

The Origin of American Black English



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The Origin of American Black English

Be-Forms in the HOODOO Texts

Traute Ewers

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To my parents

Preface

In the past three decades hardly any linguistic topic has been discussed as emotionally as the status of Black English in the United States. The discussion revolves around two main issues, namely the historical origin of this variety and its relationship with American White English. The essential question is whether Black English is derived from a creole language or from British and American dialects.

Whereas the great majority of early publications on this variety represented the traditional dialect position, the creole theory received a strong impetus through the Black Power Movement in the 1960s. Arguments in favour of one or the other hypothesis have at times triggered polemical discussion in the United States in which socio-historical motives have always played a major part.

To shed some light on the diachronic development of Black English, it is necessary to take an unbiased approach, which I have endeavoured to do in this study. The investigation is concerned with the use of *be*-forms and is based on a collection of interviews carried out by the white priest Hyatt with black hoodoo doctors in the North and South of the United States in the 1930s and in 1970. It was only in the 1970s that these interviews were published in the five volumes of *Hoodoo - conjuration - witchcraft - rootwork*.

The corpus, which has hardly been drawn upon for linguistic research, offers the rare opportunity of studying linguistic change in real time. I shall argue that *a priori* assumptions of the creole and dialect theories have often led to circular reasoning and prevented an objective analysis of Black English. Therefore this variety should first of all be studied in its own right.

An earlier version of this book was accepted by the University of Giessen as my doctoral thesis. I am grateful to Prof W. Viereck, who suggested the topic to me, and to my advisors, Prof D. Stein and Prof A. Jucker, who constantly supported my studies. I also wish to thank Mouton de Gruyter and the editor of the series, Prof H. Wekker, for accepting this work for publication.

Among those who have given their advice and practical help in many different ways, I owe a special debt to the following: John Rickford for sending me unpublished papers of his own; Dr John Schleppendach for providing me with original recordings of the HOODOO interviews; Paul Hudson and Kathryn Khairi Taraki for helping to analyze the elusive forms of *be*₂; Günther Partosch for his invaluable advice on computer

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Lünen, 25 August 1995

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List of abbreviations

alab	=	Alabama
arka	=	Arkansas
BE	=	Black English
BEV	=	Black English Vernacular
<i>be</i> ₁	=	conjugated and zero forms of the copula
<i>be</i> ₂	=	invariant <i>be</i> (not derived from <i>will/would</i> + <i>be</i>)
<i>be</i> _{ww}	=	invariant <i>be</i> derived from <i>will/would</i> + <i>be</i>
EARLY	=	interviews carried out between 1936 and 1940 (HOODOO)
-ed	=	past participle
ex	=	existential <i>there/it</i>
flor	=	Florida
geor	=	Georgia
gn	=	<i>going to/gonna</i> (future operator)
HibE	=	Hiberno-English
HOODOO	=	<i>Hoodoo - conjuration - witchcraft - rootwork</i>
LAGS	=	<i>Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States</i>
LATE	=	interviews carried out in 1970 (HOODOO)
loc.	=	locative predicate
louis	=	Louisiana
ma/man	=	man
ncar	=	North Carolina
mary	=	Maryland
newyo	=	New York
NNE	=	Nonstandard Negro English
NP	=	full lexical noun phrase
OCP	=	Oxford Concordance Program
scar	=	South Carolina
StE	=	Standard English
tenn	=	Tennessee
VBE	=	Vernacular Black English
virg	=	Virginia
wash	=	Washington D.C.
wo/wom	=	woman
WPA	=	Work Projects Administration

1. Introduction

1.1. Discussion of the topic

Since the 1960s, numerous books and articles have been published on the speech of black Americans (Abrahams - Szwed 1975: 329). The discussion of Black English gave rise to "a much heated debate" in the 1960s and 1970s (Traugott 1979: 339) which revolved for the most part around two issues, namely the historical origin of this variety and its relationship with American White English.¹ As stated by Alleyne (1980: 7), "[t]hat there exist certain regular patterns of linguistic behavior among Blacks which do not occur at all, or which occur with much less frequency among Whites, is no longer a subject of scholarly controversy. The current problem is how to interpret these patterns."

In order to account for the differences which exist between Black and White English, various theories have been suggested, the most important of which are the creole and the dialect theories. Advocates of the former theory argue that Black English can be traced back to a creole substratum and an ultimately African origin and has a deep structure distinct from that of white speech. On the other hand, according to the dialectologists Black English is a dialect of English derived from southern white speech and British varieties.

Arguments in favour of one or the other hypothesis have at times triggered quite polemical discussions in the United States (see Dillard *et al.* 1979; Birmingham 1980: 335) in which political and sociological motives have always played a crucial role (see DeCamp 1971a: 33). As Schneider (1989: 1) puts it, "[t]he subject has had a history of its own, which has been determined to a large extent by social rather than linguistic issues. Ultimately, it was the civil rights movement and the social climate of the period that lead to its upsurge in the 1960s and to an excessively heated debate in the early 1970s."

Recently, the controversy over Black English has received further impetus through the claim that this variety has been diverging from White English during the last few decades (Labov - Harris 1986; Bailey - Maynor 1989).

In the present study I am mainly concerned with the origin of Black English and its development over a period of about 30 years, although I also deal with the divergence hypothesis. The corpus for this investigation

consists of selected interviews from the five volumes of *Hoodoo - conjuration - witchcraft - rootwork* (referred to as "HOODOO"). This is a collection of recordings made by the white priest Hyatt with almost exclusively black informants in several southern and northern states in the USA in the 1930s/1940s as well as in 1970. The overall aim is to find out whether the comparison of the early with the more recent speech samples (henceforth termed "EARLY" and "LATE" respectively) may help to provide answers to the questions mentioned above.

On the basis of the HOODOO corpus I will investigate the diachronic development of *be*-forms in Black English, i.e. conjugated and invariant forms of the copula. The form of the Black English copula has long been regarded as "one of the most striking features of this dialect" (Pfaff 1971: 6) and, accordingly, it ranks high in every list that enumerates typical features of this variety (see Fasold - Wolfram 1970: 66ff.; Labov 1970b: 13; Baratz 1973a: 144; Shores 1977: 178; Hedberg 1980: 216; Weber 1984: 420).

