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UNSTRESSED *BEEN*:

PAST AND PRESENT IN AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH

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**ABSTRACT:** Unstressed *bin* is the African American English (AAE) verbal form occurring in sentences such as *I bin paid that bill last week* ‘I paid that bill last week’. Contrary to what has been claimed in much of the literature, unstressed *bin* does exist in the grammars of some contemporary AAE varieties. Unstressed *bin* occurs in many clausal environments where it can be mistaken for stressed *BIN*, which is not always stressed, and the past participle *been*, which in many English varieties, AAE and other, may occur with the preceding form of the auxiliary *have* deleted, e.g., *I Ø been at their house many times* ‘I’ve been at their house many times’. Complicating matters is unstressed *bin*’s occurrence in the homophonous *I bin at their house many times* ‘I was at their house many times’ and ‘I’ve been at their house many times’. The concept of **MERGING** labels this process, whereby AAE forms such as *bin* occur in identical syntactic environments with homophonous but grammatically distinct forms, creating a type of grammatical camouflage. More important, merging is part of a larger process of **MAINSTREAMING**, whereby one language variety, AAE in this case, converges qualitatively and quantitatively over time toward a sociopolitically dominant language variety or cluster thereof. The notion of mainstreaming avoids problems with the notion often used in creole studies, decreolization, which can obscure fundamental events in the genesis and evolution of AAE. Recognition of the grammatical status of unstressed *bin*, along with the consideration of other heretofore undiscussed or little discussed AAE forms with creole language counterparts, prompts a call for revisiting the question of whether AAE may have U.S. mainland creole origins.

**KEYWORDS:** stressed *been*, perfect tense, decreolization, mainstreaming, merging, grammatical camouflage

**ONE GOAL OF THIS ARTICLE** is to solidify our knowledge of the African American English (AAE) verbal auxiliary that I will refer to as unstressed *bin* (or simply *bin*). Unstressed *bin* is unquestionably a feature of some contemporary varieties of AAE. I wish to point out ways in which a better understanding of the grammar of *bin*—as distinct from stressed *BIN* (or simply *BIN*), a closely related form that has often been discussed in conjunction with *bin*—can provide

new ways of thinking about AAE history.

Before discussing goals in more detail, some basic information has to be presented. The two forms in question are exemplified in examples (1) and (2). Note that *bin*, in (2), has a wider occurrence as it also occurs as an auxiliary and with stative and active predicates, as shown in later examples.

1. STRESSED *BIN*<sup>1</sup>
  - a. *He BIN married.*<sup>2</sup> [Stressed *BIN*]  
'He's been married a long time and still is married.'
  - b. \**He BIN married a long time.*
2. UNSTRESSED *bin*
  - a. Copular  
*He bin married.*  
'He was married.'
  - b. Simple Past  
*He bin paid that bill.*  
'He paid that bill.'
  - c. Present Perfect  
*He bin married a long time.*  
'He has been married...'
  - d. Past Perfect  
*He bin married five years when I met him.*  
'He had been married...'

As noted, *BIN* has a constraint against adverbials occurring in the same clause, as in (1b). Unstressed *bin* is not similarly constrained for adverbials, as in (2b)–(2d).

A number of thorny issues emerge in identifying unstressed *bin* and stressed *BIN* because the two forms can indeed be confused with each other and also with the past participle, *been* used in Standard American English as perfect participles (*have* + VPPL), passive (*be* + VPPL) and a combination of perfect with other verbs, auxiliaries, and complements, as in (3).

3. STANDARD PARTICIPLE USE OF *be* (Standard English)  
*He's/has been...*
  - a. ...*married.* [perfect + copula quasi-passive]
  - b. ...*working.* [perfect + progressive]
  - c. ...*sick.* [perfect + copula + adjective]
  - d. ...*at the store.* [perfect + copula + prepositional phrase]
  - e. ...*what you think he is.* [perfect + copula + free relative clause]

The first reason for possible confusion of *bin* and *BIN* is that stressed *BIN* is not always stressed. (See the remarks below on pitch and tone as related to *BIN*.) As a result, in some writings *bin* was discussed in sections devoted to *BIN*. This led, for example, in Fasold (1981, 171), to an instance of *bin* being misclassified as *BIN*. Note that although this example was not glossed by Fasold, I would gloss it as shown in (4a) and (4b).

4. *You won't get your dues that you been paid.*
  - a. Present Perfect  
'You won't get your dues that you've paid.'

b. Simple Past

‘You won’t get your dues that you paid.’

[“uttered in an account of what happens when one leaves a club one has belonged to”;  
Fasold 1981, 171]

*BIN* is highly constrained from occurring outside of main clauses, especially in relative clauses. This and the fact that *bin paid* can be glossed with *paid*, a Simple Past (4b), make it basically impossible to take *been* in this example as stressed *BIN*. (*BIN* does not occur with a meaning equivalent to that of the English Simple Past; see the remarks on grammar below.) Consequently, the second reason for confusion comes into focus: the earlier limited understanding of *BIN*’s grammar led to *BIN* and *bin* sometimes being confused.

In some cases, researchers aware of *bin*’s existence in earlier AAE (Dillard 1972) examined only instances of the unstressed form in contemporary AAE in sentences in which what was actually *bin* could be analyzed as the past participle *been* remaining after *have* deletion. The incorrect analysis of *bin* is shown in (5). What makes this incorrect analysis possible in some cases is that *bin* and *been* are in exactly the same paradigmatic slot. In such a case, additional contextual information is required for disambiguation.

5. INCORRECT ANALYSIS OF *bin* AS A RESULT OF *have* DELETION

- a. Original: *He bin married/working for two years.*  
‘*He was married/working...*’  
‘*He’s/has been married/working for two years.*’
- b. Analyzed as: *He Ø been married/working for two years.*  
‘*He’s/has been married/working for two years*’

Thus, some researchers concluded that *bin* does not exist in contemporary AAE. Additional cases of nonrecognition and some of their causes are discussed below. However, at this point, it would be well to elaborate on the possibility that *bin* and the past participle *been* can both occur in sentences in which it is not certain which form one is dealing with, that is, without linguistic or social contextual information to disambiguate. Consider (6), where the ambiguous *been* is represented as the (orthographically hyphenated) *b-e-e-n*.

