

## **HABITUAL ASPECT MARKING AND NEWFOUNDLAND VERNACULAR ENGLISH**

**Sandra CLARKE**

*Memorial University of Newfoundland (Canada)*

**Abstract:** Much recent debate has focused on the creole vs. non-creole origins of African American Vernacular English, as well as on possible regional British/Irish sources of features of Caribbean English. This article brings to the debate evidence previously unconsidered: the vernacular English spoken in Newfoundland (Canada), the early European settlement of which parallels that of the early Caribbean and southern American colonies. Examination of habitual aspect representation in this highly conservative variety indicates the inadequacy of a criterion of putative linguistic relationship adopted by much of the sociohistorical literature, namely, the criterion of linguistic isomorphism.

**Keywords:** African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Caribbean English, creoles, Newfoundland English, regional British English, Irish English, habitual aspect, habitual *be*, historical origins, dialect variation

### **1. BACKGROUND**

The establishment of historical links between New and Old World varieties of English has been of considerable interest in the recent sociolinguistic literature. This is particularly true with respect to the ongoing debate as to the origins of African American and Caribbean Englishes. This debate hinges on whether the chief sources of these varieties, in particular Caribbean English, were creoles (typically defined as nativized pidgins), or whether their structure was in large measure derived from vernacular regional dialects of British and Irish English.

Although much has been written from the two opposing perspectives, there is little consensus as to what linguistic criteria must be met if claims relative to the historical provenance of particular New World varieties are to be accepted. One approach is typified by Rickford

(1986), for whom the criterion of historical relationship appears to be the existence of formal and functional identity in historically-removed varieties. He concludes that habitual *be* in Caribbean English (as in *He be(es) sick all the time*) must be creole in origin, since none of the input varieties which figured in early Caribbean settlement used precisely this feature; while southern Irish English played an important role in the early Caribbean, it could not have served as a source, according to Rickford, since it used *do(es) be* rather than simple *be* as a habitual marker. Others (e.g. Poplack and Tagliamonte 1991) suggest that mere surface isomorphism is inadequate, and that the establishment of historical relationship between varieties removed in space and time requires the demonstration of linguistic similarity at a more underlying level, i.e., in terms of the constraints which govern the distribution of any linguistic feature. This constitutes an important and necessary refinement, without, however, fundamentally rejecting the basic principle of linguistic isomorphism as a necessary - and possibly sufficient - condition of linguistic relationship.

The position adopted in this article is that an approach grounded in isomorphism offers only a partial answer to the problems and intricacies of historical relationship among linguistic varieties. Each variety is firmly embedded in its own individual social matrix, and the social, historical, geographical and linguistic conditions under which it develops are peculiar to it. As a result, the linguistic outcome of any particular sociohistorical context may differ substantially from its linguistic input, or source varieties. As recent literature has suggested (e.g. Thomason and Kaufman 1988, Mufwene 1996), purely linguistic factors must be supplemented by full examination of the language-external variables which play a role in dialect and language formation.

Even a thorough understanding of the theoretical principles involved in the formation of new linguistic varieties - whether language-internal or -external - would not, however, in and of itself guarantee answers to the question of historical origin. A second consideration raised by this paper is the issue of reliability of the evidence relating to putative historical source varieties. Much of the literature appears to make the implicit assumption that such varieties displayed internal homogeneity. As will be demonstrated, this is far from true.

## 2. A TEST CASE: HABITUAL ASPECT REPRESENTATION

This paper examines what would appear to be an optimal test case for the utility of the criterion of linguistic isomorphism in the establishment of historical relationship among varieties: the representation of habitual (verbal) marking in the vernacular English of Newfoundland, an island at the eastern extremity of Canada. This case is optimal in that it is a maximally simple one, for several important reasons. Firstly, the historical origins of Newfoundland Vernacular English (NVE) are well-documented, and few in number. The overwhelming majority of early settlers to Newfoundland came from two highly concentrated sources: southwest England (in particular the counties of Dorset and Devon) and southeast Ireland, largely from within a thirty-mile radius of the city of Waterford. Secondly, the formative period of NVE was one of the earliest of New World Englishes, dating back to the early 17th century. Thirdly, NVE constitutes a highly conservative variety, which because of its geographical location and socioeconomic standing has remained largely isolated from the influence of external varieties; for example, there have been relatively few in-migrants in the past 150 years.

