

ENGLISH IN THE BLACK DIASPORA: DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY

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Is there an Ebonics language variety that can be recognized anywhere in the Anglophone Black diaspora? To what extent are the English varieties that developed out of the contacts of the English and African populations in Africa and in the New World related? How are they related? What is the role of substrate influence in shaping the structural peculiarities of English in the Black diaspora? Why are its different new varieties not structurally identical? How does the role of substrate influence in language compare with that of substrate influence in music? What light does the comparison shed on the evolution of English in Africa and the New World?

I argue in this chapter that cross-territorial variation in the peculiarities of both English and music in the Black diaspora underscores the determinative role of local ecology in shaping new systems. In the case of language, that ecology includes the particular form of the lexifier that the Africans were exposed to and targeted, and the particular colonial set-ups that brought English and the African languages into contact. The ecologies were not identical from one setting to another, hence the cross-territorial variation among the new varieties that developed. The new varieties are unified more by the kinds of English that lexified them, by the similarities of the colonial experiences that produced them, and by the racial identity of their speakers than by structural features peculiar to them all.

Introduction

Among the best-known consequences of contact between the English and the Africans in both Africa and the New World is the development of new English

varieties whose structural and pragmatic systems are assumed to have been influenced by African languages. The new varieties fall into four categories:

- 1) PIDGINS, typically associated with West Africa, the best known of which are Nigerian Pidgin English, Cameroon Pidgin English, and Kru Pidgin English (in Liberia);
- 2) CREOLES, typically associated with the Caribbean (e.g., Jamaican and Guyanese Creoles), but also identified in North America (Gullah) and in Africa (Krio);
- 3) AFRICAN-AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH (AAVE) and its offshoots in Nova Scotia, in Samaná, and in Liberia (Liberian Settler English); and
- 4) INDIGENIZED (NATIVIZED) ENGLISHES, associated with those who have been schooled in English in all former British colonies in Africa (e.g., Nigerian or West African English, Kenyan or East African English, South African Black English).

I justify lumping all these categories together as Englishes in Mufwene 1997a by arguing that pidgins and creoles have been disfranchised from the lot of English dialects for reasons that are not consistent with the established practice in genetic linguistics, namely to posit genetic ties based primarily on the sources of lexical materials. The vocabularies of these new language varieties happen to originate overwhelmingly in English, especially in the case of creoles, for socio-historical reasons highlighted below. The criteria behind the four categorial distinctions are elusive (Mufwene 1994, 1997a). Nonetheless, they reflect standard practice in the scholarly literature, most of which has been written exclusively on one category or another — except for pidgins and creoles, which are typically discussed together.

There has also been a trend to treat all these new varieties as a continuum of Black speech of some sort, as they are all by-products of the contact of English with sub-Saharan African languages. For instance, Williams 1975 and Smith 1998 treat them as continuations of African communicative traditions. I focus below on this view, in an attempt to articulate more adequately the nature of diversity among them. They are unified more by their common lexifier, by the similarities of their colonial experiences, and by the racial identity of their speakers than by structural features peculiar to them.

A diverse diaspora

If we assume for the sake of this discussion that administrative colonization of Africa did not start till after the Berlin Treaty in 1885, it is accurate to speculate that the pidgin varieties developed in pre-colonial days — being based on sporadic trade or business contacts which the English had with the Black populations — on the West African coast, and that they are, therefore, the oldest English varieties in Africa. Creoles are more typical of the New World, associated with those settings that Chaudenson 1979 identifies as 'exogenous,' i. e., those in which both

the ruling and the subordinate populations were foreign to the colony. Both creoles and pidgins also share the peculiarity of not being associated with the school system. Both were lexified by nonstandard English varieties spoken by sailors, traders, and especially indentured servants (native and nonnative speakers) — the Europeans that the African traders or slaves interacted with, sporadically in the case of pidgins, but fairly regularly in the case of creoles, particularly during the founding periods of the New World colonies (see Mufwene 1996).