6. *He b-e-e-n married.*

- a. Glosses as *bin*: *He bin married.*
- i. Present Perfect  
‘*He has been married.*’
  - ii. Past Perfect  
‘*He had been married.*’
  - iii. Simple Past  
‘*He was married.*’
- b. Glosses as *been*, following *have* deletion: *He Ø been married.*
- i. Present Perfect  
‘*He’s/has been married.*’
  - ii. Past Perfect  
‘*He’d/had been married.*’

Some instances of *bin* cannot be confused with *BIN*, as shown in (7):

7. *He bin paid that bill last March.*

‘He paid that bill last March.’

\**He BIN paid that bill last March.* [due to constraint on adverbials]

\**He’s/has paid that bill last March.* [due to constraint on adverbials]

[%]*I didn’t think she had ever bin cried when she was young* ‘I didn’t think she had ever cried when...’ [my gloss; the author provides none; Dayton 1996, 815, ex. 189b]

The ungrammatical, starred glosses result from the constraint on adverbials (*last March*) in *BIN* and Present Perfect clauses. Dayton’s example, to which I have preposed “%,” is what I would analyze as an instance of “*have* insertion,” so to speak, resulting from the mainstreaming process. To elaborate, sentences of the type *have bin* VACTIVE + *-ed*, do occur and can be viewed as change in progress, outgrowths of the mainstreaming process, whereby the reconstructed earlier grammar of receding forms such as *bin* is affected by the influence and adoption of more dominant grammatical patterns, in this case the dominant English Present Perfect, requiring the auxiliary *have*. Observe that this particular case might also be seen as qualitative hypercorrection, which is a byproduct of mainstreaming.

The third reason for confusing *bin* as *BIN* is that often linguists and other scholars dealing with AAE data are not sufficiently familiar with research in creole studies to recognize *bin*’s<sup>3</sup> kinship with related past-tense forms in Atlantic creole languages, labeled here collectively as *ben*, among them Jamaican, Guyanese, and Trinidadian (Bailey 1966; Mufwene 1983; Arends, Muysken, and Smith 1995; Holm 2000; Holm and Patrick 2007; Winford 2008; Velupillai 2015). The fourth factor is that *bin* is indeed absent from the speech of most AAE speakers, and it is easy for researchers to gather by chance data from a non-*bin*-using AAE-speaking community.

Despite these problems feeding the nonrecognition of *bin*, it is possible to identify it with certainty in some cases—those where adequate contextual information is available. *Bin* has indeed been identified in some linguistic research over the past few decades as a form occurring in present-day AAE, more specifically, African American Vernacular English, as discussed below (Dayton 1996; Weldon 1998; Spears 2008, 2016; Moody 2011, 2015). It is worth noting that *bin* occurs outside of Gullah-speaking communities—in coastal Georgia (Moody 2011) and South Carolina—and also outside of areas where one might want to claim Gullah influence: metropolitan Miami, Florida; Greenville, North Carolina; and Mississippi (the last three attested by me). Especially noteworthy is that it occurs also in the North. Philadelphia is the most-documented case (Dayton 1996).

The aims of this article in more detail are to show (1) that unstressed *bin* does not solely occur as a type of past-tense marker in English-lexifier Atlantic creoles, notably Gullah, but also in AAE (a noncreole language); (2) that *bin* occurs outside of eastern coastal areas such as Georgia and North Carolina, where it might be claimed to be the result of Gullah influence; (3) that, though not widespread in AAE varieties, it is not rare either; and (4) that the clarification of *bin*’s status and grammar is important for more clearly piecing together AAE genesis and evolution. This better understanding of *bin* prompts us to return not only to hypotheses on the emergence of stressed *BIN*, but also, with the knowledge of *bin*’s existence in AAE, to the role that *bin* might have played. This discussion is especially useful in regard to the process of what has been termed DECREOLIZATION (the historical convergence of a creole language toward the lexifier language)<sup>4</sup> and the closely related concept of MAINSTREAMING, my term, referring specifically to convergence toward a sociopolitically dominant language variety, whether involving a creole language or a language variety (here AAE) that is not currently claimed to have developed from a creole. Note that MAINSTREAMING makes no claim of a creole past and does not rule out such a past for the language variety doing the bulk of the converging. It

explicitly references the convergence of a language variety toward a dominant language variety (or group of varieties), with relatively insignificant convergence of the dominant language toward that converging variety. Thus, MAINSTREAMING is not the equivalent of DECREOLIZATION or CONVERGENCE—or DEBASILECTALIZATION for that matter (Mufwene 2001). Mainstreaming is discussed more below.

An additional aim, in regard to AAE genesis, is to point out that *bin* is a highly telling piece of evidence to be added to the accumulating literature (Spears 2007, 2008, 2009) urging reconsideration of a possible creole past for AAE. Any neocreolist hypothesis on AAE genesis would have to take into consideration AAE grammatical features not considered in the earlier creolist hypotheses of over 40 years ago (Bailey 1965; Stewart 1967, 1968; Dillard 1972) and would have to differ in important ways from them. The issue of a neocreolist hypothesis will be taken up again below.

With respect to variety names and variety distinctions, it should be noted that in this discussion *bin* is referred to as occurring in AAE. It should be understood, however, that *bin* actually occurs only in African American Vernacular English (AAVE). This is in recognition of the existence of what has been termed African American Standard English (AASE) (Spears 1988, 2007, 2009, especially 2015) as a cluster of varieties distinct from AAVE.

Composed of many subvarieties like AAVE, AASE can be defined as a standard variety of AAE that has distinctively Black (i.e., African American) grammatical features (DBGFs),<sup>5</sup> but, of course, no features considered nonstandard. The DBGFs are what makes AASE a kind of AAE. However, none of the DBGFs of AASE are considered nonstandard: these features are grammatically camouflaged and fly beneath the radar of those who might challenge their standardness. DBGFs are found uniquely, or nearly so,<sup>6</sup> in AAE varieties. An example of a DBGF is stressed *BIN*, presented above and occurring grammatically camouflaged in AASE (Spears 1982, 2015). Crucially, no DBGFs in AASE are stigmatized or considered nonstandard, such as the use unstressed *bin* and *be done* (see the appendix). For the most part, no one but an AAE specialist would detect the DBGFs in AASE because they are grammatically camouflaged, as noted; that is, they are generally misrecognized by the typical hearer as forms occurring, with different meanings, in non-AAE dialects of English (Spears 1982, 2009, 2015).

