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Bare nouns in African American English (AAE)

Arthur K. Spears

Bare count (and mass) nouns, defined as nouns with no determiner or number suffix, occur in African American English, a partially restructured, noncreole language. It is noteworthy that bare nouns in AAE may take definite and generic interpretations. Bare nouns with definite interpretations were previously believed to occur in creoles outside the Americas only. However, these bare nouns occur in Palenquero, a creole spoken in Columbia. Bare nouns with generic interpretations are common across creoles but, interestingly, do not occur in non-African American dialects of English in the U.S. Bare count nouns with a definite interpretation are limited to subject position in finite sentences. This suggests that the bare noun may in fact contain a null determiner bound by a possibly null sentence topic, as might be the case in some creole languages. However, this analysis does not hold for a bare singular in the scope of negation. In such cases, we could assume that the null determiner is bound by a NEG/existential operator.

1. Introduction

In this chapter¹ I will present some remarks on bare nouns in AAE.² Although I have made a distinction between African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and African American standard³ English (AASE), (e.g. Spears 1988), I will disregard the distinction

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1. This chapter is an elaboration of Spears (2004).
 2. Also see Green (this volume) for a syntactic and semantic study of bare NPs in aspectual *be* constructions in African American English.
 3. The word *standard* is usually not capitalized, even when it is used to name a variety of language, because the variety is not the property of a group with an established social identity.

Although standards are commonly considered as attaching to regional groups among others, they are not usually associated with specific ethnic (or racial) groups, e.g. African Americans. The term AASE implies that at least in the case of African Americans, there is a standard variety that satisfies the conditions for standardness and also has distinctive grammatical traits associated

for the purposes of this chapter, unless some grammatical explanation of the examples is required. Otherwise, I will simply use the term AAE.⁴

My principal goal is to bring out the differences between, on the one hand, AAE and, on the other, non-African American dialects of English, i.e. other dialects of English (ODE), the latter having had no significant influence from West African or creole languages. Examples of dialects in the latter category would be those of the British Isles and non-African American dialects in the U.S.

2. African American English

As noted in the introduction, AAE has two subvarieties: AASE and AAVE, a distinction I set aside in this discussion (see above). Holm (2003) has classified AAE as partially restructured. This is to say that it has undergone restructuring but significantly less than languages traditionally referred to as creoles (e.g. Jamaican and Guyanese). The term *restructuring* refers to “all structural modifications that a lexifier language undergoes in the selection and evolution of new linguistic elements, influenced by other, competing languages, in a contact situation” (Neumann-Holzschuh and Schneider, 2000: 6). Simply for convenience,⁵ I will use the term *semi-creole* in reference to AAE below and to refer to any language such as AAE, which may be viewed as partially restructured, not restructured as much as most creoles, both in its genesis and its development historically. We have to be careful to distinguish when the partial restructuring may have occurred (see Mufwene 2001). Clearly, it is very difficult to talk about partially restructured languages of the African diaspora in the Americas as opposed to more or “fully” restructured ones. Let it be clear that the term *semi-creole* here simply refers to the less restructured end of a continuum or cline, which includes some varieties of languages traditionally labeled creoles (e.g. some varieties of Trinidadian and Barbadian Creole English).

with this ethnic group. The conditions for standardness are essentially negative: not having certain grammatical features considered nonstandard, e.g. multiple negatives, *ain't* use, and double modals, as in *We might could do that*. Distinctively African American grammatical features occurring in AASE are mostly undiscussed in grammatical literature, and so fall beneath the radar of those who might want to label them as nonstandard due to their being distinctively African American.

4. Some speakers who typically use AASE occasionally use a bare noun in a definite sense. Some AASE speakers never do. When any speaker uses bare nouns with a definite sense, s/he can be considered to be speaking AAVE, as, for example, when a speaker uses *ain't* or multiple negatives. This observation would, of course, raise a number of questions in the mind of a quantitative sociolinguist, but space does not permit dealing with them here.

5. It's less cumbersome than *partially restructured language* and no less precise than it or other terms used in basically the same sense (e.g. *creoloid*).

