Although American educators are gradually realizing that some children should be taught standard English as a separate, second dialect, remedial English programs still do not reflect structural observations on language variation among the disadvantaged. There is a lack of communication between linguists, teachers, and community leaders, and the nonlinguists involved in such programs have been disturbed by the idea of a correlation between language behavior and ethnic grouping. This correlation is particularly controversial when the linguist points out that Negro dialects are alike throughout the country, while different in many ways from the nonstandard dialects of whites living in the same area. In this study, the historical roots of primarily Negro speech patterns are found in the Creole and Pidgin English spoken by Negro slaves and recorded in literature of the era. Even after the Civil War, when the field-hand Creole English began to take on more features of local white dialects and the written language, certain dialect features remained peculiar to Negro speech. An understanding of the historical linguistic processes that led to nonstandard Negro dialects will help the educators of the disadvantaged to communicate with applied linguists working on the same problems. This article was published in "The Florida FL Reporter," Volume 5, Number 2, Spring 1967. (JD)
SOCIOLINGUISTIC FACTORS IN THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN NEGRO DIALECTS

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Within the last few years, the increased national commitment to bettering the lot of socially and economically underprivileged groups of Americans—the so-called "disadvantaged"—has caused educators to consider ways in which the schools may involve themselves in this task. Of the many possibilities, certainly one of the most obvious is to deal with the chronic language problems associated with many of the disadvantaged. Yet, although there is a general awareness that certain of the disadvantaged do have language problems, there is at the same time a lack of agreement as to what these problems entail, and therefore what to do about them. Some investigators (often educational psychologists) have maintained that the disadvantaged characteristically do not use verbal communication to the extent that members of the middle class do, and are thus impoverished in "communicative skills". To alleviate this situation, they have recommended programs aimed at encouraging the use of verbal communication of a variety of kinds by disadvantaged pupils. A few investigators have theorized that members of disadvantaged groups may even engage less in abstract thinking than do middle-class persons. For this there have been suggested programs designed to teach more perception and conceptualization on the part of the disadvantaged pupils.

On the other hand, linguists have tended to emphasize one other type of language problem which some disadvantaged groups often have, and for which the obvious is to deal with it. The relationship of the readiness of the schools is the fact that traditional English teachers are rapidly abandoning the older " sloppy speech" and " lazy tongue" views of non-standard speech in favor of a realization that it usually represents the speaker's use of some language system which, though it may differ from standard English in form and sometimes even in function, is nevertheless logical, coherent, and (in its own way) grammatical. Another indication of the readiness of schools to cope with the problem of dialect differences is the growth of a cadre of specialists in the teaching of English to speakers of other languages. With them, there has come into being a set of new techniques for teaching English to persons coming from a different language background.

Just as they are ready, America's schools certainly ought to be willing to deal with dialect-based problems, since there are a number of ways in which, by themselves, they can render a non-standard speaker dysfunctional in exchanges with standard-English-speaking members of the middle class. One way is for minor pronunciation differences between a non-standard dialect and standard English — each one perhaps trivial by itself — to pile up in an utterance to such an extent that the non-standard version becomes unintelligible to a middle-class listener, even though in grammar and vocabulary it may be quite similar to its standard equivalent. Thus, a non-standard version of "I don't know where they live" might, in one dialect, become so cryptic to the standard-speaking listener, merely because of its being pronounced something like Ah 'own know whey 'ey lib. Or, a standard English speaker may misunderstand a non-standard utterance of negations even though he thinks he has deciphered it correctly, because it contains non-standard grammatical constructions which are unknown to him. For example, a middle-class listener may take a non-standard sentence Dey ain't like dat to mean "they aren't like that", whereas it really means "They didn't like that". The standard-English speaker is simply unaware that ain't is this particular dialect's word for negating verbs in the past tense, as he is unaware that the usual equivalent in the same dialect of "They aren't like that" would be either Dey not like dat or Dey don't be like dat (the two variants indicating a difference in meaning which is not easily expressed in standard English). Of course, similar breakdowns in intelligibility may also occur in the other direction, when the non-standard speaker tries to understand standard English. Finally, even when he does succeed in making himself understood by his middle-class listeners, the non-standard speaker may still fall victim to the difference in social prestige between his dialect and standard English. In other words, although middle-class persons may understand what he is saying, they may still consider him uncouth for saying it the way he does.