As claimed by Holm (1984: 291), the subtleties of the Black English copula even "lead us right to the heart of the question of BEV's [Black English Vernacular's, T.E.] identity and its relationship to standard American English." This is probably one of the reasons why "[n]o aspect of the speech of relatively uneducated blacks has received more attention in recent years than has their characteristic use of the verb *be*, especially the omission of the copula in the present tense ... and the use of the so-called 'invariant *be*' for repeated occurrence ..." (Dunlap 1977: 152).

Be-forms play a crucial role with regard to the creole hypothesis in particular (see Davis 1969: 333) because advocates of this theory argue that Black English and Standard English differ in their deep structures with regard to these forms (e.g. Loflin 1969: 90).

For a better understanding of the controversial discussion of Black English I will give a short survey of the dialect and creole theories. It is true that the language variety originally acquired by the black slaves was influenced by a great number of language-external factors, among others by the size of the plantation, the slaves' range of contact with whites, their occupation, their self-image, the geographical origin of the European colonists etc. (see Mintz 1971; Rickford 1977: 193-194; Alleyne 1980: 183ff.). In what follows I will not explicate these language-external factors, however. For a detailed account the reader is referred to other studies (e.g. Rickford 1986a; Schneider 1989: 23ff.; Lissewski 1991: 80ff.).

Before the 1960s, the great majority of articles on Black English represented the dialect position, i.e. it was held that all features of Black English could be explained on the basis of white dialects (Krapp 1924: 191; Johnson 1930: 354). The only difference recognized was the

somewhat more archaic nature of Black English as compared to the speech of whites because of the lower educational level of blacks (Kurath 1949: 6). Before the close ties between African languages and Gullah (a creole variety spoken in the coastal areas of South Carolina and Georgia and on the Sea Islands) were shown by Turner (1949) in his work *Africanisms in the Gullah dialect*, even this variety was traced back to British provincial speech (McDavid - McDavid 1951: 6-7). Thus, according to Krapp (1924: 193), in "vocabulary, in syntax and in pronunciation, practically all of the forms of Gullah can be explained on the basis of English". This complete denial of the black African heritage is what Herskovits (1941: 2) called the myth claiming that the "Negro is thus a man without a past".²

Pidgin and creole varieties only arise when certain conditions are met and in the case of Black English one of these conditions is that "blacks should have greatly outnumbered whites, thus having little contact with English speech models and being forced to use English almost exclusively for communication among themselves" (Schneider 1982: 18).

In the wake of Turner's publication in 1949, the dialectologists have generally regarded Gullah as an exceptional case because in the Gullah area the demographic situation, which has always been similar to that in the Caribbean, has led to the emergence of a creolized form of English. "The federal census for 1880 ... showed that Charleston County, which includes many of the Sea Islands, contained 30,922 whites and 71,868 blacks. In 1940, the Sea Islands communities still maintained a majority black population" (Jones-Jackson 1986: 63-64).

Thus the question is not "whether Gullah is a creole, but, rather, whether all the dialects spoken by American Blacks are so" (Davis 1969: 333). The dialectologists hold that in the rest of the United States outside the Gullah area a stable creole language did not arise because the composition of the population was different, i.e. the black-white ratio was much lower (see Viereck 1985: 561). If pidgin and creole varieties outside the Gullah area emerged, they were mostly short-lived and did not have a strong impact. Here blacks normally acquired the dialects spoken by their white masters and overseers.

The dialectologists claim that present-day differences between black and white speech are due to the fact that dialect traits have been preserved more strongly in Black English than in the speech of whites, because of social factors such as illiteracy, poverty and segregation (McDavid 1969: 87-88; Schneider 1982: 18). Moreover, blacks apply certain grammatical rules more freely than whites, for example the rules governing copula deletion (Mufwene 1992: 142).

Whereas the dialectologists regard Gullah as "an anomaly among black speech varieties in the United States because of a unique case of geographical and social isolation" (Wolfram - Clarke eds. 1971: X) the

creolists, on the other hand, consider it to be a bridge between non-creolized mainland Black English and Caribbean creoles (Wolfram - Clarke eds. 1971: X). In their opinion Gullah is similar to the so-called "Plantation Creole" that was spoken all over America from Nova Scotia to Jamaica and Surinam as late as the close of the eighteenth century (Dillard 1970-1971: 270; see also Dillard 1971a: 114; Mutt 1984: 92). Modern Black English was derived from this variety via the process of decreolization (Spears 1980: 171; see Viereck 1979: 21).

The creole hypothesis was first formulated by Dillard (1964 [1975]), Bailey (1965) and Stewart (1967 [1971]) and according to Bailey - Maynor (1987: 450), this theory is supported by the majority of scholars today. It can partly be understood as a counterreaction against condescending attitudes towards Black English, especially the opinion held by some dialectologists that "the Negro, being socially backward, has held on to many habits which the white world has left behind" (Krapp 1924: 191). The socio-political significance of the theory can be explained by the "yearning to find black roots in Africa" (Spears 1980: 175). One of the early statements of the creole theory reads as follows:

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 pidginized 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 creole language to succeeding generations of the New World Negroes, for whom it was their native tongue. (Stewart 1967 [1971]: 448)

Stewart (1967 [1971]: 450) hypothesizes that the kind of pidgin English brought to the New World originated in the slave factories on the West African coast which would provide an explanation for its uniformity in widely separated places in the New World. As a consequence of the abolition of slavery, the process of decreolization began after the Civil War (Stewart 1967 [1971]: 451-452; Mutt 1984: 92).

There is, however, some disagreement on the specific period in which decreolization is most likely to have started. Mufwene (1992: 152, note 15) for example argues in favour of the past fifty years on the grounds of increased upward social mobility whereas Wolfram (1990: 127) hypothesizes that it might have begun before the end of the Civil War. In any case, according to the creolist view even modern Black English is not yet totally decreolized and "still reflects fundamental linguistic differences from White English" (Smitherman 1984: 103). Fasold (1981: 185) maintains that Black English is possibly in a late postcreole stage.