AAE is of interest for creole studies because it has grammatical (not simply lexical) features that can be classified as Africanisms (features whose source can be traced to West African languages). An example is the semi-auxiliary⁶ *come* (Spears 1980, 1982, 1990), which is found in the West African language Bambara (and probably others), and in at least the following creoles: Haitian, Jamaican, and Guyanese (Spears, to appear).⁷ It occurs too in Surinamese Dutch (de Kleine 1999). AAE is of interest also because it has grammatical features that can be classified as creolisms, e.g. associative *them*⁸ *the semi-auxiliary come* (a creolism and Africanism, as a number of creolisms are); and serial-like verb constructions⁹ (Spears, in preparation).

6. Use of the term *semi-auxiliary* has become established in identifying this item in AAE grammar; it has become its name, so to speak, since the first journal article appeared that treated it (Spears, 1982). *Semi-auxiliary* was originally used because this *come* appeared too different from both main verbs and auxiliaries to be called either one. Clearly, how it is labeled depends on the theoretical framework one uses. This said, I will point out that it differs from main verbs in that

- a. it cannot occur in compound verbal constructions, e.g. *be* + *V+ing*, *will be* *V+ ing*, *have* *V+ed*, *AUX V+ing*, etc.
- b. it does not inflect: **coming*, *comes*, etc. (except in some special cases that need not detain us here)
- c. it takes a present participle complement, as the progressive auxiliary *be* (which complement cannot be elided as can that of progressive *be*)

It also has properties that distinguish it from both *AUX* in non-AAE varieties and a third constituent type that exists in AAE but not in non-AAE that is “verb-like.” There has been almost no syntactic investigation of this third category, discussion of it would take us away from the focus of this chapter.

7. Some examples:

AAE:

He COME coming in here actin a damn fool
 ‘He had the nerve to come in here acting [like] a damn fool.’

Guyanese:

kom shee out diiz jii sii ii peepos, giv os chrii shiits ov peepo, an lef do
 COME hand out these GCE papers gave us three sheets of paper, and left the
 room.
 room.

‘She had the nerve to hand out...?’

(Rickford 1987: 616)

Jamaican:

Di gyal kom kom kaal mi fuul.
 The girl COME come calling me a fool
 ‘The girl had the nerve to come calling me a fool.’
 (Pauline Christie, personal communication)

3. AAE & U.S. Creoles

AAE forms a continuum with creoles indigenous to the U.S. I state this based on personal experience. It may be noted that the well-known AAE scholar William Stewart concurred with the view of the contemporary U.S. [cited personal communication in Holm 1983: 314]. Kautzsch and Schneider (2000) make a corresponding but more refined observation for earlier AAVE in the state of South Carolina. Their take on the matter is that “the varieties of earlier AAVE in South Carolina as recorded in the ex-slave narratives can be accounted for by the concept of ‘differential creolization’, the assumption that the amount of creolization to be observed in the sub-areas of the state correlates with the density of the black population proportion in the period after Emancipation” (Kautzsch and Schneider 2000: 271). They state further that “the grammar of coastal speakers is predominantly creole and that of the inland speakers is predominantly non-creole, but that of the speakers from the intermediate region, still part of the coastal plains, has turned out to be less strongly creole than would have been anticipated” (Kautzsch & Schneider 2000: 271). In other words, there is a comparatively greater thinning out of creole features going from the coastal to the intermediate area than in going from the intermediate to the inland area.¹⁰ Their work indicates that the continuum in South Carolina (it still exists) is not new. It is plausible that the continuum in other areas is not recent either, that it is not, e.g. the result of language change in the 20th century or the post-World War II period.

There are at least two grammatically distinguishable mainland English-lexifier creole varieties: Gullah and Afro-Seminole (Holm 1989: 479). However, the grammatical distance between them, so to speak, is certainly less than what one finds among most English-lexifier Caribbean creoles.

Haitian:

Pa vin di m anyen sou fè manje.

NEG COME tell 1sg nothing about make cook

‘Darn it! Don’t tell me how to cook.

