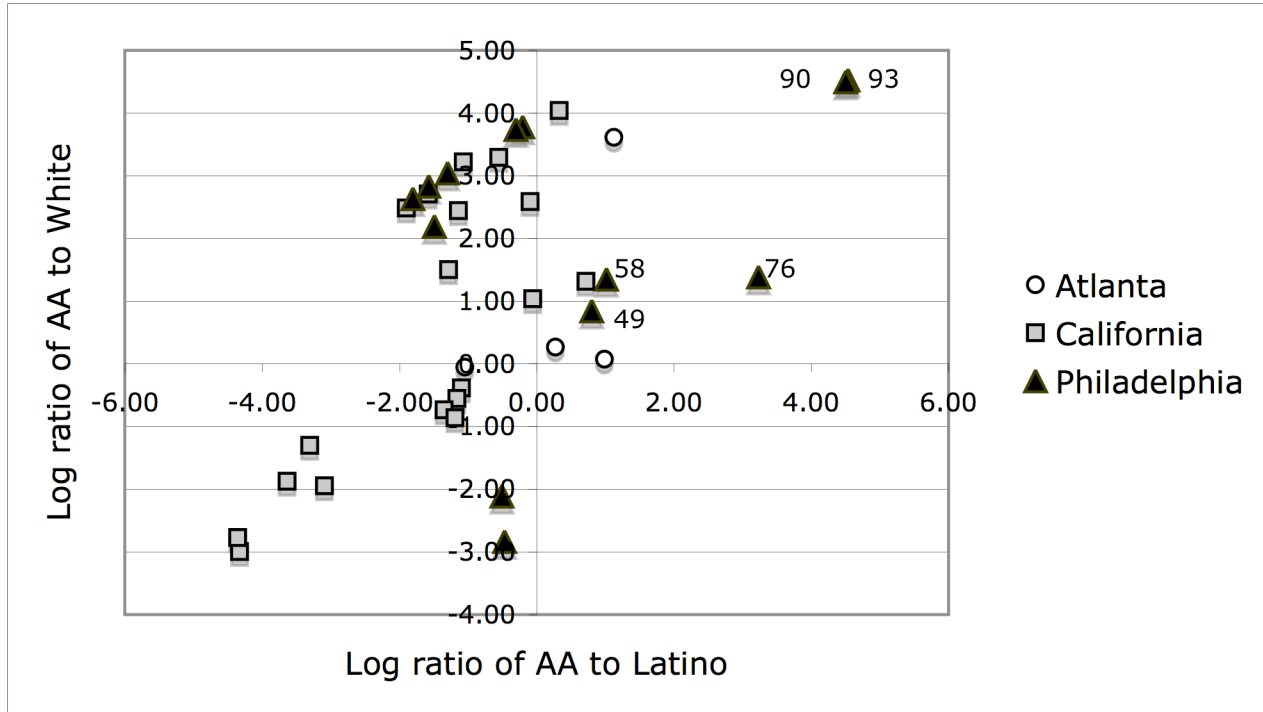
We examined the racial distribution of students for all the schools involved in California, Atlanta and Philadelphia, including the relations of Latinos, Whites and Blacks. Figure 14 displays the proportions of African-Americans to Latinos on the horizontal axis, and the proportions of African-Americans to Whites on the vertical axis. Each axis shows the log ratio of African-Americans to the other group. The 0 rating on each axis is therefore the point where there is an equal mixture of the two groups, that is a ratio of 1:1. The schools with the most extreme segregation are at upper right, where the numbers next to each symbol indicate the over-all percentage of African-Americans: 90% and 93%. No California schools show such a high concentration. The five schools in the lower left quadrant have relatively low ratios of African Americans to Whites and Latinos: there are no Philadelphia or Atlanta schools in this quadrant. It appears then that the lower frequency of AAVE characteristics in the California schools is a direct reflection of the lower concentrations of black students.

Figure 14. Concentration of African-Americans in schools in Atlanta, California and Philadelphia in which the students of Figure 14 were interviewed. Numbers next to

Philadelphia schools in upper right quadrant are percent African-American in the student body.