In addition to the proponents of the creole theory there are some linguists who advocate a strong substratist position, which is an "extrapolation of the creolist view and claims that the grammar of AAE [African American English, T.E.] is ultimately related to common features of (West) African languages, on which Atlantic PCs [Atlantic pidgins and creoles, T.E.] themselves are grammatically based" (Mufwene 1992: 143).

Advocates of this view are Dalby and Dunn who regard, among others, certain *be*-forms in Black English as African survivals (Dalby 1971: 124-125, 1972: 186; Dunn 1976: 114). However, this strong substratist hypothesis will not be dealt with because it relies on sketchy linguistic evidence (for further comments see Mufwene 1992: 144, 157-158).

There are several authors who hold intermediate views different from both the strong dialect and creolist positions. As stated by Schneider (1982: 19), the controversy is complicated by the fact that from the beginning of black settlement the situation in the southern United States was not only marked by the dichotomy between dialect assimilation vs. creolization but that "there was an infinite number of intermediate stages between the two extremes" (see also Schneider 1990: 106).

Likewise, Cassidy (1986b: 35) cautions against assuming a uniform Plantation Creole throughout the United States:

In Virginia and Maryland, as has been shown, and on a much smaller scale in the Northern states ..., slaves were never as separate from the work and general life of their owners as in the South. Plantations or households were much smaller, and the numerical proportion of blacks to whites was never as high. Whether or not a creole language had been originally introduced, it could hardly have become established. The remnants of Creole that are found today in non-Gullah black speech could have come about in more than one way.

In his study *Comparative Afro-American* Alleyne (1980: 14) claims that it is still an open question of whether or not Black English has its historical origin in Gullah. In contrast to several creole languages, the historical linkage between this latter variety and West African languages is quite tenuous and "it is more valid to consider them as being related, typologically at least, to European mainstream forms" (Alleyne 1980: 18).

At the same time, Alleyne (1980: 183) puts forward the hypothesis that "intermediate varieties" such as Black English "derive from an underlying proto-dialect, a 'proto-intermediate' Afro-American. Hence, they were generated in the contact situation at a very early stage when some segments of the African population began to be assimilated by rigorous acculturative processes."

Similarly, Wolfram (1990: 127) calls for a relativization of the creole hypothesis in the light of new evidence concerning Black English: "The original overstatement of the Anglicist hypothesis, which creolists rightly argued against, is no excuse for overstating the creole hypothesis."

Finally, it should be pointed out that there is one group of linguists, among others the sociolinguists Labov, Wolfram and Fasold, which is primarily interested in the synchronic state of Black English and less in its historical origin (see Williams 1976: 9-10). They generally argue that Black English has grammatical rules distinct from those of White English, but that it can nevertheless be regarded as an English dialect (Lisewski 1991: 23; see Fasold 1970a: 237; Labov 1973a: 102).

The extent to which they acknowledge creole influences differs even in the publications of one and the same author (see Labov 1969 vs. Labov 1982b). These inconsistencies are probably due to the fact that their interests do not lie primarily in historical matters (see comments on Labov in Abrahams - Szwed 1975: 331; Baratz 1973a: 137-138). In order to avoid confusion, I will in general not refer to the sociolinguists as a separate group but subsume their views under the dialect or creole theories respectively.

The relationship between Black and White English involves two related but nevertheless separate issues, namely its history and present status (Dorrill 1986: 1). It is frequently suggested that if Black English differs from southern white speech this automatically means that Black English has a different deep structure and is thus derived from a creole (Bailey 1965: 172). As pointed out by Dorrill (1986: 2), however, the history and the present status of black-white speech relations are not necessarily interdependent.

The same point is made by Wolfram (1971: 142) who states that the synchronic features "distinct" and "similar" may be combined with the diachronic features "creole" and "dialect" in various ways, yielding four different possibilities. Thus present-day Black English can either have a creole origin and be distinct from White English or derive from British dialects and be similar to White English, which corresponds to the two "traditional" interpretations. Conversely,

[i]t is ... possible to maintain that Black speech was originally derived from British dialects but the social and geographical segregation patterns in the United States have resulted in speech differences between Whites and Blacks. On the other hand, one may hold that Black speech was originally derived from a Creole but has since merged with a southern variety of American speech so as to be nearly indistinguishable from it. (Wolfram 1971: 142)

The question of how to interpret present-day differences between black and white speech will be resumed in section 3.1.4. where the so-called divergence hypothesis will be discussed with regard to invariant *be*-forms. Interestingly enough, it is precisely these unconjugated forms of the copula that are most often referred to as being substantially different from corresponding forms in White English (see e.g. Fasold 1970a: 235).

The problems arising from the fact that supporters of the one or other theory have come up with different interpretations of the same data will become obvious in various parts of the present study. Fasold (1981: 165) holds that

[i]t is somewhat puzzling that reputable scholars should have arrived at such divergent conclusions on the two major issues of black-white speech relations. ... The reason there are such sharp disagreements on the difference issue has much to do, in my opinion, with methodology. Everyone has data, but the data have not been collected or analyzed in the same way.

In addition to the problems connected with synchronic and diachronic issues, there are three other factors that may condition different interpretations of empirical findings. These are the assumption of either dialect borrowing or inherent variability, the data basis and the extent to which statistical analyses are carried out.

The first of these methodological problems has to do with the fact that the occurrence of standard and nonstandard features in Black English is partly explained on the basis of variability by some linguists, but as a consequence of code-switching and dialect borrowing by the creolists (Pfaff 1971: 6).

Among others, the first approach is represented by Labov (1969) who regards variability as an integral part of the system regardless of the speech variety under study. The creolists' assumption of code-switching in its strongest form is exemplified by the following quotation in which Dillard (1971c: 397) comments upon the use of copula forms in Black English: "When the speaker of NNS [Nonstandard Negro English, T.E.] does produce overt copula (whether the same as the StE [Standard English, T.E.] form or, as in very many cases, a different form) in an 'unexposed' position, the simplest and indeed almost the only explanation - without violence to the grammatical system - is that of code switching, from NNS to StE."