In its representation of habitual aspect, NVE differs from its two input varieties (S(outh)W(est) B(ritish) and S(outhern) I(rish) E(nglish)) in a very important way: while in these last two a habitual meaning would commonly be represented via unstressed periphrastic *do*, as in *I do [d] dig the ground*, NVE uses exclusively the *-s* present suffix throughout the paradigm: *I digs the ground*. The same is true of the verb *be*: while sentences like *He does be late for dinner sometimes* (Harris 1986:176) are common in SIE, and can also be found in SWB, they are very rare in NVE, which uses instead the invariant habitual form *bees* (e.g. *Usually I talks fast and gets off because I bees embarrassed*).

There is considerable evidence that NVE has not innovated in its use of the *-s* suffix and the *be* stem as habitual markers. In other areas of morphology, as well as in its phonological system, NVE appears largely to have preserved intact the forms it inherited from its two principal source varieties. Further evidence is offered by other early-established New World varieties which also make use of the same two habitual/durative forms, among them Anglo-Caribbean (e.g. *If you plant them, they comes good in the soil*, and *They bi:z (=bees) round some rocks*, both from Williams 1987). Moreover, *-s* present forms exist to some degree in both source areas, as does the (largely invariant) stem *be*, as in the SWB example *This time o' year they all be busy on the land now* (Wakelin 1986).

One obvious interpretation is that NVE exhibits innovation in its marking of habitual aspect, perhaps through a process of levelling or convergence as a result of dialect contact in the Newfoundland context. The convergence explanation would not however account for the total absence of periphrastic *do* (apart from the rare occurrence of *do be*) in NVE: according to the dialect literature, this form should have been common in both input varieties, and has had a long-standing association with habitual aspect, whether in southwest England, Ireland, or the Caribbean. It is of course also possible that NVE underwent semantic innovation, narrowing a full range of aspectual meanings associated with the *-s* present and *be* forms in the input varieties (as in the non-habitual SWB example *Where the Devil be 'em to?* from Wakelin 1986:130) to a primarily habitual function. Yet this would hardly clarify why it is that various Caribbean Englishes behave like NVE in also utilising the *-s* present and the *be* stem predominantly as markers of habitual aspect. Further, the NVE generalized *-s* present can also represent the full range of aspectual functions conveyed by the standard English simple present form (see Clarke 1997).

Examination of the vernacular source dialects, SWB and SIE, suggests that far from being homogeneous, both source areas contained considerable variability, the non-linguistic and linguistic correlates of which are often not well understood. For example, from the perspective of regional variation, while the areas of West Country England that make use of periphrastic *do* as opposed to the generalized *-s* present are well-documented, the same is not true of SIE. There seems to be an amount of confusion in the literature as to the areal spread of the *be* vs. *do be* forms in Ireland: while Rickford (1986) and others associate *be* with the north rather than the south, this form in fact has a considerably greater geographical range. Yet there is also evidence from both SWB and SIE that competing variants may be found even within one and the same community: Bertz (1987), for example, provides both *Every morning he be down on his knees* and *Sometimes I do be tired* as examples of habitual *be* in Dublin English (for SWB, see Ihlainen 1991). However, the social, stylistic and linguistic constraints that might give rise to such variation are rarely commented on - a notable

exception being Ihälainen (1991), which shows that at least some varieties of SWB favour the *be* stem outside of unstressed affirmative declarative contexts (as in *Where be I to?*). Of course, even careful analyses of 20th century regional vernacular speech in both Ireland and southwest England would not indicate the precise state of affairs relative to usage of the full range of aspectual variants some three hundred years earlier, the period of early emigration to areas like Newfoundland and the Caribbean.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In short, the evidence relating to the representation of habitual aspect in the historical source varieties of NVE suggests a degree of complexity not often taken into account in the literature on historical dialect relationships, which tends to conceive of vernacular varieties as internally homogeneous. Further, the NVE situation illustrates that, even in a maximally simple and reasonably well documented dialect contact situation, the linguistic outcome is by no means predictable. The reasons for the almost total loss in NVE of habitual periphrastic *do*, and the general success of the -*s* present along with the *be* stem, are undoubtedly grounded in such sociohistorical considerations as the precise composition of the founder populations, i.e. the proportion of different dialect types represented in the early settler mix, as well as the precise chronology of settlement. Principles of dialect contact such as levelling and koineization, while relevant, prove somewhat simplistic: as recent literature has suggested (e.g. Montgomery 1993, Mufwene 1996), varieties emerging from contact situations, among them New World Englishes, may exhibit a considerable degree of long-term variability. The NVE situation is no exception: for example, *do be* has lingered on alongside the dominant form, *bees*, to represent the habitual. What is amply clear, however, is that an approach to historical origins grounded solely in language-internal factors, notably the notion of linguistic isomorphism, can provide only part of the answer to the intricacies of linguistic relationship over space and time.

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