Review

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LANGUAGE VARIETIES AND SITUATIONS

JOHN BAUGH, *Black street speech: Its history, structure, and survival*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983. Pp. x + 149.

Baugh's book on nonstandard Black American English is an important one. Much of the information in it should be widely disseminated among non-specialists, particularly that in the last three chapters, which focus on social, economic, and educational aspects of Black English as well as its development through time. Although much of the book presents background material on sociolinguistics and black language in particular, it includes research appearing in published form for the first time. Of primary interest is the report on a long-term study of the vernacular speech of black adults recorded in social contexts ranging from informal to formal. The speech was recorded in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Chicago, Austin, and Houston. The long-term nature of the research allowed Baugh to witness changes in speech as the familiarity between him and his informants increased. Recording speech in social contexts differing in degree of formality made possible the quantification of speakers' stylistic range.

It appears that Baugh intended the book to be useful to a general audience, because a good portion of it is devoted to material that many linguists and people in language-related careers are likely to be aware of already. The nonlinguists may find it somewhat difficult to read and understand, however, due to Baugh's liberal use of specialized terminology without explanation.

It is worth stressing that the book is concerned with adult speech, since many of the earlier writings on Black Vernacular English (BVE) focused on that of children and adolescents (e.g., Labov, Cohen, Robins, & Lewis 1968; Wolfram 1969; Dillard 1972; Labov 1972; and Folb 1980; Wolfram distributing his attention equally among children, adolescents, and adults). It is precisely in the speech of adults that one expects the most style shifting since they, of course, have the deepest awareness of the social consequences of speech and, during their employment years, have the most to gain from varying their speech according to social context.

Appearing for the first time in print also is the discussion of two items that Baugh terms "unique grammatical usages." Both, *steady* and *be done*, are presented as grammatical items which have usages that, along with the other well-known items such as distributive *be* and stressed *been*, spearate Black English dialects from all non-Black ones.

It is of some interest that the author is a black American and that this book is the first in a decade or so which focuses on the structure of Black English. Baugh is a former student of William Labov's, and his work, as one would expect, is within a Labovian framework. The crucial point relating to the author's eth-

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nicity, though, is not what an endorsement on the jacket of the book states, that the author is "the first black man to write a book of this caliber on black English . . . ." This comment seems to overlook women, pushing aside Geneva Smitherman's (1977) significant contribution to our understanding of black language (primarily language use) and to suggest, ever so faintly, that the remaining books in the black author set are undistinguished or that Baugh's book is best compared to other books by blacks. I assume that such suggestions were not intended, but much of what is insidious in intergroup relations the world over is not intended. An observation worth making that relates to the author's ethnicity has been made by Labov himself: "black scholars now have . . . the technical tools to bring their cultural knowledge to bear, and the ability to define the role that their white allies can play in advancing the study of Black English" (Labov 1982:195).

The first chapter is entitled "Introduction: Street Speech as a Social Dialect." There, Baugh sets his work in context. He lays emphasis on the wide range of speaking styles that are used among speakers of BVE: "the issue . . . is not so much the fact that speakers possess formal and informal styles . . . rather, street speech covers a greater range of linguistic styles [than does Standard English (SE)], which is why it persists as a boundary for social demarcation" (8). The flexibility of street speech and its high evaluation among peers would explain how it has managed to survive in spite of the stigma attached to it. This view on the survival of BVE is quite reasonable and has been expressed before. In need of supporting empirical evidence, however, is the claim that street speech covers a broader range of styles than does SE. The question that immediately comes to mind is, what is the stylistic range of speech that can be classified as SE? Also, how does one measure stylistic breadth? Until these questions are satisfactorily answered, the claim remains vacuous.

Baugh notes Haugen's (1972) view that a standard dialect is characterized by a minimum amount of linguistic variation, while nonstandard dialects of the same language show a greater range of linguistic variation. This may be true of orthoepic standards but whether it is actually true of speech that is in reality accepted as standard is an empirical question. SE, as most standards, is actually minimally defined and largely negatively defined. In the case of standard speech, outside the area of specific prohibitions (multiple negation, pleonastic pronouns, etc.), it remains to be determined how much variation there is. Perhaps, what Baugh should claim is that, with respect to certain variables to which explicit reference is made in characterizing SE, there is more variation in black street speech than in standard speech. But this is close to being a truism if considered within the context of sociolinguistic research over the past twenty years.