Both *bin* and *BIN* occur largely in African American varieties of U.S. English. Today, stressed *BIN* occurs outside of AAE, having been diffused to other U.S. varieties. All of the literature on AAE recognizes stressed *BIN* as figuring in AAE grammar, while much of this research, as observed above, does not so recognize unstressed *bin*. It is worth noting that, at least one non-African American group, certain Whites in the South, have been reported to use *bin*, as will be discussed below.

Attestations of *bin* have appeared in a number of writings on both earlier and contemporary varieties of AAE; but, either these examples have been discussed in the context of the history of AAE and not explicitly claimed to be part of contemporary AAE (e.g., Dillard 1972), or they have been used by speakers who, due to their age, cannot be taken as speakers of contemporary AAE. In some cases, the attestations have been seen as resulting from the possible influence of Gullah, a U.S. English-lexifier creole language, on AAE speakers in contact with Gullah. The examples are therefore rejected as examples of AAE speech. An example of this view on unstressed *bin* in AAE speakers' speech is summarized in Spears (2008, 522–23):

Winford (1998, 127) mentions the claim (which he does not accept) that “unstressed *been* can ... appear in AAVE with uninflected staves and inflected non-staves, as in the following examples from Fasold (1981, 173).”

- [8.] I been know your name.  
 ‘I knew your name (before/already).’
- [9.] You won’t get your dues that you been paid.  
 ‘You won’t get your dues that you(’ve [already]) paid.’  
 ‘You won’t get your dues that you paid (before).’

Winford also notes that Rickford (1974) attested such uses among speakers “in contact with Gullah, and [that such uses] may be due to interference from [Gullah]” (127). Going further, he states that Mufwene’s [1994, 19]<sup>7</sup> examples, given in [10] and [11], “appear to be Gullah sentences and are not accepted by my AAVE informants” (127).

- [10.] Larry been gone when I come.  
 [11.] I been sleeping when you come.

Winford’s (1998, 127) overall conclusion is that

the uses of unstressed *been* in AAVE are quite different from the creole use of *bin* [i.e., *ben*]. AAVE *been* involves no significant restructuring in either syntactic or semantic properties of the type that characterize creole *bin* [here *ben*]. It is rather equivalent to superstrate *have been*, and is not a creole feature. [using the terms of this article, Winford says that AAVE has no *bin*, only *been*]

Other researchers, in discussing grammatical features of AAE, state that *been* unstressed (i.e.,  $\emptyset$  *been*) exists in contemporary AAE only as a result of *have* deletion (see immediately below), in other discussions, directly or indirectly, accepting the possible validity of a Gullah-influence view. Green (2002) and Rickford (1999), for example, maintain this position:

Beyond this use [resulting from *have* deletion], it is not clear that present-day AAE uses *bin* to mark simple past, but historical analysis might link this marker to earlier AAE. [Green 2002, 169]

[Presenting with commentary a list of tense, mood, and aspect markers in AAE] Use of unstressed *been* or *bin* for SE [Standard English], “has/have been” (present perfects), as in “He *been* sick” for “He has been sick.” [Rickford 1999, 6]

Rickford (1999), in other words, equates unstressed *bin* with forms occurring as a result of *have* deletion; for him it is not an AAE form analogous to the past-tense preverbal markers found in Atlantic creole languages.

Rickford and Rickford (2000, 117) recognize *been* resulting from *have* deletion; but, they also recognize the use of *bin* as equivalent to *was* or *were*: *About eleven or twelve o’clock he been eating everything* ‘About eleven or twelve o’clock he was eating everything’. Although it would be possible to interpret this sentence, without additional contextual information, as an example of a past perfect (*About eleven...he had been eating...*) that underwent *have* (*had* in this case) deletion to get *...he  $\emptyset$  been eating...*, one assumes that the authors had the contextual information to interpret it as they did. Thus, we can reasonably accept the sentence as an example of the *was/were*, or copula, use of unstressed *bin*. The authors continue, noting that

Gullah, like Jamaican patois—its Creole English counterpart in the Caribbean—uses *been* [i.e., *ben*, the creole counterpart of unstressed *bin*] before a verb stem (*thief* in the example below) to mark an action in the past:

[12.] We *been see* [Gullah = saw]<sup>8</sup> that man thief that man car. (Cited in Cunningham [1970, 65])

[13.] Me *been know* [Jamaican Creole = knew] say him wouldn't come. (Cited in Bailey [1966, 37])

You wouldn't hear this *been* much in mainland (especially northern) varieties of AAVE these days, although it may have been more frequent in earlier centuries. [Rickford and Rickford 2000, 118]

Here they recognize, unlike Rickford (1999), that *bin* figures in AAE, although infrequently. *Bin*'s use as a past copula and auxiliary preceding an active verb are explicitly recognized. Their view that *bin* preceding an active verb is little used in mainland varieties of AAE is quite reasonable; however, we simply do not know with any certainty how common *bin* is in AAE: there has simply been too little research across the United States and especially in the Deep South.

Holm (1991, 235) examined ex-slave narratives recorded by the Federal Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration and found that the use of *bin* was "quite rare." These recordings, as Bailey, Maynor, and Cukor-Avila (1991, 2–3) observe, "actually come from several different sources and were done over a forty year period. The earliest [...] were done in 1935, while the [last] interviews [...] were conducted in 1974. Most of the interviews, however, were done between 1940 and 1942." Holm remarks that the few uses of *bin* all came from the same speaker, born in Liberia. This speaker, recorded in 1974 and listed as born in 1844 (see Goodman 1979), also uses "unstressed *did*" occasionally instead of *bin*. Of the following examples, the first has unstressed *bin*, but the second could be an instance of the past participle *been* remaining after *have* deletion:

14. *I got on a cowboy shirt now that I brought from Texas. Been have it all my days.* [Charlie Smith, lines 121–22; Holm 1991, 235]

15. *I hear jus' as good now as I ever been hearing.* [Charlie Smith, line 342; Holm 1991, 235]

NOTE: *I hear jus' as good now as I've ever been hearing.*

Overall, Charlie Smith's use of *bin* does not imply anything with regard to *bin*'s existence in contemporary AAE, due to his age and his having spent the earliest part of his life in Liberia.