The development of AAVE in the framework of residential segregation.

Figure 15 models the development of AAVE within the framework of modern



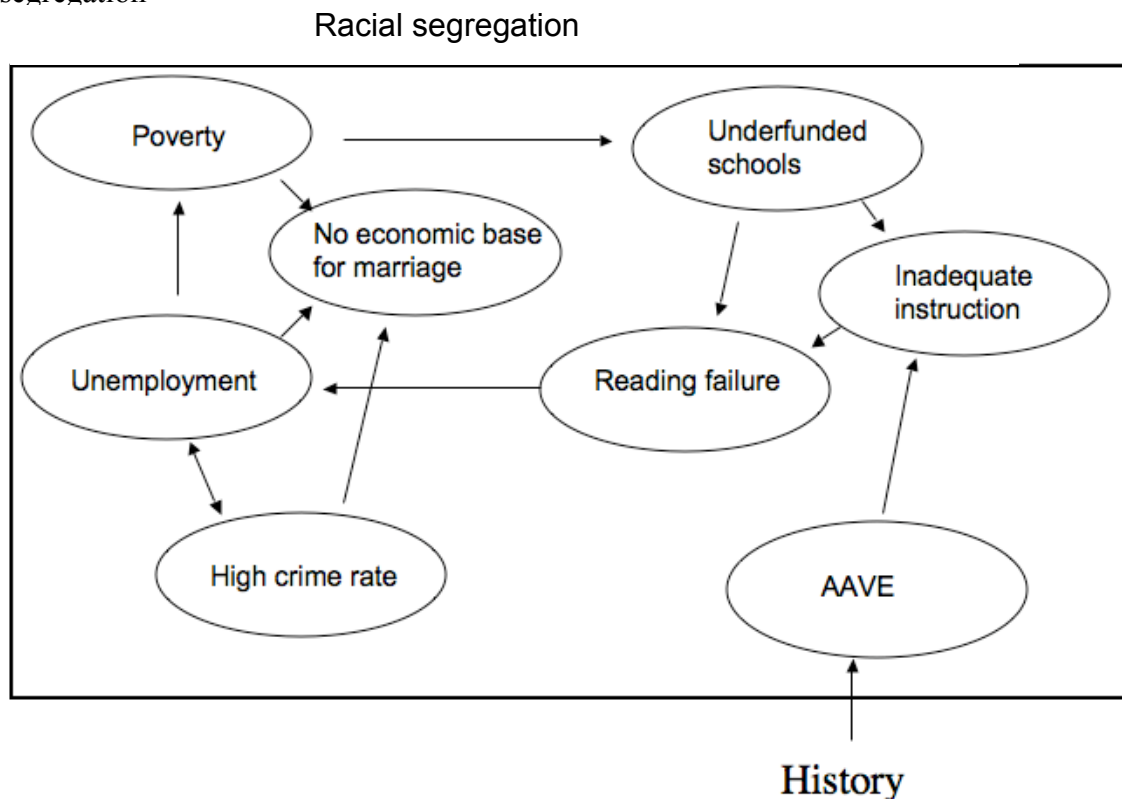
residential segregation, symbolized by the black rectangle. AAVE is shown as the product of its history, which begins outside of that framework, in plantations and small towns of the South (Bailey 1993, 2001) and in the earlier less segregated areas of the Northern cities. The 20th century developments of AAVE discussed in the first part of this paper occurred in conjunction with the other social conditions outlined in Figure 15. The first and over-arching of these conditions is the degree of poverty as indicated at upper left with its interlocking relationships with other forms of social pathology.

Unemployment is of course the primary cause of poverty; Unemployment rates for young black men who have not graduated high school have recently been reported at 72%, as opposed to 19% for the corresponding population of Latino youth (Eckholm 2006)., Unemployment, underemployment and poverty jointly reduce or eliminate the economic base for the black family. Inability to participate in the formal, legal economy leads directly to participation in the informal, illegal economy with a rapid increase in crime rates—the link shown at lower left. The incarceration rate of young black males has tripled in two decades, rising from 2% per year in 1981 to almost 6% in 2002 (Holzer, Offner and Sorensen 2004). Coupled with increasing reinforcement of child support laws, young black males are removed from the formal economy during and after their prison terms. The economic base of the largely female-headed black family is then further eroded.