Professionally able though the schools may now be to embark on programs which would deal effectively with this kind of problem, the likelihood of their actually doing so in the near future is certainly not increased by the unwillingness of many educators and even some applied linguists to approach the problem in any but the most general terms. For, unfortunately, the technical know-how necessary to teach standard English to speakers of non-standard dialects is simply not embodied in an awareness of the problem at the level of "Some children should probably be taught standard English as a second dialect" — no matter how true such statements may be. The necessary know-how will begin to be adequate when and only when applied linguists can give, and educators will take seriously, details of the type "The verb system of such-and-such a non-standard dialect operates in such-and-such a way, and the verb system of standard English operates in such-and-such a way, so that structural interference is most likely to occur at points a, b, and c. Therefore, the following: lessons and drills in the standard English verb system is what children who speak this non-standard dialect will need." (1)

One reason why there is little remedial English now being taught based upon a systematic comparison of the differences between non-standard dialects and standard English is that information about one of the pedagogically most important features of non-standard dialects — their grammatical systems — is still largely lacking. This lack is due in great part to the fact that American
dialect studies have traditionally emphasized differences in pronunciation and vocabulary, at the expense of information on systematic grammatical differences.

Now that linguists have begun to fill this information gap, however, they are finding their observations on language variation among the disadvantaged received with uneasiness and even hostility by many teachers, administrators, and community leaders. The reason for this is undoubtedly that the accurate description of dialect variation in American communities — particularly in urban centers — is turning out to show a disturbing correlation between language behavior on the one hand and socio-economic and ethnic stratification on the other. (2) The correlation is particularly controversial insofar as it involves the speech of large numbers of American Negroes, since at the present time Negro leadership (and this includes most Negro educators) is probably more achievement-oriented than any other. Because of this orientation, Negro elites tend not to welcome any evidence of uniform or stable behavioral differences between members of their own group (even lower-class ones) and those of the white-dominated middle class. Yet the fact is that Negroes account for most of the most pedagogically problematic non-standard dialect speakers in the larger cities, and also include within their group speakers of the most radically non-standard dialects of natively-spoken English in the entire country. (3) Furthermore, because de facto segregation in housing has caused non-standard-dialect-speaking Negroes to predominate in many schools and because these Negroes appear in many cases to have different kinds of problems with standard English than non-standard-dialect-speaking whites have (even in the same area), the sweeping, for political purposes, of Negro dialect descriptions under the white-oriented geographic dialect rug would probably be more detrimental to disadvantaged Negro children than it would be advantageous to Negro people. (4)

On the other hand, linguists should realize that the fears and anxieties of Negro leaders about public discussion of ethnically correlated behavioral differences may have some foundation. It is possible, for example, that quite objective and innocently-made statements about dialect differences between whites and Negroes might by interpreted by white racists as evidence of Negro cultural backwardness or mental inferiority, or even seized upon by black racists as evidence of some sort of mythical Negro "soul". Linguists should not censor their data, but they should make sure that their statements about Negro-white differences are not forced 'from an awareness of the historical, social, and linguistic reasons why such differences may have come into existence and been maintained. Perhaps it would serve that end to point out here some of the sociolinguistic factors involved in the evolution of American Negro dialects, factors which explain why certain kinds of American Negro dialects are both different from the non-standard dialects of American whites, and more radically deviant from standard English.

Although the linguistic history of the Negro in the United States can be reconstructed from the numerous literary attestations of the English of New World Negroes over the last two and a half centuries, and by comparing these with the English of Negroes in the United States, the Caribbean, and West Africa today, this has never been done for the English teaching profession. In presenting a historical sketch of this type, I realize that both the facts presented and my interpretations of them may embarrass or even infuriate those who would like to white-wash American Negro dialects by claiming that they do not exist — that (in spite of all sorts of observable evidence to the contrary) they are nothing but Southern white dialects, derived directly from Great Britain. I will simply mention strategies to those who regard human behavior as legitimate only if observed in the white man, since I feel that this constitutes a negation of the cultural and ethnic plurality which is one of America's greatest heritages. On the other hand, I do regret that such a historical survey, although linguistically interesting, may at times conjure up out of the past memories of the Negro-as-slave to haunt the aspirations of the Negro-as-equal.