The same can be said regarding an instance of *bin*, highlighted by Sutcliffe (2001), in the speech of Wallace Quarterman, born in 1844, who was known to slip in and out of Gullah. His speech does not imply anything about present-day AAE.

16. *The time ain't **bad likuh it been then**...*

'The time isn't bad like it was then'

[Sutcliffe 2001, 136, ex. 6; boldface in original]

Looking beyond Black speech, Wolfram (pers. comm., Apr. 2017) has noted that  $\emptyset$  *been* occurs in a "full complement" of non-AAE U.S. varieties, as in *I  $\emptyset$  been there a lot*.

Feagin (1979, 255–56), in her study of Whites in Alabama, presents several examples of  $\emptyset$  *been* and also unstressed *bin* as a copula and as an auxiliary with an active verb:

17. *I call her Josie and I always have ever since I been born.* [ex. 34; Copula]

'I call her Josie and I always have ever since I was born.'

18. *Well, I chewed tobacco some, and then I started smokin'—started smokin' cigarettes.*  
*Course I—I been quit about 15 years since I smoked.* [ex. 37; Auxiliary with active verb]  
'... Course I—I quit about 15 years...' [Simple Past]

Feagin (1979, 256) discusses these examples of unstressed *bin* in a section entitled “Remote Present Perfect Been” and gives no indication that some of her examples show unstressed *bin*. She briefly discusses works on English in the British Isles, none of which go beyond noting the occurrence of *Ø been*. Without additional information, it is hard to know how to interpret Feagin’s examples of *bin* in White speech in the Deep South. I have no information indicating that *bin* in its copula and auxiliary uses has been a feature of British Isles dialects, and none indicating that it may be found in Whites’ speech outside the South’s Black Belt, a region with very high Black population percentages since the height of plantation agriculture during slavery. The main question is whether *bin* was diffused from Black into White speech or vice versa, or whether other more complex scenarios offer more viable hypotheses. For example, *bin*’s appearance in AAE may be the result of the influences of creole *ben* (i.e., creoles spoken in the United States, and not necessarily vernacularized ones) and also by *bin* in early White settlers’ speech. Or, AAE *bin* may be solely the result of creole influence and later diffused to White varieties, which did not have it. Or, AAE *bin* may be the result of creole influence, and later *bin*’s use in AAE reinforced its use in White vernaculars and perhaps also expanded its semantics in White varieties to align with AAE *bin*’s grammar. Of course, additional hypotheses are possible, but all the hypotheses on the contemporary and historical relationship between *bin* in AAE and White varieties await more information.

#### REMARKS ON THE GRAMMAR OF UNSTRESSED *bin* AND STRESSED *BIN*

Some remarks on perfect tense are needed at this juncture since I will discuss the importance of unstressed *bin*’s meaning as including perfect tense, present and past. First, it should be pointed out that there is disagreement as to whether perfect is a tense, a somewhat unusual tense, or an aspect (see discussions in Comrie 1976, 1985; Dahl 1985; Binnick 1991; Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca 1994; Ritz 2012). I consider it simply a type of tense notion.

Observe that in referencing semantic notions, I use lower case; to reference specific verb forms in a language, I use upper case, following Comrie (1976). I use *semantic* to refer to context-independent meaning, without entering a lengthy discussion of semantics versus pragmatics, which I characterize as dealing with meaning as dependent on context. In the most convenient cases, the semantic term corresponds to the name of the verb form in a language; but, in a number of cases the term used in grammar books for a language specific form does not correspond to the use of that term as a semantic notion. “Thus in Latin, for instance [...] the so-called Perfect in fact covers both perfect and nonperfect meaning” (Comrie 1976, 53). *BIN* and *bin* collapse the present and past perfect distinctions, each including the two semantic notions in its meaning. Stated differently, the two forms each include both notions in their meaning. Forms that conglomerate similar semantically close notions, as do *BIN* and *bin* with the present and past perfects, can be said to express one or the other notion depending on context of utterance.<sup>9</sup> The relevant points to remember are: *BIN*’s semantic range includes the present perfect and the past perfect, but its semantics are not fully equivalent to the English Present Perfect and Past Perfect due to *BIN*’s always expressing remoteness; and *bin* covers the range of the two English Perfects,

but *bin*'s full semantic range goes beyond that of the two Perfects. Notably, it includes preterit tense-aspect (i.e., past tense + perfective aspect), which falls within the semantic range of the English Simple Past. However, one should not jump to the conclusion that they are tenseless since they cannot express, when unmodified, any kind of future (e.g., future perfect). Thus, observe that at least some varieties of AAE, or perhaps more accurately, some individuals' AAE continua (including mine), allow sentences with the AAE Future Remote Perfect, with stressed *BIN*: *gon BIN*, as in *they gon BIN gone, I'm (g)on BIN finished*.

There are two perfects in Standard English and some other Englishes that denote past situations, such as states, actions, events, and processes: the Present Perfect and the Past Perfect (also called Pluperfect and Past in the Past). (I will not discuss Perfect Progressives explicitly, as in *Mary has been leaving early this year*.) To return to *bin*, the following examples and commentary within the examples lay the groundwork for further remarks. Example (19) has *bin* as a copula, (20) as an auxiliary with an active verb, and (21) with an auxiliary and a stative verb. In (19c) *before* forces a past perfect reading. Standard English does not require the Past Perfect verb form in (19c); however, the sentence still conveys the meaning of past perfect.

#### 19. Copula

##### a. Simple Past

*She bin married when I met her.*

'She was married when I met her.'

##### b. Present Perfect

*She bin married a long time now.*

'She's/has been married a long time now.'

##### c. Past Perfect

*She bin married before I met her.*

'She had been married before I met her.'

#### 20. Auxiliary, Active Verb

##### a. Simple Past

*Joe bin pay ~ paid that bill last month.*

'Joe paid that bill last month.'

##### b. Present Perfect

*Joe bin pay ~ paid that bill already.*

'Joe has paid that bill already.'

##### c. Past Perfect

*Joe bin paid that bill the week before.*

'Joe had paid that bill the week before.' (also: 'Joe paid that bill...')

#### 21. Auxiliary, Stative Verb

##### a. Present Perfect

*I bin had this name all my life.*<sup>10</sup>

'I've had this name all my life.'