Poverty in the inner city also affects the quality of schooling. Many of the schools we have worked in have a severe shortage of books, texts and art supplies, and most critical of all, teachers. One school we have worked with most closely in our intervention

programs has lost four teachers this year through budget cuts, so that in two classrooms, second and third grade students will be combined. Underfunding of schools plainly contributes to inadequate instruction and—no matter what instruction is used—to reading failure. The cycle closes as reading failure leads to further unemployment. Since the majority of children in the schools of Figure 15 are reading below Basic level in the 5th grade, and cannot use reading to obtain information content in their other subjects, it is not likely that they will be able to graduate from high school without further intervention. Reading failure reinforces the cycle of poverty, unemployment and crime.

Figure 15. Model of the development of AAVE in the framework of residential segregation



The relationship of AAVE to inadequate instruction is indicated by an arrow on Figure 15. Since the Ann Arbor decision (Smitherman 1981, Labov 1982), it has generally been agreed that teachers need to know more about children’s home language to be effective teachers of reading. How this can best be done is the major focus of our current research (Labov 2001, 2003). Whether our efforts will be effective enough to cut into the cycle of Figure 15 is a question still to be resolved over time. This paper has addressed a distinct, but closely related question: what are the social conditions under which AAVE has developed, flourished and become increasingly differentiated from other dialects of American English?

A major strategy of our intervention efforts is to respond in a meaningful way to the real-life situation of the children we are dealing with, who are all affected by the cycle of Figure 15. Many of the narratives I have written for our Individualized Reading Program deal with conflict between students and the school, and the injustice that

children see in the world around them. In contrast, most of the standard school reading materials deal with a happy, anodyne and irrelevant world in which children take their sand buckets to the beach and dip their toes in the water. By the time they reach the fourth grade, most of our students are alienated from the reading process as they have known it and from the institution of education as a whole. Their rejection of the school as an institution is similar to the position of the adolescent Jets and Cobras of the 1960s, who saw the school system as a form of institutionalized racism (Labov et al. 1968). There is a generalized level of anger that may surface at any moment, expressed primarily in fighting with their fellow students rather than overt hostility to the teacher. Many of our most promising students were forced to drop out of our program when they were suspended for fighting.

It is therefore important to get a clear idea of the social condition that generates these powerful emotions. A study of one individual may be helpful.

An angry fourth grader

Riana was a fourth grader when she entered the Individualized Reading Program. She scored in the 35th national percentile in the Woodcock-Johnson Word Attack sub-test, in the 13th percentile in the Word Identification sub-test and in the 16th percentile on Passage Comprehension. On our analysis of decoding skills, she had more than 10% errors for 12 out of the 20 phoneme/grapheme relations, the benchmark for needed instruction. In addition to these reading tests, we recorded the spontaneous speech of all of our students in that year with an interview format that followed the sociolinguistic techniques that have been found to stimulate the flow of speech (“Did you ever get blamed for something you didn’t do?” “Is there any place in your neighborhood that’s really scary?” “Did you ever get into a fight with someone bigger than you?”). Riana talked very freely about the fights she had been in.

I was in my old school and I was used to fightin’ an’ stuff. I only fought two times in this school. And I ain’t never get in trouble but in the old school I got suspended three times. That’s when I was a real fighter and I liked to fight a lot but I on’t--I try not to fight a lot and I told this--I told one of the teachers I said I was gonna punch her in her face. . . . Uh--I say anything when I’m mad. When I get real real mad I just say anything. I don’t be meaning it but I just say it. It then come out--anything comes out my mouth then but no curse words did . . . Anything else I say I’m going to do something to somebody but it comes out my mouth only--only say that when I’m mad I don’t--like--I don’t mean to say it. It just come out my mouth when I’m real real angry at people.

This is what she said about scary places.

Tutor: Is there any place that you know about that’s really scary? Some place you wouldn’t want to go?

Riana: Jail.

Tutor: How come?