Of those Africans who fell victim to the Atlantic slave trade and were brought to the New World, many found it necessary to learn some kind of English. With very few exceptions, the form of English which they acquired was a pidginedized one, and this kind of English became so well established as the principal medium of communication between Negro slaves in the British colonies that it was passed on as a crucial language to succeeding generations of the New World Negroes, for whom it was their native tongue. (5) Some idea of what New World Negro English may have been like in its early stages can be obtained from a well-known example of the speech of a fourteen-year-old Negro lad given by Daniel Defoe in The Family Instructor (London, 1715). It is signifi-

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2. The American Dream notwithstanding, it is well known to social scientists that, American society is stratified into a number of social classes and ethnic groups, and that each of these exhibits a "characteristic" configuration of customs, attitudes, roles, life-ways and, as it were, speech patterns. The literature on social and ethnic stratification is extensive, but very little is known about ethnic stratification. Social Stratification (New York, McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1962), and Tamotsu Shibutani and Egon Berge!, (page 289).


4. For a discussion of Negro dialect in one urban community, see William A. Stewart, "Urban Negro Speech Patterns and Social Factors Affecting "Normal" English Teaching" in Roger W. Shuy, editor, Social Dialects and Language Learning (Champaign, Ill., National Council of Teachers of English, 1965). The non-standard dialect patterns cited in the present article are also Negro dialect.

5. In referring to types of languages, linguists use the terms pidgin and creole in a technical sense which has nothing to do with racial connotations of popular uses of these terms. When a linguist says that a variety of English is pidginized, he merely means that it has a markedly simplified grammatical structure compared with that of an unpidginized (or "normal") source-language. This simplification may be one way in which speakers of different languages can make a new language easier to learn and use — particularly if they have neither the opportunity nor the motivation to learn it the way its primary users do. In addition, some of the unique characteristics of a pidginedized language may be due, not to simplification, but to influences on it from the native languages of its users. What is important to realize, however, is that pidginized languages do not have "normal" syntax even though their specific patterns may be different from those of the related unpidginized source-languages of higher prestige. Thus, the fact that the sentence Dem no get-am in present-day West African Pidgin English is obviously different from its standard English equivalent "They don't have it" does not necessarily indicate that the Pidgin English speaker "talks without grammar". In producing such a sentence, he is unconsciously obeying the grammatical rules of West African Pidgin English, and those determine that Dem no get-am is the "right" construction, as opposed to such ungrammatical or "wrong" combinations as Dem get am-no. If a pidgin finally becomes the native language of a speech community (even by definition a creole language), it may expand...
A sample of his speech is: (6)

he was born in the New World.

master, even though he states that

pidginized kind of English to his boy

cant that the Negro, Toby, speaks a

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plantations in the Dutch colony of

New World by the end of the Sev-

teenth Century can be gathered

from the fact that it had even be-

come the language of the coastal

plantations in the Dutch colony of

Surinam (i.e., Dutch Guiana), in

South America. In an early descrip-

tion of that colony, the chapter on

the Negro ends with a sample conver-

sation in the local Negro English dia-

lect. The dialogue includes such sen-
	
tences as Me bella well “I am very

well”, You wantee siddown pinkin-

nin’? “Do you want to sit down for a

bit?”, and You wantee go walka longa

me? “Do you want to take a walk with

me?” (7) In these sentences, the

use of the enclitic vowel in wantee

recalls the same in DeFoe’s example

makee. Also, the speaker, like Toby,

uses me as a subject pronoun. In

the first Surinam sentence, we see

an early example of a construction

without any equivalent of the stand-

ard English verb “to be”. Toby also

would probably have said Me weary,

since the be in his first sentence was

in all likelihood a past-tense marker

(as it is in present-day West Afri-

can Pidgin English) — the sentence

therefore meaning “I was born in

Barbadoes”. In the last Surinam

sentence, a reflex of English along

is used with the meaning of standard

English “with”. It may or may not

be accidental that in the Gullah dia-

lect, spoken by the Negroes along

the South Carolina coastal plain, the

same phenomenon occurs, e.g.,

Eny you wantuh walk long me? “Do

you want to take a walk with me?”

Some Gullah speakers even still use

me as a subject pronoun, e.g., Me

kyaan bruk-um “I can’t break it”,

and enclitic final vowels seem to have

survived in such Gullah forms as

yerry, yiddy “to hear”.