(Elisée St. Preux, personal communication)

8. Example:

John an them [or ‘em] left this morning.

‘John and his friends/family/gang, etc. left this morning.’ (There’s no one good term to use in translating associative *them*.)

9. Those having three or more bare verbs in sequence:

Hurry come go walk to the store with me.

Rush run come go take this to Grandma.

(ODE’s would break up the sequence with one or two *ands*, if indeed so many bare verbs were used in a simple sentence at all.)

10. They duly address the difficulty of making firm claims about what is and is not a creole grammatical feature. The reader is referred to their work for further discussion.

In the creole speech of Florida today, there may also be a creole variety distinguishable from Afro-Seminole and Gullah – indeed a Bahamian creole, given the back and forth of Afro-Seminoles, Gullahs, other African Americans, and Bahamians between the Bahamas and the U.S. mainland. There are pockets of Bahamian descendants in Florida, for example, whose speech falls along a creole/AAVE continuum. This statement is based on my own observations. Research is required to determine whether the creole end of this continuum can usefully be distinguished from Gullah, which has historically influenced Bahamian (Holm 1983) and, perhaps, to a lesser extent been influenced by Bahamian.

Of course, Bahamian (i.e. in the Bahamas), Gullah, and Afro-Seminole are quite close; and, Bahamian and Gullah, at least grammatically, share more with one another than they do with other English-lexifier Caribbean creoles. Moreover, Afro-Seminole is an offshoot of Gullah (Holm 1989: 495). Bahamian is in most respects an offshoot of Gullah too. “In many respects the ‘mother country’ of the Bahamas was actually the North American mainland...” (Holm 1989: 489).

4. Source of data

For this chapter, I am using my own grammatical intuitions as a native speaker of AAE, born in the U.S. My family and ancestors, my clan¹¹ – to use the anthropological term, are without exception, for the past one hundred and fifty years or so at least, members of the largest language group in the African American community, that which speaks AAE. In other words, none of my family has Caribbean (and possibly, creole language) connections. No one in my family except me lives in a part of the country where there is a significant Caribbean population, so Caribbean creole (or West African creole, for that matter) language influence is quite out of the question.

Overwhelmingly, African American (AA) communities are multi-class, as were and are the communities in which my family lives/d. Note also the high level of residential segregation by race that marks U.S. residential areas. The great majority of AAs live in racially segregated AA communities. The communities in which I and the rest of my family of my age were raised were rigidly segregated – and multi-class. Thus, we spoke, unavoidably, a variety of AAE. In my family’s case, it was a standard AAE, but we were in constant, everyday contact with vernacular (i.e. nonstandard) varieties of AAE (AAVE). We are all capable of speaking a somewhat acrolectal¹² AAVE, but do not normally do so owing to social factors.

11. It is indeed a clan, since I am speaking of a once unilocal extended family that has recently dispersed. The clan, as it happens, is a collection of relatives descended from a nineteenth century ancestor (actually, there are paternal and maternal clans). The presence of Native Americans and European-Americans (whites) in African American family histories is common and is of no consequence for this discussion.

12. That which is close to the standard.

Thus, the data I present in this chapter contain sentences that I normally would not speak, but am perfectly capable of speaking and that I do use on occasions, e.g. when socializing briefly with AAVE speakers or when in a social situation where it is to my advantage to speak AAVE.¹³ Furthermore, since I live in Harlem (New York City), I hear daily even the most basilectal varieties of AAVE. Harlem is a kaleidoscope of AA class groups, not to mention other groupings based on identities such as regional ones. New York City's population density and the use of public transportation allow one to hear many kinds of speech daily.

5. AAE bare nouns and creoles

AAE is often compared to Atlantic creole languages (e.g. Jamaican, Barbadian, and Trinidadian), primarily because of hypotheses on its origins that relate it to creole languages (see Holm 2000; Holm 2003; Wolfram & Thomas 2002, for discussions) and because AAE has creolisms (see the discussion below).