It is obvious that Dillard's view is an *a priori* assumption that can neither be proven nor refuted by empirical findings and thus obviates linguistic research altogether. This strong version of code-switching is therefore not assumed in the present study. On the other hand, there is no denying the fact that black and white speech influence each other, which

means that Black English is not only affected by White English but also vice versa. This view is held by a great number of researchers (Meredith 1928-1929: 291; Stewart 1974: 16; Dunn 1976: 115-116; Rickford 1977: 211; Brandes - Brewer 1977: 62; Fasold 1981: 182-183).

It has to be noted, however, that for whites with extensive black contact the "phonological and lexical features of BEV [Black English Vernacular, T.E.] are far more accessible than the grammatical features" (Ash - Myhill 1986: 40). This does not apply to blacks who move in white circles because they "show a major shift in their grammar in the direction of the white norm" (Ash - Myhill 1986: 41). In the present study Labov's variable theory is regarded as the most suitable approach by means of which the dialect as well as the creole hypothesis can be tested (see discussion in 2.4.1.). By contrast, the assumption of code-switching would favour the creole hypothesis and thus preclude an unbiased analysis.

As pointed out by Fasold (1970a: 233) with regard to black-white speech relations, "[a]lmost any conceivable position on the subject can find its advocates" and one further reason for this is the relatively heterogeneous nature of the data basis (see Lisewski 1991: 28). Dialectologists frequently draw on atlas records and, as noted by the creolist Stewart (1968 [1973]: 64), this prevents them from perceiving structural differences between Black and White English because atlas material focuses on phonology and vocabulary whereas differences remain mostly in syntax (see section 2.3.1.).

The data basis used by many creolists is however equally inappropriate, because they frequently rely on the representation of literary dialects (Stewart 1967 [1971]; Dillard 1972a etc.). Dillard (1970-1971: 269) defends the use of these sources for the diachronic study of Black English on the grounds that literary representations are often more accurate than some scholars assume.

Thus he uses literary evidence in order to support his hypothesis of a uniform Plantation Creole and claims that "[t]he literary evidence, in summary, provides a clear picture of a continuum of eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century Black English from the American South to Nova Scotia, with no great break in such places as New York City, Boston and Connecticut - ..." (Dillard 1970-1971: 274). The fact that this kind of "evidence" is not comparable with "real language data" will be illustrated in 2.3.1.

Furthermore, the data basis used by some advocates of the creole theory is too small to warrant any definite conclusions. Bailey (1965) for example analyses the speech of only one literary character and Loflin (1967, 1969, 1970) draws on the speech of a single fourteen-year-old informant.

Finally, Rickford (1985) compares the speech of one black and one white speaker living in the Gullah area.

These examples may suffice to show that the number of speech samples is at times too limited. It is self-evident that conclusions drawn from a very small set of data are less well-founded and may deviate from results obtained from the much larger samples used by other authors, for example Labov *et al.* (1968), Wolfram (1969), Fasold (1972b), Rickford (1974), Baugh (1980), Schneider (1989) etc.

Although a number of studies comprise quantitative analyses and include statistical tests there are, on the other hand, a lot of authors who quote purely qualitative evidence. This applies equally to proponents of both theories, among others to Williamson (1970 [1971]) and Miller (1972) who advocate the dialect position, and to Bailey (1965), Stewart (1967 [1971]) and Brandes - Brewer (1977: 72-73) representing the creolist view.

It is of primary importance, however, to consider "not only *what* occurs and *where*, but *how often*" (Rickford 1986b: 39-40) and to "view the system of Black dialects as a whole" (Davis 1969: 337; see Dunlap 1977: 152). In the present study strong emphasis will therefore be placed on the quantitative interrelationship of different *be*-forms and their frequencies in certain linguistic environments.

Likewise, statistical tests are deemed necessary. Whereas Labov (1969: 731), who first used quantitative analysis in the study of Black English, still maintained that statistical tests are not required if certain patterns occur regularly, this attitude is not adopted here because "[s]ometimes ... results are not as clear as they at first seem to be; in fact, without statistical analysis, one often is left with mere impressions, and those impressions may or may not be valid" (Davis 1982: 83).

The present investigation is subdivided into five chapters which, besides the present section, comprise the following parts: in the second half of the introduction terminological issues are discussed, i.e. the use of "Black English", "Negro dialect" and related terms. In the second chapter, the HOODOO material will be described and compared with other corpora of Earlier Black English as to its linguistic reliability. Furthermore, that chapter includes the discussion of methodological issues. It is concerned, among others, with the study of language change and gives an account of the computer analysis applied.

Chapters three and four form the main part of the investigation and deal with the use of *be*-forms in the corpus and their diachronic development in the course of about 30 years, i.e. from the 1930s/1940s until 1970. This analysis includes the study of the so-called "invariant *be*" (chapter 3) and of full, contracted and zero forms of the copula in present and past

environments (chapter 4). In the conclusion a summary of the results will be given.

The major task will consist in ascertaining whether the use and distribution of *be*-forms provide evidence for or against the two origin hypotheses. For this purpose, the data supplied by HOODOO will be compared with the results of other studies of Earlier Black English as well as with investigations of present-day Black English, English-based creoles and White English. As pointed out by Viereck (1985: 567), an objective view is required in order to make a contribution to the origin debate: "Researchers must allow the data to change their preconceived notions rather than ignore or suppress portions of the evidence in order to keep them alive. Earlier research must be carefully reviewed and the views honestly presented."

In linguistic literature it is frequently stated that in order to find evidence for a particular hypothesis it is important to investigate the speech of elderly adults in the rural South, because this variety should be closest to possible creole roots. As claimed by Troike (1973: 7), "unless research is focused on older speakers today, any chance to directly attest shifts from earlier hypothesized stages will be lost, and reconstruction will continue to have to rely on inference from literary sources."

Research in this field, however, has long been neglected (Bailey - Maynor 1986: 2; Smith 1974b: 32) so that several authors complain about the "relative dearth of historical documentation on black English in all its forms" (Dalby 1972: 172). The present study is intended to provide insight into the nature of an earlier variety of Black English. Most of the speech samples are from the southern United States.