##### b. Past Perfect

*I bin had this name all my life.*<sup>11</sup>

'I had had this name all my life.'

##### c. Simple Past

*I bin had two dogs when I lived back home.*

'I had two dogs when I lived back home.'

Examples (19)–(21) illustrate that *bin* occurring as a copula and co-occurring with an active verb or a stative verb can express contextually the meaning of simple past, present perfect, or past perfect. Its semantic meaning, that is, its meaning independent of context, includes all three semantic notions: simple past, present perfect, and past perfect. In some cases, an adverbial (or other added contextual information) forces a particular reading.

The point to be stressed now is that *bin* may be contextually present perfect; that is, it may contextually express the notion of present perfectness, in combination with active and stative verbs. At this juncture, some remarks need to be made on stressed *BIN*, to prepare for the claim below on what is most probably *BIN*'s origin. In regard to *BIN*'s stress, a number of writings have pointed out that *BIN* does not ALWAYS receive stress (see Rickford 1999). On the basis of acoustic analysis of speech from AAE speakers in Washington, D.C., North Carolina, and elsewhere, Wolfram (pers.comm., Apr. 2017) has observed a “number of cases” of stressed *BIN* that were not stressed. As a native AAE speaker who has lived in several African American communities, I agree that *BIN* is not always stressed. In some AAE varieties, *BIN* always receives high tone (Spears 2004a), which occurs with stress usually, but not always. The term tone, rather than pitch, is used based on the phonological systems of the AAE varieties for which tone is posited.

Stressed *BIN* also prohibits the occurrence of any adverbial, thus the ungrammaticality of \**He BIN married a long time*, whose ungrammaticality is caused by the presence of the adverbial *a long time* (see example 1 above).<sup>12</sup> The same restriction is in effect when *BIN* expresses the past perfect (e.g., \**When I got back last week, she BIN gone a long time*).<sup>13</sup>

Stressed *BIN*, unlike unstressed *bin*, has as part of its meaning ‘for a long time’, ‘a long time ago’, or something equivalent. All are ways of expressing what Rickford (1975) termed remoteness. The term Remote Perfect<sup>14</sup> captures the fact that *BIN* refers to a situation whose instantiation began a long time ago (in the case of stative predicates) and continues in effect up till the present. In the case of active predicates, the situation occurred a long time ago in the past, and there is posterior time relevance (in the case of the past perfect) or present relevance (in the case of the present perfect). How much time is ‘a long time’ or ‘a long time ago’ is subjective, depending on the viewpoint of the speaker and the discourse context.

I will restrict this discussion to present relevance for convenience. *BIN* is labeled as a Remote Perfect, denoting a situation (state, action, event, or process) with present relevance that was instantiated or whose instantiation began a long time ago, the length of time being relative to the discourse context. Present relevance in the case of a past tense, perfective aspect (i.e., preterit) action such as ‘pay’ in (20) is related to the time interval referenced: some time long ago in the past up to the present.

We can also speak of present relevance in terms of present effects. The present effect relevance in regard to (22), with the active verb *pay*, is that the bill is paid. There are also implications such as ‘the bill is not owed’. In the case of a sentence such as *He BIN crazy*, with a stative predicate, there is present relevance because the situation continues to be in effect up until the present moment of speech.

In the case of certain active verbs other than *pay*, for example, *lock* in (23), there is present relevance in that the door is still locked. The type of present relevance that is always involved is connected to the perfect’s time reference interval, reviewed above.

22. *Joe BIN pay ~ paid that bill.*

‘Joe paid that bill a long time ago.’

23. *That door BIN lock.*

‘That door has been locked a long time.’

Unstressed *bin* has no restrictions on the occurrence in the clause of adverbials, as seen in (19)–(21), which are grammatical in AAE. Moreover, remoteness, which cannot be specified by an adverbial in a *BIN* sentence, is not part of *bin*'s meaning, hence the glosses given.

## MAINSTREAMING VERSUS DECREOLIZATION, AND MERGING

Consider again example (6) above, *He b-e-e-n married*. This example has *b-e-e-n*, representing either unstressed *bin* or the past participle *been*. Stressed *BIN* is excluded from consideration for the temporal reasons above. The discussion above also pointed out that unstressed *bin* can contextually take a present perfect meaning. (For simplicity, I will now discuss only the present perfect meaning.) The question at hand is this: how can one know if indeed the *b-e-e-n* in sentences without any adverbial, such as (6), results from *have* deletion or is an unstressed *bin*?

There is no way to know for sure, especially since *bin*-users, at least some of them certainly, also use *have been* Perfects.<sup>15</sup> In other words, in these sentences, unstressed *bin* and the past participle *been* merge. Without contextual information, linguistic (e.g., adverbials) or social, there is no way to assign a reading or syntactic structure with certainty for an utterance like (6). Thus, such a sentence would be an example of grammatical camouflage (Spears 1982, 2009). Of course, in actual discourse, contextual information would most likely provide the correct reading. In such cases of what I term MERGING, *bin* retains its range of meaning, which includes the perfect. Thus, the *bin*-user with the Present Perfect in her or his repertoire ends up with two choices, so to speak, for expressing the present perfect—*bin* or the Present Perfect *been* (< *have* + *been*). The latter is narrower semantically, as shown in the glosses for (6), and reducible via *have* deletion to *been*, as shown, which in effect becomes the merged *b-e-e-n*. Merging is the functional-syntactic equivalent of homonymy in contexts where syntactic and other contextual information is unavailable for disambiguation (e.g., *She's looking for a sail/sale* [seII]).

The historical process in language change of decreolization has been much discussed and refers essentially to the historical convergence of a creole language toward its lexifier language—that which is the source of the bulk of its lexicon (among the recent references, see Holm 2000; Mufwene 1994, 2001;<sup>16</sup> Vilupillai 2015). DECREOLIZATION is a process that affects creole languages or erstwhile creoles alone. I use the term MAINSTREAMING to refer to the same language change processes that are discussed in treatments of decreolization and to other processes. I use it also in reference to languages, or dialects of a language, that are not creoles, or at least not ostensibly so. Additionally, mainstreaming, in line with DeGraff (2005), avoids any claim or suggestion that change toward the lexifier or a dominant language is desirable, inevitable, linear, unceasing, and/or necessary for mass education and economic development. Mainstreaming is a broader term for dealing with instances where a language variety, as a result of sociopolitical pressures, converges toward a sociopolitically dominant language variety or group of them.

