JANUA LINGUARUM

STUDIA MEMORIAE NICOLAI VAN WIJK DEDICATA

edenda curat

C. H. VAN SCHOONEVELD

Indiana University

Series Practica, 191

A SEGMENTAL PHONOLOGY OF BLACK ENGLISH

by

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1975

MOUTON

THE HAGUE · PARIS

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Mouton & Co. N.V., Publishers, The Hague
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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 72-94483

Printed in Hungary

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The present study was conceived and begun in 1966–67 while I was Project Linguist with the Urban Language Study of the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C. To the Director of the Center, Charles A. Ferguson, the Director of the Urban Language Study, Joey L. Dillard, and the Coordinator of Linguists of the Urban Language Study, Marvin D. Loflin, I owe a profound debt of gratitude for providing a free and provocative environment within which to work.

The first draft of this work was completed during the summer of 1969 and the second draft during the winter of 1970. I wish to express my heartfelt appreciation to Charles W. Kreidler for his comments on the first draft which resulted in numerous improvements.

To Frances Lamberts and Wendy Uncles I am grateful for graciously volunteering to assist in the preparation of the typescripts.

No study exists *in vacuo*, least of all the following. My debt to Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle and the handful of researchers on Black English, especially William Labov and William A. Stewart, is pervasive. To Marvin D. Loflin, however, I owe much of my intellectual independence and inspiration. Without his initiative, encouragement, and sincere devotion to the pursuit of truth, this study would never have seen the light of day.

Last but not least, I wish to thank my principal informant for his unbounded patience and tolerance during the 500 hours of elicitation which provided the empirical foundations upon which this study rests. It is to him that this study is gratefully and respectfully dedicated.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments 5
I Introduction 9
II Dialectology in Generative Grammar 21
III Segment Structure Conditions 32
IV Sequence Structure Conditions 44
V Phonology of the Word 59
VI Phonology of Inflection 73
VII Phonology of Derivation 80
VIII Conclusion 87
Bibliography 90
Index of Names 92
Index of Citation Forms 93
Index of Subjects 99

I

INTRODUCTION

0. SUMMARY

In Section 1 I state the purpose of the present study. Section 2 supplies background information relevant to the present study and details several shortcomings inherent in the approach adopted. Section 3 provides a summary statement of the theoretical framework within which the study is written. Section 4 contains a brief discussion of field procedures, stressing the importance of systematic elicitation to the construction of a generative grammar. Section 5 is a review of the literature related to the phonology of Black English and a statement of the major differences between previous conclusions and those presented in this study. The final section is a statement of the way in which the present study is organized.

1. PURPOSE

The purpose of the present study is both empirical and theoretical. On the one hand, I present a description of the segmental phonology of a dialect of English spoken by Black adolescents in the District of Columbia. On the other, I attempt to contribute to the development of phonological and dialectological theory by providing some basis for specifying the ways in which the dialect under investigation differs phonologically from Standard English. In addition, I hope that the results of this study will prove useful to those interested in preparing pedagogical materials for the teaching of Standard English as a second dialect[1].

2. BACKGROUND

The data for this study were collected over a ten month period in 1966–67 while I was Project Linguist with the Urban Language Study of the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C.[2]. The principal informant was a fourteen-year-old

[1] *Cf.* Luelsdorff (1970).

[2] The data elicited support a much broader study than the present work.

male native resident of Washington who turned fifteen during the course of the elicitation. Some of the results of the study are generalizable to the speech of other Blacks in the Washington area and in Delaware and New York.

The scope of the study and the theoretical framework in which it is written (transformational grammar) necessitated working in depth with one informant over a protracted period of time. Several shortcomings are inherent in this kind of approach.

First of all, working with only one principal informant leaves the problem of the extent to which the analysis is generalizable to other portions of the Black community an open question. In this regard, I can only hope that future research will contribute to our understanding of the nature and extent of interpersonal variation in Black speech.