The study of language change on the basis of the two subcorpora will be of primary importance owing to my interest in diachronic matters. It should be noted that, regardless of whether Black English is derived from English dialects or from a creole, linguistic change is to be expected, i.e. either as a consequence of dialect levelling or of decreolization. When compared with dialect levelling, decreolization is likely to involve more radical grammatical changes, however, and a restructuring of the grammatical system.

The divergence debate, which has been discussed in the United States in recent years, will also be referred to in this context. If present-day black-white speech differences are indeed caused by an ongoing process of divergence and not by a creole origin of Black English, the investigation of the HOODOO material might help to find an answer to the question of when the divergence of black and white speech started.

Finally, some problems have to be pointed out which are encountered when establishing genetic relationships between different varieties. Although this can be attempted by drawing on internal and external

evidence, one has to remain aware that "a language can have elements derived from more than one source in such a way as to make a unique genetic classification impossible or arbitrary" (Alleyne 1980: 20-21). Similarly, the distinction between "borrowing" and "inherited stock" may at times be quite problematic (Alleyne 1980: 29).

These difficulties and a number of other methodological problems with regard to the study of linguistic variation in a "nonstandard" variety will become obvious in the course of this study. Despite certain linguistic criteria such as divergence from other dialects and similarity to creole languages that may be applied to check the possibility of former creolization, "[t]here are no hard and fast criteria by which the possibility of prior creolization can be assessed using linguistic data from a later period" (Rickford 1977: 194).

1.2. Terminology

Although there have been a great number of publications on the speech of Black Americans since the mid-1960s, there is still disagreement on the term to be used for this variety. One of the reasons for this is the fact that the subject of black race in America "is far from emotionally unloaded and the tension between white racism and black self-confidence is conspicuous in much of the writing up to the present day. This perspective is necessary if one is to understand the variety of terms used to designate the speech of American blacks, including some expressive coinages with varying connotations" (Schneider 1989: 8).

Examples of white racism even appear in linguistic literature (see Morse 1973: 839) and socio-cultural factors sometimes play a more important role than linguistic criteria.³ The following discussion concentrates on two aspects, firstly the terms "Nonstandard Negro English", "Black English" and related ones, and secondly the different meanings of "Vernacular".

As stated by several authors, certain extralinguistic factors exert an influence on the way Black Americans and their speech are referred to. Thus the use of the words "colored", "Negro", "black" and "Afro-American" ("African American") heavily depends on the age and educational background of the speaker. Furthermore, various public opinion polls reveal that the preference for specific designations is in a state of flux.

[T]erms that were once considered offensive are now acceptable (e.g., *black*) and terms that previously had polite connotations, to whites and blacks alike, are now highly offensive to a majority of ASD/VAAC [American Slave Descendants, Vernacular African American Culture, T.E.] (e.g., *colored*). ... "Blacks are clear on terms they believe are negative - like *nigger* and *colored*." Positive terms, however, are another matter. These changes are dynamic and usually take time because they originate within the vernacular culture. (Baugh 1991: 137)

According to a survey carried out in 1968 among black students in Dallas, Texas, and other speakers in East Texas, elderly speakers prefer "colored", whereas middle-aged persons tend to use "Negro" and high-school students "black" (Troike 1973: 7).⁴ This result is confirmed by Rafky (1970: 32): "Age is the situational cue most often mentioned by the black professors. A lecturer in education from the Northwest ... states, 'If they're over 30, I use *Negro* - but if they're under 30, I call them *blacks*.'"

Although a Gallup Poll conducted at the end of the sixties showed that a relative majority of black interviewees still used the term "Negro" (38%), 20% "colored", only 19% preferred "black" and 10% "Afro-American"; "black" nevertheless seemed to be gaining ground because this designation was given priority by people in the North of the USA, higher income groups and young people (Gester 1971: 54; Rafky 1970: 34). This trend was also supported by the news media (Rafky 1970: 34).

Some of these terms have undergone semantic changes in the course of time.⁵ In the 19th century, "colored" was the prevailing racial label used by abolitionist leaders and it continued to be the preferred term until the beginning of the 20th century (Smitherman 1991: 119-120). Its negative connotation can be traced back to its use as a means of carrying out segregation by the white population in former times, and today it seems to be regarded as "out of time" (Gester 1971: 54-55).

At the turn of the century, a shift away from "colored" to "Negro" began and subsequently the campaign for the capitalization of the latter (Smitherman 1991: 120). "Negro" was used "during the Civil War and Reconstruction periods by black men defiantly asserting their racial pride and, more recently, by black and white moderates" (Rafky 1970: 34). The reason for the present-day negative connotation of "Negro" is the fact that the word was originally imposed by the Anglo-Saxons and is thus associated with slavery (Gester 1971: 55).

By contrast, the term "black" has adopted a positive meaning, mainly due to the Black Revolution. For a long time "dark-skinned Americans regarded the term [*black*] as racist" (Rafky 1970: 30) because, as pointed out by Woodson (1933: 195) in the 1930s, "[h]ere in America, ..., we are ashamed of being black". This did not change before the mid-1960s. At

that time, however, when the doctrine of Black Power had been proclaimed by Stokeley Carmichael in Greenwood, Mississippi, the term began to be seen as a means of expressing racial pride on the part of the blacks (Rafky 1970: 30; Smitherman 1991: 121).

The major disadvantage of "black", namely its use as a synonym for "dirty", "evil", "threatening" etc. in the English language, is counterbalanced by the production of positive associations, for example in "Black is beautiful" and "Black Power" (Gester 1971: 59, 61).⁶

The fourth term mentioned above, "Afro-American", has been employed particularly by the more militant blacks since the 1960s (Johnson 1972: 149). At present, however, a growing number of blacks take offence at this abbreviated term (see Baugh 1991: 135; Smitherman 1991: 131) and advocate "African American" instead. According to a public opinion survey conducted in five cities in 1989 one can conclude that "at least one-third of African Americans are in favor of the name change and that such support is seemingly strongest among African American youth, particularly those in college" (Smitherman 1991: 128).