The most interesting feature of AAE bare nouns, that is, those without determiners or a plural suffix, is that

- A. count nouns may take definite and generic interpretations, which is not the case in ODE.
- B. mass nouns may also take definite interpretations, which is not the case in ODE.

The following examples in (1) illustrate A, and those in (2) illustrate B:

- (1) a. (The) **dog** got fleas. (AAE) (Count, Definite)¹⁴
'The dog's got fleas.'
- b. **Dog** ain't got no sense. (AAE) (Count, Generic)
'Dogs don't have any sense/ A dog doesn't have any sense.'
- (2) (The) **butter** you bought is good! (AAE) (Mass, Definite)

Of interest in relation to creole languages are two facts involving the differences mentioned above between AAE and ODE:

- C. AAE bare nouns (count and mass) may take a definite interpretation. Among Western Hemisphere creoles, this is the case in Palenquero¹⁵ alone, (Schwegler and Green, to appear; Schwegler, this volume), although this trait is found in several West African creoles.

13. E.g. in conflict-prone ones, where AAVE implies the ability to defend oneself, verbally and physically.

14. Optional elements are in parentheses. Nouns of interest are in boldface.

15. Palenquero is a Spanish-lexified creole spoken in Colombia.

- D. AAE bare nouns may take a generic interpretation (as in 1b). This is typically the case in creole languages. (E.g. Haitian Creole: *Lè revèt fè dans li, li pa envite poul* ‘When cockroaches/a cockroach give/gives a party, they/he don’t/doesn’t invite chickens’.)

Concerning C, note that as recently as a few years ago, it was claimed that definite bare nouns do not exist in Atlantic creoles, although they do in non-Atlantic ones, for example, Tok Pisin and Nubi (Holm 2000: 214). It should also be pointed out that such bare nouns are found in African Portuguese-lexifier creoles in West Africa (see Baptista, Kihm, Alexandre & Hagemeyer, and Kihm in this volume). Schwegler (2002), Schwegler (this volume) and Schwegler and Green (to appear) show that bare nouns in Palenquero may take a definite interpretation depending on pragmatic context. Observe the following example with its possible translations:

- (3) *Pelo asé ndrumi mucho*
 Dog HABITUAL sleep much
 ‘The dog sleeps a lot.’ (Singular, Definite)
 ‘There’s a dog that sleeps a lot.’ (Singular, Indefinite)
 ‘Dogs sleep a lot.’ (Generic)
 ‘The dogs sleep a lot.’ (Plural, Definite)
 ‘Some dogs sleeps a lot.’ (Plural, Indefinite)
 (Example from Schwegler 2002; author’s translations)

As Schwegler and Green (to appear) elaborate,

...[Palenquero] can and generally does signal number and “±definite” in nouns via *un* (singular indefinite), \emptyset (singular definite), *un ma* (plural indefinite), and *ma* ‘plural definite’. But the use of these articles is conditioned not by grammatical but discourse pragmatic principles, i.e. the need to disambiguate number and ±definiteness. (Schwegler and Green to appear: 40)

Thus, the Palenquero bare noun may contextually be interpreted as singular (definite or indefinite) or plural (definite or indefinite) as well as generic. This follows from Schwegler’s and Green’s discussion and Schwegler’s observations (this volume).

Consequently, certain behaviors of AAE bare nouns are like those of creoles (even if not all). I use the term **creolism** for grammatical features

- that are unlike anything found in a creole’s lexifier language (or ODE, in the case of AAE; in some cases, the features may be found in ODE, but their presence can most likely be attributed to contact with AAE)
- but that are like features found in some, if not all, Atlantic¹⁶ creoles.

16. The reference group of creoles in this chapter is Atlantic creoles. It is much less revealing to speak of all the languages that have been traditionally labeled creoles in using the locution “grammatical features found in some creoles, if not all.”