AAVE has a similar genetic explanation, except that it has its roots on the tobacco plantations of the Chesapeake Bay (USA) and the cotton plantations of the American Southeast, where people of African descent were seldom the majority and where racial segregation was institutionalized much later than in Africa, in the late 19th century, after about two centuries of regular and intimate, though discriminatory, contacts with English speakers of European descent (Mufwene 1999). Extensive similarities between AAVE and White Southern English (see, e.g., Bailey & Cukor-Avila 2001) are evidence of this peculiar history, which has encouraged a greater categorical distinction between it and Gullah (a by-product of population and language contact in rice fields) than may be justified on structural (phonological, morphosyntactic, semantic), and pragmatic grounds (Mufwene 2001). Otherwise, AAVE shares with creoles the peculiarity of having developed in exogenous settings from the contacts of nonstandard English vernaculars with African languages.

However, creoles have typically developed in settings in which descendants of Africans have been the majority, which has encouraged creolists to include Gullah in the creole category, although it is in some structural respects closer to AAVE and other North American varieties of English than Jamaican and Guyanese Creoles are (Alleyne 1980). To be sure, there are varieties such as Saramaccan and Sranan which have developed in settings where regular contact with the English lexifier was severed early — within 15 years of the foundation of the Surinam colony, in this case — and which are hardly intelligible to speakers of not only non-creole Englishes but also of other creole Englishes. They are said to be 'radical' creoles, either because they have putatively been the most influenced by the African substrate languages formerly spoken by those who developed them (Alleyne 1980), or because they supposedly developed by processes that are the most drastically different from those assumed in historical linguistics: creations by children (Bickerton 1984). For more extensive discussions of related issues, see Mufwene (1996, 1997a, 1998).

Because of the settings of their developments, indigenized Englishes share with their pidgin counterparts the peculiarity of being endogenous, having developed in the home countries of their speakers. However, they are by-products of Africans' exposure to scholastic English, both as a subject and as a medium of instruction. Functioning also as markers of social class identity, they are consequences of the appropriation of scholastic English by the educated as a *lingua franca*, less for communication with the former British colonists and other expatri-

ates than for communication among themselves. Such ethnographic conditions led these new varieties to become autonomous, developing their own local norms and normalizing as (somewhat) independent from the British metropolitan norms. Consistent with some accounts in, for instance, Pride 1982 and Kachru 1992, they reflect both substrate influence and adaptations of the former colonial language to local cultural realities and communication needs, as may also be observed in music.

Black music diaspora: Why diversity matters

Parallels to the differing by-products of language contact outlined above can be observed in some other outcomes of Euro-African culture contacts. For instance, the mixing of European technology with African rhythms has definitely not yielded the same outcomes everywhere. High Life is a West African phenomenon, Reggae is a Jamaican invention, and Calypso developed in Trinidad first. Although these distinctions are geographically-based, the names serve primarily to differentiate distinctive music styles. As much as they may be said to be related by some African element, they vary from each other. A musician must recognize, for instance, that each style operates on a different beat, just as a dancer knows that different steps and body moves are required for each one. One might even suspect influence from the universe of Franco-African culture in the case of Trinidad, where input from Latin cultures in its history justifies the significance of the Carnival tradition, which has been adopted only as imitation on other Anglophone Caribbean islands. Support for this guess can be adduced from the total absence of the Carnival tradition in Anglophone North America, as opposed to Louisiana.

In more or less the same vein, the Blues and Spirituals in North America have their roots on the plantations. Jazz emerged in cities like New Orleans (being more or less the counterpart of Classical Music), and varieties of Rhythm and Blues are inner-city phenomena. In a way, one may say that High Life is Anglophone West-African, associated linguistically with West African pidgins; Reggae and Calypso are Anglophone Caribbean, associated with Caribbean English creoles; and the Blues, Jazz, the Spirituals, and Soul Music are all North American phenomena, associated with AAVE and Gullah. And despite the recognition of Rhythm and Blues influence in both Jamaican Reggae and Louisiana Zydeco, one may also say that the latter carries influence from Francophone colonial folk music.