This designation owes its growing popularity above all to Reverend Jesse Jackson, who (among others) called for its adoption in late 1988 on the grounds that in contrast to "black" it refers to the cultural heritage of African Americans (Smitherman 1991: 115).

When referring to the speech of black people the following compound expressions can be found in other publications on this subject: "Negro Dialect", "Nonstandard Negro English" (the traditional terms), "Negro English", "American Negro Speech", "(nonstandard) Black English", "Black Dialect", "Black Folk Speech", "black language", "Afro-American English" and several others. In addition to this confusion about terminology, there is even some disagreement on spelling because "words like *dialect* and *speech* are sometimes capitalized and sometimes not" (Stewart 1971: 126).

As stated by several authors, some of these designations have various disadvantages. "Negro Dialect" in particular is strongly criticized, for example by Bragdon (1974: 265) who calls this term "the most objectionable of all", because it brings about associations with the language of slaves and also because of the inferior connotation of "dialect" (see Dillard 1972a: 190-191).

Stewart (1971: 126) shares this opinion, but he points out that the negative connotation of "dialect" applies only to popular usage and, strictly speaking, not to its application as a technical term. The drawback of terms containing "language" as a second element is that they imply that "Blacks speak something other than the English language" (Bragdon 1974: 266).

Thus all compounds with the elements "Negro", "dialect" and "language" do not appear to be eligible candidates for a neutral designation of the speech of black Americans. The same applies to expressions containing "African American". Although this term is gaining more and more acceptance, it will not be employed because its use could be interpreted as presupposing the African origin of Black English and thus favouring the creolist position.

Other designations that do not appear to be appropriate are those Schneider (1989: 9) calls "self-coined labels, to which some expressive functions may be explicitly ascribed" and which are mainly used by black authors. As examples he gives "Ghettoese", "Blackese", "Black Idiom", "Ebonics", "Black Amerenglish", and "Black street speech".

The term that is most widely used today is "Black English", which according to Cohen (1952: 282) was first mentioned in the South Carolina Gazette in 1734. In the writings of some authors, the switchover from more traditional terms to the new "Black" compounds can be clearly observed. Stewart (1966 [1975]) for example, who still talks about "Negroes", "Negro speech" and "Negro dialect" in an article published in 1966, uses "Black folk speech", "black language" and "black dialect" five years later (Stewart 1971).

In addition to the controversy over the terms that are used for the speech variety under study, there is at least as much disagreement on what Black English actually refers to. Some definitions of this "remarkably imprecise term" (Spears 1980: 170-171; see also Sommer 1980: 290) are predominantly speaker-based, others are feature-based and frequently both criteria are incorporated.

The two main criteria for the speaker-based definitions of Black English are ethnic and social in nature. As to the ethnic component, it is important to point out that Black English is neither spoken by all blacks in the United States (see Baratz 1973: 145) nor is it restricted to this ethnic group.

On the one hand, "the speech community may consist of members of other races as well, if they have extensive language contact with blacks" (Schneider 1989: 4), for example Puerto Ricans in Harlem (see Labov *et al.* 1968). On the other hand, ethnic affiliation may be taken in its widest possible sense; this is done by the creolist Dalby (1970-1971: 292) who understands by Black English the forms used by "speakers of Black African or partly Black African origin".

Thus Dalby uses the expression as a kind of blanket term because he includes not only the English variety spoken by blacks in the United States, but also English-based creoles in the Caribbean. Since this broad interpretation, which is restricted to creolists, makes it impossible to

distinguish between English creoles and Black English in the narrow sense, however, it will not be adopted here.

The final point which needs to be made about ethnicity is that as a speaker variable it cannot usually be isolated from social class. Because migrant populations are frequently recruited as low-paid workers, they tend in many countries to cluster in the poor areas of inner cities near to their workplaces, and to be concentrated in low-status occupations. (Milroy 1987: 104)

Black English is normally seen as "the speech of the socioeconomically lower class of the black population" (Schneider 1989: 5), but some authors also regard it as the "lect of a large number of working- and nonworking-class Blacks" (Williams 1976: 24). Such a definition, however, does not help to solve the problem. Therefore it is anything but astonishing that the estimates as to how many people speak Black English differ as well (see Fine - Anderson - Eckles 1979: 22); Dillard (1975: 9) for instance talks of about 18 to 20 million speakers from the lower classes.

Since Black English is usually restricted to the speech of socially disadvantaged groups, it is considered to be nonstandard English (hence the traditional designation "Nonstandard Negro English") and recognizably different from White English, although Labov (1973a: 102) holds that "the differences between nonstandard black speech and standard English are slight compared to their similarities".

As a consequence of this social restriction, some black speakers are, from a linguistic point of view, not speakers of Black English. Some authors find it regrettable that "the term 'Black English' should have been identified solely with non-standard speech patterns" (Troike 1973: 7) and that Standard English in the Black community has not been defined although it is clearly identifiable as black (Troike 1973: 7; see also Labov 1972a: 288).

This is also the reason why Black English is sometimes referred to as a misleading term (Weber 1984: 419) and why some linguists speak of "Standard Black English": "[I]t is reasonable to claim that there are a number of Standard Englishes, not only regional varieties such as British versus American, but also ethnic, as, for example, Anglo versus Black; there is considerable evidence that a Standard Black English is currently developing, as used by congressmen and writers, as well as by a large number of teachers" (Traugott 1976: 63).

Another possibility proposed by Rickford (1974: 111) would be to modify the term "Black English" depending on which variety in the continuum one has in mind: one could refer to "basilectal", "mesolectal" and "acrolectal" Black English where necessary.

As to the feature-based definitions of Black English, it is important to realize that some differences between Black and White English are qualitative, but others are merely quantitative in nature (see Fine - Anderson - Eckles 1979: 22; Stewart 1966 [1975]: 62-63). Still other features are exactly the same as in White English.

Since the linguistic system we call Black English is on a continuum of American English social dialects, it will be easier to define it in terms of its features than in terms of its speakers. A linguistic feature is a feature of Black English if, at a given structural point, it appears in the speech of working-class black people in contrast to a corresponding feature of Standard English. A linguistic feature is technically also a feature of Black English if it appears in both dialects at a structural point where there is no contrast. Black English, then, is a construct containing all the features of these two types defined above and only these. (Fasold 1969: 763)

Baratz (1973a: 139-140) points out that it is hardly possible to provide a definite answer to the question of when (i.e. at what point along a frequency rating for nonstandard forms) it is appropriate to refer to an individual as a speaker of Black English.