Early examples of Negro dialect as

spoken in the American colonies show it to be strikingly similar to

that given by DeFoe for the West

Indies and by Herlein for Surinari.

In John Leacock’s play, The Fall of

British Tyranny (Philadelphia, 1776),

part of the conversation between a

certain “Kidnapper” and Cudjo, one

of a group of Virginia Negroes, goes

as follows: (8)

Kidnapper. . . . what part did you

come from?

Cudjo. Disse Trakk man, disse

one, disse one, disse one, come from

Hamton, disse one, disse one, come from

Nawfok, me come from Nawfok too.

Kidnapper. Very well, what was

your master’s name?

Cudjo. Me massa name Cun-

ey Tomasee.

Kidnapper. Colonel Thompson —

eigh?

Cudjo. Eas, massa, Cunney

Tomasee.

Kidnapper. Well then I’ll make you

a major — and what’s

your name?

Cudjo. Me massa cawra me

Cudjo.

Again, the enclitic vowels (e.g.,

disse) and the subject pronoun me

are prominent features of the Negro

dialect. In the sentence Me Massa

name Cunney Tomsee “My master’s

name is Colonel Thompson”, both

the verb “to be” and the standard Eng-

lish possessive suffix -s are absent.

Incidentally, Cudjo’s construction is

strikingly similar to sentences like

My sister name Mary which are used by many American Negroes to-
day.

One possible explanation why this

kind of pidginized English was so

widespread in the New World, with

widely separated varieties resem-

bling each other in so many ways, is

that it did not originate in the New

World as isolated and accidentally

similar instances of random pidgin-

ization, but rather originated as a

creole in the trade centers and slave

factories on the West Afri-

can coast. (9) It is likely that at

least some Africans already knew

this pidgin English when they came

to the New World, and that the

common colonial policy of mixing slaves of various tribal origins forced its

rapid adoption as a plantation lin-

gua franca.

In the course of the Eighteenth

Century, some significant changes

took place in the New World Negro

population, and these had their ef-

fect on language behavior. For one

thing, the number of Negroes born

in the New World came to exceed the

number of those brought over from

Africa. In the process, pidgin Eng-

lish became the creole mother-tongue

of the new generations, and in some

areas it has remained so to the pres-

tent day. (10)

In the British colonies, the cre-

ole English of the uneducated Ne-

groes and the English dialects of

both the educated and uneducated

whites were closely enough to each

other (at least in vocabulary) to al-

low the speakers of each to commu-

nicate, although they were still dif-

ferent enough so that the whites

could consider creole English to be

“broken” or “corrupt” English and

evidence, so many thought, of the

in Dutch orthography. I have retranscribed these sentences in the kind of spelling which his

English contemporaries would have used in order to

show better the relationship between the

Surinam dialect and the other examples. In the

Dutch spelling, these sentences appear as

My bella well “I am well”, and Ja wantee gaau wakke lange mi?

8. This citation also occurs in Kraep, and with others in Richard. Kidnapper. In Eighteenth-Century American Drama" American


9. See, for example, Basil Davidson, Black Mother: The Years of the African Slave Trade (Boston, Little, Brown and Co., 1961), particu-

larly p. 218.

10. In the West Indies, creole English is usually called patois, while in Surinam it is called Taki*Taki. In the United States, the only

usually called
mental limitations of the Negro. But in Surinam, where the European settlers spoke Dutch, creole English was regarded more objectively. In fact, no less than two language courses specifically designed to teach creole English to Dutch immigrants were published before the close of the Eighteenth Century. (11)