The process of merging discussed above is one example of a process occurring in mainstreaming. The analysis of *bin* furnishes us with a specific case of merging in AAVE's evolution toward mainstream Englishes (including ones we might not want to call standard). In speaking of mainstream Englishes, I mean those with greater sociopolitical clout.

In introducing the term MAINSTREAMING, I follow Rickford (1983) and Dayton (1996, 999) by noting that decreolization (the term they used) does not solely follow the linear process described by Derek Bickerton in many writings, whereby this change process (decreolization, included within the concept of mainstreaming; see above) is one of replacement, a steady march

toward the standard. Rather, it should be viewed also as a process of extension, during which “speakers in a creole continuum move upward to ‘higher’ [prestige or dominant]<sup>17</sup> lects by expanding their linguistic repertoires rather than by replacing one lect by another” (Rickford 1983, 308; quoted in Dayton 1996, 999). Thus, in the mainstreaming process, speakers acquire greater grammatical “ranges which give them [more] room for stylistic maneuvering” (Dayton 1996, 999; citing Rickford 1983, 308) that is not available to them in non-AAE dialects of English. AAE—its auxiliary system specifically—is just such an example: it has basically the same auxiliaries as non-AAE dialects of English as well as a set of AFRICAN AMERICAN AUXILIARIES (Labov 1998), a set unique to AAE that gives the variety a remarkably higher level of expressive efficiency (see the appendix).

I have presented merging as one example of this mainstreaming process in which an AAVE form merges with a more mainstream one. If we look into this case more closely, we are in a better position to formulate hypotheses about stages in this merging process. This example involves the auxiliary unstressed *bin*, which can also be analyzed as a preverbal marker, like its near counterpart, the past tense preverbal marker *ben* in Atlantic creoles, formerly referred to as an ANTERIOR marker (Bickerton 1981; see Patrick 2007 for a discussion of the reasons underlying the change in terms). I say “near counterpart” because, though quite similar, the creole past-tense marker *ben* (taking various phonological forms in Caribbean creoles), differs from AAVE *bin* in at least one way in regard to semantics. Caribbean English-lexifier creole *ben* is not used to express the present perfect, as in the examples with *bin* above, although it may be used for the past perfect (Donald Winford, pers. comm., Apr. 2017; Patrick 2007).

Above I stated that a better understanding of *bin* prompts us to return to hypothesizing on the origin of stressed *BIN* with the knowledge that unstressed *bin* is part of some AAE grammars. Winford (1998, 128; after Winford 1993) presents a hypothesis on the origin of *BIN*. However, he did not take into consideration that *bin* exists in contemporary AAE. Therefore, he could not have considered the crucial fact that *bin* may contextually express present perfectness. Winford argues that

the semantics of *BEEN* [stressed *BIN*] can be perhaps best explained as the result of partial reanalysis of continuative perfect *been* [i.e., *have* + the past participle *been*] under the influence of an earlier creole past marker *bin* [i.e., *ben*]. In other words, it represents a type of partial semantic shift, with transfer (retention) of semantic features from the creole past category and incorporation of features of continuative *been*. [Winford 1998, 128]

However, since *bin* is a feature of AAE, there is no need to posit a reanalysis of past participle *been*, which figures in the Present Perfect. It is more reasonable to hypothesize that *been* and *bin* merged, with some varieties of AAE later dropping *bin* and others retaining it. Moreover, since no creoles appear to use *ben* present perfects, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the earlier use of *bin* was as a past-tense marker, as in creoles—not signaling present perfectness. As *bin* took on the meaning of present perfect, it was semantically close enough to *been* to indeed merge with it. This merging would have been influenced and reinforced by  $\emptyset$  *been* occurring in some non-AAE dialects of English, notably those of Whites.

Unstressed *bin* then may have been used variably with stress, or high pitch, or high tone. This high tone would be used if there existed then the minimal tone system we find in some varieties of AAE today (Spears 2004a). These prosodic features would have signaled various kinds of emphasis, including that related to length of time/remoteness, and eventually would have done so invariably, thus connecting stress (or pitch or tone) to the notion of remoteness, i.e., ‘for a long

time’/’a long time ago’. Thus, it would have become what we today call stressed *BIN*, due to *BIN*’s usually occurring with stress. One reason that White varieties did not develop *BIN* would be that they, unlike varieties of AAE, do not have a pattern of using phonemic stress for developing new words, such as stressed *STAY* (see the appendix) and others not discussed in the literature.

There are other possible scenarios, especially given our limited knowledge of AAE history. The main prompt for hypothesizing is the full consideration that contemporary *bin* may contextually express present perfectness. The source of stressed *BIN* heretofore was more difficult even to speculate about because unstressed *bin* was not universally recognized as a feature of AAE—its existence explicitly denied by some; and, the semantic relatedness of two forms in terms of perfectness had not been highlighted in discussions of AAE grammar.

## CONCLUSION

The growing range of forms incorporated into AAE via mainstreaming can help to explain why most varieties of AAE have, in addition to the same auxiliaries as other dialects of English, AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH AUXILIARIES (Labov 1998). This enlarged auxiliary set provides AAE with a remarkable degree of expressive efficiency, here speaking specifically of tense, aspect, and mood as well as ancillary notions. Note, however, that not all AAE varieties have all of the AAE auxiliaries. In the process of mainstreaming, some old nonmainstream forms are kept in some cases—and indeed, new nonmainstream forms develop, such as stressed *BIN* and stressed *STAY* (see the appendix). The greater range of expression is made possible by the auxiliary forms and combinations pointed out by Dayton (1996) and others that have never—or hardly or only recently—been discussed in the literature. Some of them are presented in the appendix. Note that auxiliary *done* occurs in non-AAE dialects of English and in creoles.

A good percentage of the forms in the appendix have creole counterparts, as indicated there. This fact is another reason for reconsidering the possibility that AAE has U.S. mainland creole ancestry (and not necessarily ONE creole ancestor). This is particularly so in light of the number of AAE grammatical features not involving auxiliaries that have creole counterparts.<sup>18</sup> One such feature is bare nouns (Spears 2004b, 2007), which occur with no article or suffix and may take a definite or generic reading, unlike nouns in non-AAE dialects of English,<sup>19</sup> and like nouns in creoles:

24. *Dog ain’t got no sense.*
  - a. Definite  
‘The/that dog ain’t got no sense.’
  - b. Generic  
‘Dogs don’t have any sense.’