This discussion provides sufficient evidence to show the complexity of the problem. The controversy over terminological issues is succinctly expressed by McDavid (1973: 23) who states that Black English "has other names, but the meaning is the same". According to Sprauve (1976: 46), there is no agreement on what Black English is and in his opinion some authors simply elude the problem of defining Black English by supplying merely data, whereas others prefer the term "vernacular".

The vernacular denotes "publicly unrecognized and institutionally stigmatized language varieties" (Milroy 1987: 58) and it implies two distinct dimensions, namely a stylistic and a social one. On the one hand, it is equivalent to the speech variety used by speakers from "the lower end of the socioeconomic scale" (Cheshire 1982: 6), and on the other hand, it is a spontaneous speech style where as little attention as possible is paid to speech and which is located "at the extreme informal end of the stylistic continuum" (Cheshire 1982: 7). When combining these two aspects one could regard the most casual speech of working-class people as "the vernacular style of 'the vernacular'" (Cheshire 1982: 7).

Labov (1972b: 112) applies only the stylistic interpretation and explicitly states that the vernacular style is not restricted to illiterate lower-class speech, but can be found in any social group. He considers the vernacular to be the most appropriate basis for linguistic analysis because it is the style most regular in its structure. According to Labov (1972a: XIII), this uniformity in grammar is "found in its most consistent form in

the speech of black youth from 8 to 19 years old who participate fully in the street culture of the inner cities", but the vernacular is also used in the casual speech of many adults.

Since in Labov's opinion the term "Black English" should be applied to the whole range of different language forms used by blacks including the creole grammar of Gullah as well as literary styles, this term is very imprecise and liable to create misunderstandings (Labov 1972a: XIII). Therefore he refers only to the unambiguous "Black English Vernacular" (BEV).

As to the appropriateness of Black English Vernacular for linguistic studies, it is sometimes held "that the Labovian linear concept of style is oversimplistic" (Cheshire 1982: 7). But in general it is an undisputed fact that variation is extremely consistent in this style. Another important advantage is that hypercorrections are eliminated by the lack of monitoring.

Harrison (1976: 192), who applies the stylistic interpretation of 'vernacular', claims that "most varieties of Black English are best characterised as vernaculars". This contention, however, is doubtful because there are different styles in Black English with varying degrees of formality, and especially in interview situations the language use probably differs from the speech variety used at home (see discussion of interview situation in 2.2.1.).⁷

In this study the term "Black English" is therefore considered to be more appropriate than "vernacular". When referring to the interviews carried out in the 1930s/1940s I will use the term "Earlier Black English" (see also informant selection in 2.4.2.). This designation has been adopted from Schneider, who prefers it to "Early Black English" coined by Brewer (and used by some scholars as a synonym of "Plantation Creole", for example by Birmingham 1980: 337) because the speech variety under study is "not an early one in an absolute sense but - more importantly - representative of a stage in the development of Black English prior to the present one" (Schneider 1989: 53).

As will be pointed out in 2.3.2., the speech of the HOODOO informants interviewed in the 1930/1940s does not date as far back as the one spoken by the ex-slaves on which Schneider's study is based. For the sake of convenience, however, there will not be any further modification of the term.

Although the term "Black English" has some drawbacks and Labov (1972a: XIII) claims that it "implies a dichotomy between Standard English on the one hand and black English on the other", it does not have the emotive overtones of some other terms, for example "Nonstandard Negro English" (Wolfram 1969: X), and is accepted by most authors today. "We will use the term Black English, both to avoid the negative

connotations of words like 'sub-standard', 'dialect', and 'non-standard' and to take advantage of the current use of the term 'black' as a positive term of racial identity" (Fasold 1969: 763).

2. The HOODOO texts as corpus

2.1. General background and description

The material for the five volumes of *Hoodoo - conjuration - witchcraft - rootwork* was collected by Harry Middleton Hyatt under the Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation in the 1930s/1940s and in 1970. The first two volumes were published in 1970, the third and fourth in 1973 and 1974 respectively and finally, the fifth book appeared in 1978. HOODOO is concerned exclusively with "witchcraft and allied magic practice" (Hyatt 1970, 1: I) and is referred to as "one of the most extraordinary folklore odysseys" (DeCaro 1974: 29).

Hyatt conducted interviews with 1,605 black people and one white man from 1936 until 1940. This early material makes up volumes I to IV and the first part of volume V, amounting to nearly 4,500 pages. Later in 1970, Hyatt returned to St. Petersburg in Florida and interviewed another 14 people, i.e. 13 blacks and one white schoolteacher. This new material comprises 262 pages and constitutes the second part of volume V.

In contrast to the 1970 material which is presented in the form of complete interviews, the interviews before World War II are mostly broken up and the individual portions distributed according to subject matter, for example "folk medicine", "ghostlore" or "time and hoodoo spell". Out of a total of 1,606 interviews conducted between 1936 and 1940, only 119 interviews are not broken up (the latter are published in volumes II and III).

Whereas the early interviews were recorded with Ediphone and Telediphone cylinders, the first recording devices, Hyatt used a cassette recorder in 1970. The latter recordings have been preserved; nearly all the early recordings, however, were thrown away after transcriptions had been made:

The storage problem must have been immense, with boxes and boxes of unwieldy, fragile cylinders. Since all of them had been transcribed and the transcriptions retained, Hyatt saw no reason to keep the original recordings. Now he refers to the act as "that great crime of mine," adding, "I think that's the reason I went to Florida when I was seventy-five, to show that I could do the work, that I had done the work." Needless to say, all the cassettes from his 1970 expedition to Florida have been retained, locked in a safe-deposit box in a Quincy bank. (Bell 1979: 25)

From the early material, only one set of recordings has been preserved, namely the interview with the root doctor Lindsay whom Hyatt interviewed in 1937 (published in Hyatt 1970, 2: 933-948). This sample and some of the recordings made in 1970 have been made available to me by J. Schleppenbach from Quincy University.