All in all, one may say that cultural phenomena in the Black diaspora have resulted through interesting selection processes from encounters between diverse cultures. Different selections in different cultural ecologies have yielded different musics, undoubtedly with African elements in them, but they leave us with the following questions: What is the African element? Is it the same one from one cultural setting to another or from one music style to another? If it is the same, does it have a uniform manifestation? Or could it be that different African elements have been retained in these different music styles, subject to the settings of their development?

Take, for instance, the Spirituals, which are associated with church services. They are predominantly vocal, and one may say that their basic musical accompaniments are clapping and the rhythmic and synchronized ground tapping with the singers' feet. These African elements, which exert special rhythmic constraints on the new music style, are undeniable; but equally incontrovertible are the constraints imposed by the church tradition in terms of what lyrics may be sung in their contexts. On the other hand, the Blues, which are more secular, are more permissive in their lyrics. The harmonica, a non-African instrument which plays a central role in this style, certainly imposes its own constraints on the kinds of melodies that can be produced. In yet a different way, Jazz is predominantly instrumental, based on European string and brass instruments. The African contribution to it was very much constrained by the kinds of music that these particular instruments allow. One may safely conclude that these cultural phenomena of the Black diaspora were all invented in specific ecologies, addressing specific needs, and that all these ecological conditions shaped their respective morphologies.

On the unity of English(es) in the Black diaspora

It should be intellectually rewarding to investigate whether selection constraints similar to the domain of music applied to language development in the Black diaspora. The question for this chapter is whether definitions such as the following, proposed for *Ebonics* by Williams (1975:vi), are valid:

the linguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represents the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and the United States slave descendant of African origin. It includes the various idioms, patois, argots, idiolects [sic], and social dialects of black people especially those who have been forced to adapt to colonial circumstances. *Ebonics* derives its form from ebony (black) and phonics (sound, the study of sound) and refers to the study of the language of black people in all its cultural uniqueness.

Williams proposes a notion of 'Ebonics' that is more inclusive than its present association with African-American English, lumping together all English varieties of the Black diaspora. He does not suggest that all of them are mutually intelligible — and indeed they need not be, but he claims that they all share 'linguistic and paralinguistic features.'

As in the case of music styles, one may probably invoke a number of features that can be attributed to African influence, though most of this influence may amount to the role played by African languages in favoring one of the variants available already in colonial or metropolitan varieties of English themselves (for discussion, see Mufwene 1993). There are certainly a number of phonological features that can be invoked to argue that English varieties of the Black diaspora are different from other English varieties. For instance, they are generally non-rhotic, in most of them the phonemes /a/ and /æ/, /t/ and /θ/, and /d/ and /ð/ have merged, respectively, into /a/, /t/, and /d/. The vast majority of them do not have a

schwa. In all these respects, AAVE is exceptional and Gullah comes close to it, as it has a schwa and does not have a pronounced merger of /a/ and /æ/. As a matter of fact, despite the tradition that lumps Gullah structurally with Caribbean creoles, pronunciations such as /ayl/ for *oil*, /plie / for *play*, /gwot/ for *goat*, /towɛ/ for *tower*, and /abawt/ for *about* are not as common in Gullah as in Caribbean creole Englishes. Even representations of words like *very* as /βeri/ are more stereotypical than the facts can support as valid analyses (see Mufwene 1986).

Prosodically, English varieties of the Black diaspora are quite different from each other. Overall, one can say that a Black Caribbean speaker of English sounds more like a White Caribbean than like an African American in any register — with the exception of basilectal Gullah speakers, who are often misidentified by other African Americans as Bahamians. Speakers of African varieties of English also sound different from those of diaspora varieties, and their prosodic features often make them unintelligible to AAVE speakers.