This detailed investigation of AAE unstressed *bin* provides insight not only into its grammar but also into both the history of AAE and specific processes, like mainstreaming and merging, involved in that history. Such investigation also provides insight into AAE’s genesis and argues strongly for more qualitative research to complement quantitative and historical research in the study of AAE.

APPENDIX  
Some AAE Auxiliaries<sup>20</sup> and the Auxiliary *done*  
(adapted from Spears 2009)

AUXILIARY: *be* [also used as copula]

NAME: Invariant habitual *be*

MEANING: Habitual aspect (expresses a situation in effect, either repeated or continuing, over a significantly long period of time, as determined by social context)

OCCURRENCE IN CREOLES: No

OCCURRENCE IN OTHER AMERICAN ENGLISH DIALECTS: Yes (but considered a DBGF; see note 5)

EXAMPLES: *She think she be knowing the answer.*

‘She thinks she always knows the answer.’

*They be watching tv when I get home.*

‘They are normally watching tv when I get home.’

[as copula] *He be at Fred house.*

‘He’s normally/always/etc. at Fred’s house.’

AUXILIARY: *done*

NAME: Perfect *done* (or “perfective” *done*), auxiliary *done*

MEANING: Perfect tense (expresses a situation that began in the past and has present relevance, e.g., the situation still exists: *He done lock the door* (the door is still locked); tends to express intensity and/or disapproval)

OCCURRENCE IN CREOLES: Yes (however, its grammar is different in subtle ways)

OCCURRENCE IN OTHER AMERICAN ENGLISH DIALECTS: Yes (its grammar is most likely subtly different)

EXAMPLES: *I done forgot my hat.*

‘I’ve forgotten my hat.’

*He done told you game.*

‘He sure exposed you.’

AUXILIARY: *STAY* (written thus)(Spears 2000)

NAME: Stressed *STAY*

MEANING: Frequentative, iterative **habitual (as opposed to durative habitual)** aspect (expresses a situation that occurs repeatedly and frequently)

OCCURRENCE IN CREOLES: No

OCCURRENCE IN OTHER AMERICAN ENGLISH DIALECTS: No

EXAMPLES: *She STAY at Grandma house.*

‘She is frequently at Grandma’s house.’

*She STAY flossin.*

‘He is always well dressed.’

AUXILIARY: *gone* (also *go*)(Spears 1980, 1982, 1990, 2006, 2007, 2009)

NAME: Disapproval marker *gone*, past *gone*

MEANING: Disapproval (mood) marker (expresses the speaker’s negative evaluation of a situation expressed by the sentence in which it occurs and that situation’s unexpectedness)

OCCURRENCE IN CREOLES: Yes

OCCURRENCE IN OTHER AMERICAN ENGLISH DIALECTS: No

EXAMPLES: *Now why he go act like that?*

‘Now why the hell did he act like that.’  
*And he gone raise the damn window.*  
‘And he had the nerve to raise the damn window.’

AUXILIARY: *come* (Spears 1980, 1982, 1990, 2006, 2007, 2009)

NAME: Come of indignation (or strong disapproval)

MEANING: Disapproval (mood) marker

OCCURRENCE IN CREOLES: Yes

OCCURRENCE IN OTHER AMERICAN ENGLISH DIALECTS: No

EXAMPLES: *He come coming in my house acting a damn fool.*

‘He had the nerve to come in my house, acting like a damn fool.’

*She come being all nice (like we were friends or something).*

‘She had the nerve to be/act all nice...’

AUXILIARY: *gone-come* (the combination of the two is not a simple combination of the meanings of each)(Spears 1980, 1982, 1990, 2006, 2007, 2009)

NAME: *Gone-come*

MEANING: Disapproval (mood) marker (treated as one bimorphemic word)

OCCURRENCE IN CREOLES: Yes

OCCURRENCE IN OTHER AMERICAN ENGLISH DIALECTS: No

EXAMPLES: *He gone-come telling me had to change my whole transmission (probably lying).*

‘He had the nerve to tell me had to change my whole transmission.’

*Jane said he gone-come asking her if I could steal one for him (I can’t believe he had the nerve).*

‘Jane said he had the nerve to ask her...’

AUXILIARY: *be done*<sub>1</sub> (Baugh 1983)

NAME: Resultative *be done* (Baugh’s term); Disapproval *be done* (Spears’s term)(to be distinguished from the other two *be dones*)

MEANING: Disapproval (mood) marker (also expresses a rapid reaction of the clause subject to the disapproved situation)

OCCURRENCE IN CREOLES: No

OCCURRENCE IN OTHER AMERICAN ENGLISH DIALECTS: No

EXAMPLES: *You do that again, I be done whip your little behind.*

‘If you do that again, I will whip your behind so fast (you won’t know what happened).’

*If the police shoot anybody again, we be done had a riot up in here.*

‘If the police shoot anybody again, we’ll have a riot around here so fast.’

AUXILIARY: *be done*<sub>2</sub>

NAME: Future perfect *be done* (to be distinguished from the other two *be dones*)

MEANING: Future perfect

OCCURRENCE IN CREOLES: No

OCCURRENCE IN OTHER AMERICAN ENGLISH DIALECTS: No

EXAMPLES: *They be done finished by the time you get there.*

‘They’ll have finished by the time you get there.’

*She be done read it before you do.*

‘She’ll have read it before you have.’

AUXILIARY: *be done*<sub>3</sub> (Spears 1985, 1990, 2006)

NAME: Habitual perfect *be done* (incorporating habitual *be*, above)

MEANING: Tenseless habitual perfect, which may contextually be past, present, or future tense)

OCCURRENCE IN CREOLES: No

OCCURRENCE IN OTHER AMERICAN ENGLISH DIALECTS: No

EXAMPLES: *They was raggedy, and they buttons be done fell off.*

‘They were raggedly, and their buttons (habitually) had fallen off.’

*Every time I see him [dog], he be done dug up something.*

‘Every time I see him, he’s dug up something.’