Riana: 'Cause . . . it's a lot of people there that--that--a lot of thiefs there and the police don't care what they do long as they stay in them jail. As long as they stay in the bars they don't care what they do. And then. . . long as they don't call the police in they don't care what they do long as they ain't doing nothing to the police. And they might take your food like if you there--you had to go there--they might--and they have their own food--they own plate of food--they might -- they want yours and they snatch yours from you and they'll beat you up there.

Tutor: How do you know so much about jails?

Riana: My--my dad is in jail.

The tutor had no intention of talking about jail; up to this point, she did not know that Riana's dad was in jail. Without further reflection, she pursued the point.

Tutor: Do you ever go and visit your dad?

Riana: I never did. . . [sigh] I never saw him--the last time I saw my dad was . . . I was in second grade and I was going on a trip. He-he brought me money. That was the last time I saw him.

Tutor: Do you know does he get out soon?

Riana: I don't know.

Tutor: You don't know.

Riana: I don't think so. I-I've keep writing notes--I wrote my--I wrote--uh--I wrote--we write to each other. . . . He say he gon give me a--he say he gon give me a tape--he gon mail me a tape with him on there reading 'cuz I suh -- 'cuz at they jail I supposed to come there every week so we could do like a parent--a father and daughter--uh--reading.

Riana's sighs are quite audible. Her style is reflective and sad.

Riana: So--and--he say he gon send me a tape with him readin' on it. It's cuz instead--since I can't read then--since we can't see each other a lot--I never saw my dad in there--for a long long time. I think I saw--the last time I saw him was last year. My last birthday and it wasn't--not on my June--not on this--the June twenty seven that already came up. The one the buh--before that . . . And I didn't get--that's the last time I saw him. And he came to my birthday party. . . [sighs]

Riana is not an exceptional case. The uncontrollable anger that she feels, which will inevitably lead to her suspension from school, is the product of a despair that is not known to children outside the ghetto, but is commonplace within it. One in three black men between the ages of 20 and 29 is either in jail or prison, or on parole or probation: these are their children.¹¹ The stories that I write for them are quite remote from the happy tales that are written for suburban readers; they reflect—but only to a small degree — the grim reality of a world where the best we can do is to register a protest against the unfairness of it all. We made some progress with the children in Riana's class in 2001,

¹¹ Mauer 1995.

and the four years that followed. But the size of the problem is staggering. Of the 156 schools in Philadelphia, 141 are in the bottom quintile on the state achievement test. So far, we have worked with only a dozen. Table 2 is a brief extract from the list of hypersegregated cities in the United States: this is the norm for all large American cities. We have worked in a half-dozen, and the problem of reading failure is everywhere.

There are many ways in which what I have written here may be misunderstood, and I would like to be clear in the conclusion. I have shown that AAVE has developed its present form in the framework of the most extreme racial segregation that the world has ever known. In no way have I suggested that AAVE is a cause of the problems of African American people. On the contrary, it is their great resource, an elegant form of expression which they use when they reflect most thoughtfully on the oppression and misery of daily life.

If you love your enemy, they be done ate you alive in this society.

The great progress of the civil rights movement has given a large part of the black population access to education and jobs, along with the means to move out of the inner city. There have been great gains. On the linguistic side, there has emerged a standard African American English in which the major features are phonological, like the merger of *pin* and *pen*, (Henderson 2001), or camouflaged grammatical markers like the *come* of moral indignation (Spears 1982). If some forces in American society, perhaps led by Baugh's initiative on linguistic profiling (2000), were to make a major impact on residential segregation, then we would expect African American Vernacular English to shift some part of the distance towards other dialects, and we might then observe large scale convergence instead of continuing divergence.

If the mixed populations of our Philadelphia schools should actually be integrated, we may even reach a time when young black children use elements of the white vernacular, saying "get [eət]" and "I like to flit." At that point, AAVE as a whole might be in danger of losing its own distinct and characteristic forms of speech. I expect that some among us would regret the loss of the eloquent syntactic and semantic options that I have presented here. But we might also reflect at that time that the loss of a dialect is a lesser evil than the current condition of an endangered people.

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