Second, it became apparent during the course of this investigation that variant pronunciations existed in the speech of the principal informant for what were intuitively felt by him to be one and the same words. This phenomenon of intrapersonal variation emerged only after an attempt lasting several months to encourage the informant to speak with me as naturally and uninhibitedly as he would with his family and friends. Although it is difficult to assess the extent to which this attempt was successful, the large number of doublets elicited testifies to some measure of success. Typically, the informant described one of the pronunciations as the way he would speak when talking with family and friends and the other as the way he would speak when talking with teachers and strangers. I labeled (unoriginally) the former pronunciation 'casual' and the latter 'careful'. In the vast majority of cases, careful pronunciation corresponds to Standard English.

Third, in view of the length of the period of elicitation coupled with the informant's daily exposure to Standard English, it was expected that the informant's speech patterns would change in the direction of more formal Standard English. I attempted to cope with this dynamic situation by the process of socialization mentioned above and by a preliminary survey of the segmental phonology in which some of the major dialect variants were noted. One of the most obvious changes was the articulation of preconsonantal and word-final *r*'s in a dialect which, at the outset of the study, was *r*-less.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is written within the theoretical framework of generative phonology. Of the descriptions of the form and substance of generative phonology, those of Chomsky and Halle (1968), McCawley (1968), Stanley (1967, 1968), and Zwicky (1965) are among the best.

A generative phonology is a set of rules which are divided into three subgroups according to their function[3]. The first of these subgroups contains redundancy condi-

[3] Chomsky & Halle (1968) discuss the necessity of a fourth group of rules, called "readjustment rules".

tions[4] which function to specify redundant feature specifications in phonological segments on the basis of feature information contained within those segments and feature information contained within surrounding segments. The first type of redundancy condition is called a 'segment structure condition' and the second a 'sequence structure condition'. On the basis of the information that a vowel is Back and High, for example, it is possible to predict that it will also be Rounded. Since this prediction depends exclusively upon information contained within the same phonological segment, it is an example of a segment structure condition. Alternatively, if a morpheme begins with two consonants followed by a liquid, it is possible to specify that the first consonant will be *s*. Since this rule requires feature information in surrounding segments for its proper operation, it is an example of a sequence structure condition.

The second subgroup of rules consists of phonological rules which function to assign stress and to add, delete, and rearrange phonological segments. Stress rules depend upon syntactic information for their proper operation and apply cyclically, first to the innermost constituents of the utterance. The labeled brackets surrounding the innermost constituent are then erased and the rules reapply to the next innermost constituent, etc. In some variety of Standard English, for example, there is a Compound Stress Rule which assigns primary stress in nouns to a primary-stressed vowel preceding a vowel with primary stress. All monosyllables are assigned primary stress and, by convention, when a vowel in a constituent is assigned primary stress, the stresses on all other vowels are reduced by one. Thus, $(_N(_A\text{black})_A(_N\overset{1}{\text{board}})_N)_N$ remains unaltered by the rules during the first pass through the cycle, and the innermost brackets are erased yielding $(_N\overset{1}{\text{black}}\ \overset{1}{\text{board}})_N$. During the second cycle, primary stress is assigned to the first primary-stressed vowel by the Compound Stress Rule, yielding $(_N\overset{1}{\text{black}}\ \overset{2}{\text{board}})_N$. Similarly, the noun phrase $(_{NP}(_A\text{black})_A(_N\overset{1}{\text{board}})_N)_{NP}$ remains unaltered during the first pass through the cycle, and the innermost brackets are erased yielding $(_{NP}\overset{1}{\text{black}}\ \overset{1}{\text{board}})_{NP}$. During the second pass through the cycle, primary stress is assigned by the Nuclear Stress Rule to the second primary-stressed vowel yielding $(_{NP}\overset{2}{\text{black}}\ \overset{1}{\text{board}})_{NP}$. The second type of phonological rule is illustrated by the rule which deletes the vowel of the plural ending *-ez* in the environment of a preceding segment which is not both Coronal and Strident[5].

All the features (excluding Stress) in the redundancy conditions and phonological rules are binary in that they are assigned either the coefficient '+' or the coefficient '−'. It is the function of the third subgroup of rules to convert these binary features into integers representing different degrees of the presence of the feature in question.

[4] Stanley (1967, 1968) places the redundancy rules in the lexicon.

[5] *Cf.* Luelsdorff (1969) for a discussion and justification of this rule.