Lists of creolisms that accord with this characterization can be found in Schneider 1990; Kautzsch and Schneider 2000; and Spears, in preparation.¹⁷

My use of the term *creolism* does not imply that AAE has its origins in one or more creoles. The creolisms in AAE, I might add, are not enough to reasonably classify AAE as a creole language. This is to say that languages that are commonly classified as creoles have significantly more creolisms (i.e. traits distinguishing them from their European lexifiers but shared with at least some other creoles). Additionally, my use of the term *creolism* does not imply that all creole languages form a typological class (McWhorter 1998, 2001a, and 2001b; Mufwene 1997, 2001). It simply recognizes that there are features found in a number of *Atlantic* creoles (not all creoles that have been traditionally labeled as such) that are not found in their European language lexifiers.

6. The semantics of bare nouns

6.1 Determiners in AAE and ODE

It is well known that ODE, as well as AAE, have bare singular mass nouns (e.g. *butter* and *salt*) and plural nouns with no determiner, interpreted as indefinite (e.g. *tables*). Note the use of determiners in ODE, as shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Use of determiners to express definiteness in ODE – Count Nouns

Singular nouns		Plural nouns	
Definite	Indefinite	Definite	Indefinite
The N	a(n) N	the N+PL	N+PL

Examples would be, from left to right, *the car*, *a car* (*an apple*), *the cars*, and *cars*. Of course, mass nouns normally occur only without a determiner and normally do not

17. However, not every single item in those lists is a creolism in this sense: e.g. *don*, the perfect tense/aspect marker, which occurs in a number of English varieties with no connection to creoles (e.g. Ozark American English). Also, some traits are limited to intentionally (as opposed to extensionally) definable creole subgroups, e.g. the postposed articles of French-lexifier creoles: e.g. Haitian *gason-an*, 'boy-DET' = 'the boy'.

Note finally that any definition of *creolism* will ultimately run into problems because this language set is still not strictly defined, grammatically or otherwise, pace McWhorter (1998). Even his later remarks on creole typology fail to mark off the set of languages that have commonly been labeled creoles. Any creolist can come up with a structural definition of creole languages that will define a subset of the languages commonly called creoles. At this point in our understanding, we can only hope to narrow down as much as possible what we are talking about and rely on the forbearance of the reader until our knowledge of contact languages expands significantly.

occur as plural, the notable exception being when one refers to more than one kind, e.g. *all the cheeses sold at the supermarket*. AAE is different in that it has count nouns that are singular and bare.

6.2 Plurality

Plurality must be marked in the following AAE sentences, as in ODE, but the definite article is optional under a definite interpretation:

- (4) A: You got too many suits!
 B: (Yeah, but (the) **suits** I got are all good. (Plural, Definite)
 A: Yeah, but you don't even have a chance to wear them all.
 B: Well, (the) **suits** still good, so I'm gonna (= going to) keep them. (Plural, Definite)

In line with the statement just made, the following example is ungrammatical:

- (5) *Yeah, but **suit** I got are all good. (Plural, Definite)

In other words, for a noun to be definite and plural, it must be marked with the plural.

Since AAE bare count nouns, as in some creoles, can take a definite interpretation, even though this is impossible in other English varieties, it is reasonable tentatively to classify this feature as a creolism. In any case, the occurrence of definite bare count nouns in Atlantic creoles and in an Atlantic semi-creole forces us to reformulate our views of the grammars of Atlantic creoles and semi-creoles.

6.3 Optionality, definiteness, and number

The examples thus far underlie the following claims concerning AAE (see A–D above):

- E. Optionality of the determiner – the definite article is optional with bare nouns taking a definite interpretation; see the examples in (1) and (2).
 F. Number – bare nouns may take a singular definite interpretation (see (1a) and below), while determinerless plural nouns may be indefinite, as in ODE, or definite, *unlike* ODE; see examples in (4). Bare nouns cannot be interpreted as definite *and* plural; see example (5).
 G. Definiteness – in AAE, *unlike* ODE, the definite article is not required to express definiteness; see E and F. (This is another way of stating A and B.)

6.4 Specificity

Going further, I can point out the behavior of AAE bare nouns with respect to specificity. By *specificity* is meant denotation by the speaker of an entity or a group that has already been uniquely identified and distinguished from all other entities inside and

outside of the class of entities to which it belongs.¹⁸ Example (1a), repeated here as (1a)', which is also SPECIFIC, shows that a bare noun may be specific.