Another change which took place in the New World Negro population primarily during the course of the Eighteenth Century, was the social cleavage of the New World-born generations into underprivileged fieldhands (a continuation of the older, almost universal lot of the Negro slave) and privileged domestic servants. The difference in privilege usually meant, not freedom instead of bondage, but rather freedom from degrading kinds of labor, access to the "big house" with its comforts and "civilization", and proximity to the prestigious "quality" whites, with the opportunity to imitate their behavior (including their speech) and to wear their clothes. In some cases, privilege included the chance to get an education and, in a very few, access to wealth and freedom. In both the British colonies and the United States, Negroes belonging to the privileged group were soon able to acquire a more standard variety of English than the creole of the field hands, and those who managed to get a decent education became speakers of fully standard and often elegant English. This seems to have become the usual situation by the early 1800's, and remained so through the Civil War. In Caroline Gilman's Recollections of a Southern Matron (New York, 1838), the difference between field-hand creole and domestic servant dialect is evident in a comparison of the gardener's "He tief one sheep — he run away last week, cause de overseer gwine for flog him" with Dina's "'Souse me, mistress, I is getting hard o' hearing, and yes is more politer dan no" (page 254). A more striking contrast between the speech of educated and undereducated Negroes occurs in a novel written in the 1850's by an American Negro who had traveled extensively through the slave states. In Chapter XVII, part of the exchange between Henry, an educated Negro traveler, and an old "aunty" goes as follows: (12)

'Who was that old man who ran behind your master's horse?'
'Dat Nathan, my husband.'
'Do they treat him well, aunty?'
'No, chile, was an an' I's been sahin' God dis many day, fo yeh baun! Wen any on 'em in de house git sick, den da sen foh 'uncle Nathan' come pray foh dem; 'uncle Nathan' mighty good den!'

After the Civil War, with the abolition of slavery, the breakdown of the plantation system, and the steady increase in education for poor as well as affluent Negroes, the older field-hand creole English began to lose many of its creole characteristics, and take on more and more of the features of the local white dialects and of the written language. Yet, this process has not been just one way. For if it is true that the speech of American Negroes has been strongly influenced by the speech of whites with whom they came into contact, it is probably also true that the speech of many whites has been influenced in some ways by the speech of Negroes. (13)

Over the last two centuries, the proportion of American Negroes who speak a perfectly standard variety of English has risen from a small group of privileged house slaves and free Negroes to persons numbering in the hundreds of thousands, and perhaps even millions. Yet there is still a sizeable number of American Negroes — undoubtedly larger than the number of standard-speaking Negroes — whose speech may be radically non-standard. The non-standard features in the speech of such persons may be due in part to the influence of the non-standard dialects of whites with whom they or their ancestors have come in contact, but they also may be due to the survival of creolisms from the older Negro field-hand speech of the plantations. To insure their social mobility in modern American society, these non-standard speakers must undoubtedly be given a command of standard English; that point was made in the early part of this paper.

In studying non-standard Negro dialects and teaching standard English in terms of them, however, both the applied linguist and the language teacher must come to appreciate the fact that even if certain non-standard Negro dialect patterns do not resemble the dialect usage of American whites, or even those of the speakers of remote British dialects, they may nevertheless be as old as African and European settlement in the New World, and therefore quite widespread and well-established. On various occasions, I have pointed out that many speakers of non-standard American Negro dialects make a grammatical and semantic distinction by means of be, illustrated by such constructions as he busy "He is busy (momentarily)" or he workin' "he is working (right now)" as opposed to he be working "he is (habitually) busy" or he be workin' "he is working (steadily)", which the grammar of standard English is unable to make. (14) Even this distinction goes back well over a century. One observer in the 1830's noted a request by a slave for a permanent supply of soap as "(If) Missis only give we, we be so clean forever", while he is absent in a subsequent report of someone's temporary illness with "She got sick for a little while". (15)

Once educators who are concerned with the language problems of the disadvantaged come to realize that non-standard Negro dialects represent a historical tradition of this type, it is to be hoped that they will become less embarrassed by evidence that these dialects are very much alike throughout the country while different in many ways from the non-standard dialects of whites, less frustrated by failure to turn non-standard Negro dialect speakers into standard English speakers overnight, less impatient with the stubborn survival of Negro dialect features in the speech of even educated persons, and less zealous in proclaiming what is "right" and what is "wrong". If this happens, then applied linguists and educators will be able to communicate with each other, and both will be able to communicate with the non-standard-speaking Negro child. The problem will then be well on its way toward a solution.

11. These were Pieter van Dijk, Nieuwe en mosst bvovorens gzaende onderwijsinge in het Bastert Engels, of Neepeer Engels (Amsterdam, undated, but probably 1760), and G. C. Way-gandt, Gemeenwoordige leermijtje om het Bastert of Neeper Engels op een gealligatorsch wijze te leeren verstaen en spreken (Paramaribo, 1798).