It is surprising that on the book jacket this claim is stated thus: "Baugh's work uncovered a far wider breadth of speaking styles among black Americans than among standard English speakers." Someone, apparently, still subscribes to the erroneous notion that all black people speak nonstandard English.

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In Chapter 1 also, Baugh justifies his introduction into sociolinguistics the term "black street speech." He chose this term because "it conveys a similar meaning to most of the black consultants" whom he has interviewed, "regardless of their social or regional background" (5). He goes on to characterize street speech as "the nonstandard dialect that thrives within the black street culture, and . . . is constantly fluctuating, as new terminology flows in and out of colloquial vogue . . . we need to think of street speech as a flexible dialect" (5,6). All of this is true, but *street* in black culture has a meaning too restricted for what Baugh wishes to label. I agree with Roger Abrahams that "A strong distinction, often discussed by young Blacks, is made between the kind of talk appropriate to the house when 'around moms' and that of the more public and open places, where what some refer to as *street talk* may take place" (Abrahams 1976:37). The real point here is that street speech or talk should refer to nonstandard speech that is both public and unrestrained. Baugh's book is about nonstandard black speech, that is, BVE as spoken by men and women in the home and in public, not street speech specifically. He gives practically no attention to cursing and various types of playing (Abrahams 1976) that characterize street speech in particular.

Information on BVE itself is provided in Chapter 2, "The Birth of Black Street Speech"; Chapter 5, "Specialized Lexical Marking and Alternation"; Chapter 6, "Unique Grammatical Usage"; and Chapter 7, "Phonological Variation." Only some of the information is presented quantitatively, that in Chapters 2 and 7. The quantitative material in the second chapter is presented in more detail elsewhere (Baugh 1980). It concerns his finding that in the speech of the Cobras, a Harlem youth gang, the probability values for *is* absence according to the following environment (NP, adjective, locative, etc.) follow those of Jamaican English and Gullah. This significant finding provides supporting evidence for the claim that Black English has creole antecedents. The material in Chapter 5 deals with matters such as topic-related shifting, syllable contraction and expansion, and hypercorrection. Each topic is supported with examples and some general remarks on the phenomenon. Since none of this material is new, it will be most useful for those who have little or no familiarity with the literature on Black English.

In Chapter 7, data are presented on the correlation between phonological and morphological variation and speech event tyre. The speech event types in this case are characterized by their level of formality as a function of familiarity (whether the speakers are well acquainted with each other) and share vernacular culture (whether all participants are products of vernacular culture). Speech event type 1 is characterized by familiarity and shared vernacular culture. With type 2, vernacular culture is shared also, but familiarity is absent. With type 3, familiarity is present, but vernacular culture is not shared. With type 4, there is neither shared vernacular culture nor familiarity. Analyses were carried out for seven kinds of variation: suffix /-s/ deletion, /t/ and /d/ deletion in consonant

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clusters, *is* deletion, *is* contraction, *are* deletion, *are* contraction, and postvocalic /r/ deletion.

For each kind of variation, Baugh gives the probability value for deletion according to both speech event type and linguistic environment. I will consider briefly his treatment of /-s/ deletion and then offer some general remarks on the analyses presented in Chapter 7 considered together.

Baugh's findings on /-s/ deletion replicate those of Wolfram (1969) for Detroit blacks. Third singular /-s/ is deleted most often, followed by the possessive suffix, which is in turn followed by the plural suffix /-s/. Thus Baugh's findings provide yet another indication that the black vernacular is surprisingly uniform nationally in comparison to white dialects of English. It is interesting that Wolfram and Fasold have classified the absence of 3sg. /-s/ as dialect importation since it is absent in BVE "at frequencies often higher than 75 percent" (Wolfram & Fasold 1974:156), figures prominently in hypercorrection, and is completely absent in the speech of some speakers. For Wolfram (1969), it is not in underlying form. Baugh calculates the probability of 3sg. /-s/ absence to be .753, the highest of all items analyzed, but curiously says nothing about its status in underlying vernacular grammar. (When correlated with speech event type, separate probability values are not calculated for each of the three uses of suffix /-s/. As a result, the reader cannot determine whether the probability value for 3sg. /-s/ deletion ever drops significantly below .75.)