AUXILIARY: *had* (Rickford and Théberge-Rafal 1996)

NAME: Preterit *had*

MEANING: Preterit tense-aspect (not past perfect); marks the beginning of a narrative

OCCURRENCE IN CREOLES: No

OCCURRENCE IN OTHER AMERICAN ENGLISH DIALECTS: No

EXAMPLES: *This is a story that happened to me Monday, not too long ago. I was on my way to school, and I had slipped and fell [cf. SE I slipped and fell], and I ran back in the house to change my clothes.* (Rickford and Rickford 2000, 122)

## NOTES

I want to thank John Baugh, Nicholas Faraclas, Salikoko Mufwene, David Sutcliffe, Tracey Weldon, Donald Winford, Walt Wolfram, and an anonymous reviewer for comments on previous drafts of this article. Of course, they are in no way responsible for this article’s contents.

1. Some examples, (1)–(4), (6), (7), (19), (20), and (21b)–(23), have been created based on attested data and my own knowledge of the forms. A number of grammatically equivalent examples can be found in Dayton (1996, chap. 9, §9.4). However, many of her examples are those where what she calls “unstressed *bin*” can actually be analyzed as containing the past participle *been* that remains after *have* deletion; see examples (4) and (5) for elaboration. As a result, many of her examples are not as useful as they might be. The created examples are used to facilitate this article’s exposition by having sets of examples close in wording. My knowledge of these forms is based on use of one in my own AAE varieties (stressed *BIN*) and having lived and interacted with stressed *BIN*- and *bin*-using speakers (all use both forms) for roughly 35 years in a multiclass African American neighborhood (Harlem, New York City). These *BIN*- and *bin*-using AAVE [speakers whom I know reasonably well are](#) not native New Yorkers. The entire group includes neighbors, acquaintances (street vendors, street-corner men, neighborhood visitors, etc.), and legal case clients of mine, some of whom I have conversed with regularly and frequently over the decades. A group of women and men, the youngest of these speakers are men about 60–65 years old and the one older woman, from Mississippi, would be in her 80s or 90s if alive. Others that I have information on are a woman from Greenville, North Carolina, roughly in her 60s, and a man from the Miami, Florida, metropolitan area, in his 60s. The others, men, appear to be 60 and older. I do not assume that *bin* is limited to older speakers: due to culture and age differences, it has been difficult for me engage younger speakers in casual conversations.

Since no attempt has been made to capture the phonetics of entire examples, words in

examples are given their conventional spellings.

2. For ease of exposition, I collapse passive, quasi-passives (e.g., *He bin married*), and copula forms into one category labeled COPULA.
3. It should be made explicit that not all of the counterparts forms are phonologically close to *ben*; for example, the Trinidadian counterpart form is *did*. I thank Don Winford for emphasizing this point.
4. Salikoko Mufwene (pers. comm., Apr. 2017) takes the position that the formation process of creoles involved vernacular varieties of the lexifier language, while throughout decreolization, convergence has been toward the standard. MAINSTREAMING holds only that convergence is toward sociopolitical dominant language varieties (plural), without getting into the question of which standard varieties—since the (U.S.) standard is not monolithic (Spears 2015)—or whether dominant varieties are always ones that would be considered standard.
5. See Spears (2007, 2008, and 2009) for discussions of additional DBGFs.
6. Some of these features we know are not 100% exclusive to AAE, but they are much more robust in the speech of African Americans and have a vastly wider geographical distribution, such as habitual, invariant *be* (Bailey and Bassett 1986). Also, it can be reasonably supposed that this form was diffused from AAE to English dialects of southern Whites, pace Bailey and Bassett; and the same is true of other DBGF's not 100% exclusive to AAE.
7. The page reference for Mufwene (1994) and the work cited are incorrect: there is no page 19, and the chapter does not contain the examples cited.
8. Brackets glosses are in the original text in this and Rickford and Rickford's next example.
9. Also, both *BIN* and *bin* may follow *had*, making them explicitly past perfect. See the discussion following example (7). In this article, I focus on the two forms when not preceded by other auxiliaries.
10. Uttered by Charlie Pride, the famous Black country-and-western singer, from Mississippi, during a television interview.
11. Observe with more contextual information: *I was talking to him a few years ago, and he ask me how long I had this funny name, and I told him I bin had [= had had] this name all my life*. Again, Standard English does not require the Past Perfect here.
12. The question of exactly what can occur in a clause with *BIN* is highly complicated, in terms of adverbials (not solely temporal adverbials) but also nonadverbials. Intonational constraints are involved also. I thanks Walt Wolfram for pointing out this thorny issue.
13. The restrictions on co-occurrence with *BIN* recall the adverbial restrictions on the Standard English (including AASE) Present Perfect. However, the restriction in the case of *BIN* applies to *BIN* clauses interpreted as both present perfect and past perfect, unlike the case with the corresponding Standard English Perfects. The Standard English Past Perfect imposes no such restriction, as in *I had seen him on March 3, before...* (the adverbial does not trigger ungrammaticality). See Binnick (1991, 264–66) and Ritz (2012) for more discussion.
14. The specific term he used was REMOTE PHASE.
15. I have heard some *bin*-users use Present Perfects many times. From others, I have simply not heard enough of their speech to know if they use the Perfect.
16. See Mufwene's (1994) problematizing of the term DECREOLIZATION and also his (Mufwene 2001) discussions of DEBASILECTALIZATION and BASILECTALIZATION. On DECREOLIZATION, also see Winford (1997).
17. Here, we must keep in mind that in some social situations, vernaculars have more prestige.

Thanks to John Baugh for emphasizing this point.

18. I am not implying that functional and semantic parallels alone indicate a possible U.S. (or Atlantic) creole source; obviously, independent development is conceivable, particularly in view of the social history of the United States and the Afro-Atlantic world. Thanks to Salikoko Mufwene for pointing out the need to stress this point. My view is that, as we become aware of more “creole-like” forms in AAE, we are forced to begin RECONSIDERING the question of one or several mainland creole ancestors of AAE.
19. Bare nouns do occur in non-AAE dialect of English with definite and generic (e.g., *Pizza’s here*, *Boy meets girl*), but only in special cases, with many more restrictions on their occurrence than in AAE.
20. Note that *steady* (Baugh 1983, 1984) is not an auxiliary though it has a unique relationship with AAE auxiliaries (Spears 1985).

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