- (1) a.' (The) **dog** got fleas. (Count, Definite, Specific)

Plural nouns, with or without the definite article, may be specific, as shown in the examples in (4) above. *Suits* is Specific in those examples. Also note that in (4), even if *suits* were not modified, it could still be interpreted as specific and definite.

Thus,

- H. Specificity – in AAE, *unlike* ODE, bare nouns may be specific (see the examples referenced in the immediately preceding discussion).

6.5 Tense

None of these interpretations are affected by tense. This is shown in the examples in (6) and (7). In (6), the bare nouns are definite and specific. In (7), it is generic.

- (6) a. (The) **Norwegian** gonna ['is going to'] marry Betty. (Definite, Specific)
 b. (The) **dog** barkin like he crazy. (Definite, Specific)
 c. **Cop** ('policeman') was telling them what to do. (Definite, SPecific)
 d. **Cop** told them what to do. (Definite, Specific)
 e. (The) **man** always act crazy. (Definite, Specific)
- (7) (A) little **dog** fight more than a big one. (Generic)

Thus, we have I:

- I. Tense – The interpretation of bare nouns is not affected by tense.

6.6 Genericity

The examples in (8) illustrate J:

- (8) a. White man don't want you to have nothing. (Generic)¹⁹
 b. Pretty woman ain't nothing but trouble. (Generic)
 c. Black woman got it hard. (The black woman has a hard time in life.)
 (Generic)
 d. Cow eat grass. (Generic) (This sentence shows 3sg verbal -s absence. See also example in (1b)).

18. This definition, which does not make critical use of the notion of presupposed existence, handles cases of specificity in embedded clauses of "world-changing" verbs (such as *dream*), e.g. *Last night, I dreamt that I married a unicorn*. In this example, the unicorn is not presupposed by the speaker ever to have existed.

19. In practice, bare noun generics are often used to talk about racial and gender issues, but they are certainly not limited to such discussions.

- J. Genericity - Bare nouns may be specific, but they may also be generic, i.e. quantifying over all denotated entities (or more accurately in the case of mass nouns, all instances of a substance), i.e. the extension of the noun. (The same is true with definite article generics such as *the tiger*, e.g. *The tiger is a carnivore*, which also takes nongeneric interpretations. An example of the latter would be where *the tiger* designates a type, as in *The tiger is found in India*. Obviously, not all tigers are found in India.) Determinerless plural nouns, in AAE as in ODE, may also be interpreted as generic, e.g. *Tigers are carnivores*.²⁰

6.7 Summary – interpretation of bare nouns

Table 2 shows the possible interpretations of count nouns in AAE, indicating among other things that all five forms of the count noun may contextually express specificity and genericity.

Table 2. Forms and possible interpretations of count nouns in AAE

	Singular count nouns			Plural count nouns	
	The N	A(N) N	N (bare noun)	The N+PL	N+PL
Definite	+	–	+	+	+
Indef.	–	+	–	–	+
Specific	+	+	+	+	+
Generic	+	+	+	+	+

A summary of the same information for mass nouns is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Forms and possible interpretations of mass nouns in AAE

	Singular mass nouns			Plural mass nouns	
	The N	A(N) N	N (bare noun)	The N+PL	N+PL
Definite	+	–	+ [†]	+ ^{††}	+
Indef.	–	+	–	–	+ ^{†††}
Specific	+	–	+ [†]	+ ^{††}	+
Generic	–	–	+	–	–

[†]e.g. *Last night we had cheese and gumbo, and, man, I tell you, **cheese** was good! **Gumbo** didn't taste like nothing.* (Specific and Definite)

^{††}Meaning 'types' only, e.g. *The **cheeses** I got are more like brie and camembert.*

^{†††}Meaning 'types' only, e.g. *At the gourmet store, **cheeses** are a better buy than wines.*

20. In standard ODE, singular nouns with the definite article (e.g. *the tiger*; *the tiger is a carnivore*) having a generic interpretation are rarer than determinerless plural-marked generics (e.g. *tigers*; *tigers are carnivores*). The former are somewhat bookish, for one thing, and have a more restricted use. Singular nouns with the indefinite article can also be used as a type of generic, e.g. *A dog is a canine just like a wolf.*

The comparison of AAE with ODE can be made explicit by pointing out that, as implied by the preceding discussion, ODE do not have bare nouns. Thus, Tables 3 and 4, showing the facts for ODE, would have no bare nouns column.