In 1970, fieldwork was confined to one locality, i.e. St. Petersburg in Florida. To the early material, however, the following applies: "[T]he present study - ... - covers a wide geographical area; from New York City south through Florida; west across the Gulf of Mexico to Mobile, New Orleans and Algiers; and north up the Mississippi River to Vicksburg, Memphis and Little Rock" (Hyatt 1970, 1: I).

On the whole, the fieldwork before 1940 includes 13 states, namely New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, Washington D.C., North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Florida. Some more differences between the older and new material will be discussed in 2.2.2.

As to the informants, it has already been mentioned that in the 1930s/1940s and in 1970, Hyatt restricted his studies to black people, apart from one exception in both cases. In the introductions to the five volumes of HOODOO he gives several reasons for this. One of the main arguments is supplied in the following remark: "I would limit my subject matter ... and confine my informants to black people. ... (3) I theorized that blacks, with less educational opportunities than whites, would preserve more witchcraft traditions and current practices" (Hyatt 1973, 3: XIV).

Thus in Hyatt's opinion, hoodoo practices are more common among blacks than in white communities. This, however, does not mean that whites do not believe in witchcraft at all. As Hyatt puts it, "superstition influences the mind regardless of race, nationality or creed" (Hyatt 1970, 1: IV).

Furthermore, Hyatt mentions personal and economic reasons that made a decision in favour of either blacks or whites necessary. "I wanted to collect down the Atlantic Coast so that my wife could be with me occasionally ... and this meant Southern States" (Hyatt 1973, 3: XIV). In 1936, however, it would have been impossible to work among blacks and whites simultaneously in the South (Hyatt 1970, 1: XV, Hyatt 1973, 3: XIV).

Besides, there were economic constraints that forced him to confine himself to either blacks or whites: "[T]he beginning of World War II and gasoline rationing prevented me from working separately among white people" (Hyatt 1970, 1: II). A particular advantage about working with blacks is *"their special concentration in or near cities, or in country*

districts" (Hyatt 1973, 3: XV), this being an important factor in times of petrol rationing.

2.2. Linguistic value

2.2.1. The interview situation

Two factors that play an important role with regard to the interview situation are the observer's paradox and the impact of racial bias on the informants' speech. The term "observer's paradox" was introduced into sociolinguistics by Labov (1970a: 47): "We are then left with the *Observer's Paradox*: the aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain this data by systematic observation."

Since the aim of linguistic studies is to record unmonitored speech, it is necessary to find ways to alleviate the problem of the observer's paradox. Possible solutions could be certain types of questions that encourage the emotional involvement of the informant (Chambers - Trudgill 1980: 59; Brown - Fraser 1979: 43), natural peer-group interaction (Labov 1972b: 115), rapid anonymous observations, and participant-observation on the part of the field worker (see also Milroy 1987: 64). "As the outsider gradually becomes an insider, the quality of the speech obtained and the speaker's involvement in it rises steadily. A field worker who stays outside his subject, and deals with it as a mere excuse for eliciting language, will get very little for his pains" (Labov 1972b: 114).

In HOODOO, Hyatt is primarily concerned with hoodoo and folklore and not with the speech of his informants. Furthermore, the purpose of his studies is not concealed from his informants whenever they are interested in it.

And how did I answer when informants asked me what I was doing? I merely stated the truth - that I was writing a book about hoodoo, and I let their imaginations fill in the rest. I am sure that most believed I was a hoodoo man who was writing another *how-to-do-it* book, ... I did not wear my clericals, and it was fine with me if they saw me as the *mystery man*. Certainly, such an identity matched the situation well: I also found myself pitted against *mystery men* and *mystery women* ... (Hyatt 1978, 5: IV)

In this context it is quite revealing that Hyatt himself is frequently taken to be a white hoodoo doctor by his informants and sometimes not even his contact man knows that in reality he is a preacher (Hyatt 1970, 1: XXXV). Hyatt can almost be seen as a colleague for these "strange theologians of hoodoo" (DeCaro 1974: 35). Since Hyatt is therefore a kind of participant-observer not even interested particularly in linguistic matters, one condition for alleviating the problem of the observer's paradox is fulfilled (see Fasold 1969: 765).

In this respect, the corpus is comparable with material used for linguistic research by Dubois - Crouch (1975: 293) who state that they "were fortunate enough to have tape recordings of a recent small professional meeting, which fits the criterion of authenticity, since the meeting was not staged for purposes of analyzing speech. It was only after the fact that we decided to use the tapes for linguistic research."

The informants were thus unlikely to direct their speech toward the superordinate dialect, i.e. in the case under study toward White English as spoken by Hyatt, so that there was probably no "subordinate shift" (see Labov 1972b: 111).

Another point in favour of the corpus relates to the topic of the conversations. As noted above, certain themes encouraging emotional involvement may help to reduce the attention paid to speech. Some of these mentioned in other publications are for example danger of death, interaction between the sexes, moral indignation, local issues, and gossip (Labov 1972b: 114).

The topics touched upon in HOODOO include "much supernatural lore, on ghosts, witchriding, spirit lights, pacts with the devil, jack-o'-lanterns" (DeCaro 1974: 32-33) as well as sexual rites (Hyatt 1973, 3: XV). It is easy to imagine that this kind of subject matter promotes an emotional atmosphere all the more so because the black arts, i.e. witchcraft, are often considered to be an underworld activity (Hyatt 1978, 5: IV).

This is probably part of what Harrison (1976: 193) has in mind when she refers to topics that cannot be talked about in a formal style and are thus conducive to eliciting the vernacular. Harrison (1976: 194) also points out that for this purpose it is favourable "when the informant discusses subjects not in direct response to questions asked by the interviewer", a phenomenon that can frequently be observed in HOODOO.

Several of Hyatt's informants give rambling replies with occasional outbursts of rhetoric and digress from the topic so that Hyatt (1970, 2: 1328) remarks several times that he is quite glad when they come back to the original question. Another important factor is the employment of a local black contact man, which makes it easier to include local issues and gossip.