This is one of several instances in which Baugh does not relate his findings to the literature as much as he might. It is only fair to note in his defense, however, that his stated primary interest is in uncovering patterns and magnitudes in stylistic variation. Consequently, a more appropriate question would be whether any generalizations emerge concerning stylistic variation. Baugh does not really present any generalizations nor are the data satisfactorily explained or systematized in any other way. The statement closest to a generalization that one can extract from the analysis is that in the case of four (suffix /-s/ deletion, *is* deletion, *are* contraction, and postvocalic /r/ deletion) of the seven types of variation considered, speech event types 1 and 3 (those characterized by familiarity) are more likely to produce speech with the highest number of nonstandard features than are types 2 and 4 (where familiarity is absent). Thus familiarity would be more likely to produce more nonstandard speech variants than shared vernacular culture.

As Baugh points out, his data are meant to show the "complexity and elasticity" of vernacular speech. Even though his findings cannot be modeled neatly, they point with some clarity to directions for future research. An important point, which Baugh discusses quite convincingly, is that vernacular speakers control their use of some variables during conversations, while others go unmonitored. Additionally, he notes the significant influence of the media and instruction in the schools, which bring the stigma attached to certain grammatical features more clearly into speakers' minds.

One noteworthy problem with Baugh's research as reported is that it is not replicable. One of several important questions is: Who are his informants? They are speakers of BVE and products of vernacluar (i.e., popular, urban) black culture, but beyond this, no information is provided nor is the term "vernacular culture" defined or adequately characterized, even though it figures prominently in the determination of speech event formality. No systematic information is provided in data analyses on the sex, age, socioeconomic class, or regional origin of informants. Overall, discussions of methodology oriented toward replicability are few, even though such discussions would have been appropriate given Baugh's generous inclusion of material for the specialist. Indeed, the fact that Baugh includes much material for the specialist, but not enough, and much material for the nonspecialist, but not enough, points to the book's central problem, from which most of the others stem: It attempts with limited success to satisfy two audiences.

Baugh's discussion of what he terms "unique grammatical usages" is of special interest, particularly in view of recent work that has focused on aspects of Black English grammar that represent absolute differences between it and non-Black English dialects (Spears 1982, 1984). Such absolute differences are still being uncovered and suggest that, although Black English is probably the most studied ethnic dialect group (comprising standard and nonstandard varieties), we have yet much to learn.

The discussion of *steady* and *be done* as unique grammatical usages raises several questions. The most significant is whether these two are grammatical items or lexical ones. Obviously, there are many lexical differences between black and non-black dialects and among dialects in general. These differences are insignificant when compared to the different basic structural building blocks of dialects being compared. Baugh states in Chapter 6 that BVE *steady* is an adverb, occurring in sentences such as the following (86):

(1) Ricky Bell be steady steppin in them number nines.
(2) . . . your mind is steady workin.
(3) She steady be runnin her mouth.
(4) Them brothers be rappin steady.

It marks the action of a particular verb as being intense, consistent, and continuous in manner. With regard to *steadily* in the speech of white speakers, Baugh states that while there is "a close semantic approximation, the corresponding impact of intensity and continuation is not explicit when paraphrasing with *steadily* in the environments where *steady* is usually found" (87).

Although grammaticalization (or syntacticization) is not always clear-cut, but is rather a matter of degree, particularly keeping in mind that grammaticalization is the result of a diachronic process, certain items are clearly not grammatical: those not belonging to a closed set. This includes elements belonging to word classes that accept additions with relative ease, among which is the class of

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adverbs. BVE *steady,* no matter what is aspectual or other semantic baggage, is at most merely a difference in vocabulary between BVE and other English dialects. It is, moreover, interesting that dictionary entries for *steadily* provide meanings which include those which Baugh posits as unique to BVE. The crucial point, though, is that *steady* cannot be considered a "unique grammatical usage" because it is not a grammatical item.

Be done is. It belongs to the closed set of BVE auxiliaries and semiauxiliaries. Its unique usage in black speech (not explained clearly by Baugh) is brought out by the following examples, the second provided by Baugh (80):

(5) I'll have killed that motherfucker if he tries to lay a hand on my kid again.
(6) I'll be done killed that motherfucker if he tries to lay a hand on my kid again.

Example (5), with Standard English grammar is quite odd; example (6), a BVE sentence, is not odd at all. The problem stems from the fact that only in the black vernacular can the future perfect clause (with *be done*) express an event which is the consequence of and which is subsequent to the event of trying to lay a hand on the child which is expressed in the second clause. This, of course, is not to claim that in SE a future perfect apodosis can never preceed its hypostasis (with a futurate, simple present verb form). Even though this would rarely occur, examples with accompanying contexts can be constructed, but none need detain us here.