7. Bare nouns and sentential position

Bare nouns whose formal and semantic behavior does not conform to that of ODE, discussed above, occur freely in tensed clause subject position. They do not occur in other argument positions (Examples 9a–c). Thus, the bare noun phenomena under discussion occur freely in subject position in conjoined clauses (Examples 9d, e), and tensed complements (9g, h) but not in untensed complements, e.g. *want*, in (9f), which is highly questionable. The nouns in question in the following examples are to be interpreted as definite.

- (9) a. *Yeah, I saw **man** you know.
 b. *Give it to **woman** upstairs.
 c. *I saw him with **car** I want.
 d. Dog is dead, but **man** got out alive.
 e. **Man** left, and **woman** did too.
 f. ??I want **dog** next door to stop messin around in my yard.
 g. I know **man** ain't got no sense.
 h. I told him **man** ain't got no sense.

Curiously, the sentences in (10) are acceptable, and they both have objects of negated verbs.

- (10) a. I didn't see woman nowhere.
 b. I ain't found bucket nowhere.
 (Both *ain't* and *didn't* can be used for negating the Simple Past in AAVE.)

The behavior may be relatable to the fact that crosslinguistically, noun complements of negated verbs are sometimes treated differently (morphosyntactically) from those of their non-negated verb counterparts. For examples, in the following French example, the object noun in the affirmative sentence has the indefinite article *une*, while that in the negative has the preposition *de*:

- (11) a. J'ai vu **une** femme dans la salle. 'I saw a woman in the room.'
 b. Je n'ai pas vu **de** femme dans la salle. 'I didn't see a woman in the room.'

An interesting generalization emerges from the data in (9) and (10). It seems that a bare singular noun is definite only in the subject position of a finite sentence. This could suggest that the bare noun may in fact contain a null determiner bound by a possibly null sentence topic, as might be the case in some creole languages. It is interesting that this solution does not hold for a bare singular in the scope of negation.

Then, we could assume that the null determiner is bound by a NEG/existential operator in such cases.²¹

8. Conclusion

The preceding observations raise a number of points. One is the possibility that there are dialects of AAE unknown to me in which bare nouns occur in a wider range of sentential contexts, conceivably some for which the proviso concerning sentential context is unnecessary. This possibility should be pursued in further research.

Given the partially restructured nature of AAE, we could expect its grammatical subsystems to be different in distinct ways from both ODE and creoles, and this is true. This point about the partially restructured nature of AAE is all the more important in view of the fact that there are other varieties of European languages in the Americas (as opposed to creoles) showing the phenomenon of bare nouns taking definite interpretations and probably taking an array of interpretations similar to those treated above (see Green, 1997 on nonstandard Dominican Spanish and Melo 1997 on Brazilian nonstandard varieties). This observation strongly suggests that creolists should make the study of partially restructured languages, “semi-creoles,” or whatever one wishes to call them, a central feature of the creole studies agenda. Indeed, this group of languages, including AAE and other African-language-influenced varieties of European languages (again, as opposed to “creoles”) including Cuban and Dominican vernacular Spanish, vernacular Brazilian Portuguese, and Surinamese Dutch²² (de Kleine 1999) should be studied with reference to each other, to creoles, and other languages falling within the purview of language contact studies.

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21. I am indebted to Jacqueline Guéron for clarifying these possibilities.

22. Afrikaans could certainly be included here, even though for sociopolitical reasons it is not considered a variety of Dutch and it has some non-African substrate influences.

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