Questions of mutual intelligibility aside, one must wonder what the meaning of *Ebonics* as defined by Williams 1975 is. There are undoubtedly some morpho-syntactic similarities among Englishes of the Black diaspora — for instance, the fact that *dem* is used as a nominal plural marker in pidgins, creoles, and AAVE, as in *dem boys*. But one must also note that this is not a feature of the indigenized Black varieties. Also, in Jamaican Creole, the combination for plural only is *di* + Noun + *dem*, whereas *dem* + Noun has the meaning 'those' + Noun. On the other hand, in AAVE the combination *dem* + Noun has the same meaning as in white nonstandard vernaculars in North America. Yet, AAVE is closer to creoles and pidgins in its associative plural, as in *John an' dem* 'John and his associates'.

We may also consider a verbal feature such as preverbal *bin/been* in AAVE, creoles, and pidgins. In the respects that are relevant to this essay, morphosyntactic use of *been/bin/ben* without an auxiliary *have* is not typical of indigenized Englishes. Also, while it is used as an ANTERIOR marker in creoles and pidgins, as in *mi bin kom* 'I came' or 'I had come', it is rarely used with this grammatical meaning in AAVE. In this vernacular, it functions as regular PERFECT marker, as in *I bin home all morning*. This usage is as in other nonstandard English vernaculars. In AAVE, *bin* is also used as a REMOTE PHASE marker to denote a state of affairs that, subjectively, started a long time ago, as *I bin six/known you* 'I have been six [for quite a while now]' and 'I have known you [for a long time]'. Winford 1993 argues that such uses are attested in mesolectal Caribbean English, but not in their basilects.

Something similar may be observed about the consuetudinal aspect marker *be*, which AAVE and Gullah share with Irish English, as in *Malcolm be sick/jivin' whenever I see him*, with *be sick/jivin'* denoting REPEATED UNBOUNDED STATES rather than simple repetitions of states or events. This marker, which occurs perhaps also in Bajan (the English variety of Barbados) is different from the simple HABITUAL marker [dɔz] in Gullah ([doz] in Guyanese Creole), as in *how you duhz cook fish?* 'how do you cook fish?'. These features are not universally shared by

English varieties in the Black diaspora. In particular, the African varieties do not have them, nor does Jamaican Creole.

I could go on illustrating such cross-variety variation with more grammatical features and local lexical semantic peculiarities to show that the alleged similarities among Englishes of the Black diaspora are partially real, but partly disputable. They are disputable because it is probably difficult to find peculiarities which they share universally which are not phonological and non-prosodic, more specifically segmental. At the grammatical level, the similarities may obtain more within specific subcategories of language varieties. For instance, creoles may share more features among themselves than they do with indigenized Englishes, and varieties lexified by nonstandard vernaculars probably share more features among themselves than they do as (sub)groups with varieties lexified by scholastic varieties. Thus, pidgins and creoles share quite a few grammatical features, such as the omission of the copula in some grammatical environments, usage of *de* as a locative verb, of *done* as in *im don gon* 'he has left (already)' as PERFECT marker, and of *bin* as an ANTERIOR marker.

However, Englishes of the Black diaspora also differ among themselves, in the same ways that music styles such as Reggae and North American soul music differ despite the common influence of Rhythm and Blues on them. Thus, Jamaican Creole distinguishes between the locative verb *de* and the equative copula *a*, while Gullah, Guyanese Creole, and West African pidgins use only one phonetic variant of *de* ([de], [di], or [də]) in both functions. And we can also note that those varieties that developed in settings where descendants of Africans were minorities and could interact fairly regularly with descendants of Europeans, such as in the hinterlands of the North American Southeast, the Black and White varieties are quite similar, just like there are indeed similarities between the Spirituals of African Americans and those of European Americans.

The kinship of Englishes in the Black diaspora: Some conclusions

The kinship of Englishes of the Black diaspora, in the Wittgensteinian family-resemblance model, is undoubtedly as real as the kinship of all English varieties, with the understanding that varieties that developed under the agency of speakers of African languages are bound to have some features that distinguish them as a group from other English varieties. The problem is whether there is any robust subset of structural features attributable to (convergent) African linguistic influence that can justify thus singling them out as a category of Englishes, or whether we should be content with identifying them ideologically, most obviously by the color of their speakers or by the kinds of colonial experiences that produced them. Can we single out such varieties by the culture of their speakers? Is there such a thing as a culture of the Black diaspora, as opposed to the colonial experience of people in the Black diaspora? Is there a sense in which one can argue that the Nigerian Pidgin vernacular used by Chinua Achebe 1967 in *A Man of the People* is the same language as used by Toni Morrison 1987 in *Beloved*? The di-

versity of linguistic materials is such that scholars who subscribe to Williams' 1975 definition of *Ebonics* may want to articulate more explicitly what is meant by 'the language of black people in all its cultural uniqueness'.