Thus, BVE *be done* is not at all merely an equivalent of the future perfect with *will*, and it seems almost certain that it has no equivalent in any non-black dialect of English, given the usage pointed out by Baugh.

However, some additional remarks are in order, and they concern the question of why Black English should have the additional usage of *be done* exemplified in (6). There is much to be said, but I will discuss it as briefly as possible.

My own contact with Black English indicates that this usage has most often a retributive sense and is uttered in negative contexts. Typically, someone has done something to which the speaker reacts negatively, stating the action that will be taken – "kill the motherfucker, kick ass" – and so forth. It is important to note that this usage is part of a partially elided stock phrase, uttered frequently in a set way. Perhaps the most frequent and complete formulation is

(7) If X, I ('ll) be done Y so quick s/he won't know what happen to him/her.

This second usage also occurs in contexts which are negative but not retributive, for example, those involving great fright. To (8), a child might answer (9):

(8) What will you do if you're in a dark room at night, and you see a whole bunch of ghosts and things?
(9) I ('ll) be done jump out the window so quick they won't even know what happen.

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The key is that these negative situations or events are considered to require rapid reaction, so rapid, as it were, that the reaction is seen as an event having no duration in conceptual time and requiring reference to its aftermath if it is to be referred to at all.

Since the original phrase is being or perhaps has been lost among some younger vernacular users, a grammatically interesting contrast between (6) and (10) has developed:

(10) I'll kill that motherfucker if he tries to lay a hand on my kid again.

(6) I'll be done killed that motherfucker if he tries to lay a hand on my kid again.

Example (6), of course, is the stronger since it expresses the rapid reaction more appropriate to a strong provocation.

The second usage of *be done*, what we might label the "*be done* of rapid reaction," can be linked to speech habits in the black community and what may well be a group-specific way of looking at the world. Most interesting is that this is a case in which speech focusing on certain kinds of negative context has apparently given rise to a differentiating grammatical feature of Black English. This would not be worth mentioning were it not for the existence of another such feature, the *come* of indignation (Spears 1982) and others which have not yet been described.

Baugh's book is definitely worth reading for the new information presented on Black English alone, and this is so in spite of expository problems stemming to a large extent from what is perhaps best interpreted as a dual-audience focus with limited success. Personal interests have caused me to concentrate on material in the book dealing with black language structure; however, I should stress that the chapters on education and employability are lucid and positively provocative. Baugh, quite interestingly, focuses on black self-help as a means for solving educational problems, not, however, in a Sowellian (e.g., Sowell 1981) vein, but, I believe, in a sincere effort to focus on a relatively neglected component of the discourse generated by the black condition.

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JOHN CHAMBERS, JR. (ed.), *Black English: Educational equity and the law*. Ann Arbor, Mich: Karoma, 1983. Pp. xiv + 170.

This volume is a collection of seven papers which explore the "Ann Arbor Black English" court case and decision of July, 1979. Six of these papers were among those presented at a National Institute of Education conference in June, 1980, which focused on the decision by United States District Court Judge Charles W. Joiner. This decision, which is included in the book as an appendix, was widely misinterpreted in the press as sanctioning, even enforcing, the teaching of Black English. Actually, the decision required the Ann Arbor school district to recognize that some children attending their schools spoke this vernacular social dialect and to take it into account in teaching them to read standard English. What is unique about this decision, at least in the field of language and education, is its reliance on a body of research, presented through expert testimony, to resolve a legal argument.

All the authors clearly, and some quite vehemently, favor this decision. They view the decision from legal, civil rights, educational, historical, linguistic, and philosophical perspectives. In spite of the variety of perspectives, however, the authors uniformly support the affirmation of cultural and linguistic diversity in this country. This book's heavy political stance will not please those who opt for the assimilation and integration of ethnic minorities over the affirmation of diversity. I would say that this book is not for them – but several of the papers are clearly intended to persuade such people of the importance of acknowledging and valuing cultural heritages. It should be noted that the linguists who have studied vernacular dialects also support their recognition as legitimate language systems, if not for political reasons, then for scientific ones. That is, the linguistic evidence is clear: nonstandard dialects do not reflect deficiencies in their users, but are normal, complex language systems. What is done about them in a society is an educationl, and ultimately political, issue.

Since it is ultimately a political issue, it is fortunate that the general tone and level of these papers are appropriate for an audience of "educated laymen." Although the issues discussed are substantial and complex, the discussion is carried on in relatively nontechnical language. Thus this book will contribute to