All in all, this discussion does not prove that African languages did not play a role in shaping the English varieties of the Black diaspora. As a matter of fact, I have not dealt with questions of origins, which are a more complex topic, and their discussion would have to periodize contacts and tease apart mechanics of the restructuring process in varying ecological settings. Nor does this discussion dispute the fact that the relevant English varieties seem to be related structurally in the family-resemblance model. In this respect, this essay suggests that the varieties that developed under similar sociohistorical conditions are more like each other than they are like any other variety. There is probably a sense in which Nigerian Pidgin English is very much like Jamaican Creole, at least in its morphosyntax, although it also shares features with its endogenous kin, Nigerian English.

This essay also highlights similarities between the developments of contact-based music styles and the developments of contact-based English varieties in the Black diaspora. In the same way that differences among High Life (in West Africa), Zulu Jive (in South Africa), Reggae (in the Caribbean), and Soul Music (in North America) may be correlated with the specific settings of their developments, so may differences among West African pidgins, Caribbean creoles, and AAVE be correlated with the differing sociohistorical ecologies of their evolutions (see Mufwene 1999). In the same way that differences between Jazz and the Blues were determined in part by at least the kinds of European instruments that were adopted, so too were differences between indigenized Englishes and English pidgins determined in part by the kinds of Englishes that the Africans were exposed to (Mufwene 1997a). After all, in their adaptive efforts, the Africans meant to speak English (of whatever kind they came in contact with), and it is through their communicative acts that the new varieties developed, consistent with the usual patterns of language diversification in genetic linguistics.

In all such cases, too, the timing and nature of the contacts between populations of European and African descent were critical factors, as much as the extent to which the ensuing linguistic system has autonomized from the alternative models in the dominant or ruling community. For instance, having been declared separate languages for over a century now, pidgins have enjoyed a lot of normative autonomy from their lexifiers, most of all from standard English. Likewise, having been isolated from native English-speaking populations from the time of their inception as new vernaculars (most likely in the early 18th century), the creoles of Suriname have also enjoyed greater autonomy and have diverged the most drastically from their lexifiers. On the other hand, AAVE is perhaps the latest to have achieved linguistic autonomy among New World Englishes, coming into its own just since the institutionalization of race segregation in the North American Southeast in the late 19th century. Indigenized Englishes have yet to win full autonomy, given the ongoing debate over whether scholastic English should

follow local or external norms (i. e., British or American English) through the mediation of nonnative speakers, as observed by Kachru 1996. That is, scholars and others take different sides on the question of whether indigenized Englishes of Africa, as of Asia, are deviations from the so-called 'native Englishes' or 'more legitimate' varieties in their own right, with their own norms that can and should be taught in schools.

The latter considerations aside, it is true that there is a Black diaspora which came about from the dispersal of sub-Saharan African populations in the New World and islands of the Indian Ocean. A subset of this diaspora can be defined by the use of English as either a vernacular or a lingua franca. As anywhere else where English has likewise been adopted, it has undergone adaptive evolutions, the outcomes of which have been claimed to be new languages in the cases of pidgin and creole varieties. Although African substrate influence can be claimed to be a common cachet of the Anglophone Black diaspora, we have no evidence that such influence has been the same everywhere, nor that there is one Black language that may be called *Ebonics* for the whole dispersal area. What we need are more elaborate studies of these diaspora English varieties as autonomous systems. Subsequent research will reveal in what specific ways they are related to, and different from, each other. Much more sophisticated studies, based on how substrate influences operate, will inform us about what proportion of these common and unshared peculiarities are due to African languages.

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