

Review: Reassessing the Status of Black English (Review Article)

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Reassessing the status of Black English (Review article)

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Butters's (1989) book, *The Death of Black English*, does an excellent job of summarizing most of the important research on Black English (BE) over the past 15 or 20 years and subjects the results of that research to an analysis and evaluation that is considerably more thorough than what is typically found in variation studies. It is not that variation studies often lack in thoroughness, simply that Butters is more thorough than what we are used to. Indeed, his discussions and arguments are often so fine-grained – and lengthy – that they are difficult to present in a book review. For that reason, I concentrate on only a subset of the variables he discusses and then present some conclusions regarding the broader context of BE studies.

Butters's focus is on the recent divergence/convergence controversy, but he also presents (particularly in Chapter 5) important discussions of a number of issues associated with variation research, for example, the difficulty of determining the full range of a speaker's linguistic competence, the criteria for deciding who is a speaker of Black English Vernacular (BEV), and the relative importance of structural or grammatical differences among dialects (such as those involving verbal systems) as opposed to nonstructural ones (e.g., prosody).

Regarding the “data which have been presented to date as support for the divergence hypothesis” (Butters 1989:5), Butters's conclusion is that they are “in general not interpretable in any simple way, pro or con” (1989:5), that BE is actually best seen as both diverging and converging, depending on the particular features on which one focuses. Moreover, “If anything, the evidence seems to point to a mild sort of stable convergence in which linguistic changes arise in both the White and Black communities” (1989:180).

He goes on to express the view that both Black and White communities borrow from each other, but that convergence is overall toward the culture of the majority, as they control the major power-wielding institutions of society (1989:180). In Butters's view, linguistic assimilation has been the major pattern in American history; this history indicates that the “death” of BE is at least as likely as an increasing divergence, whether we would like for BE to “die” or not (1989:4,5).

In discussing the divergence hypothesis, whose principal proponents are Labov (1985, 1986, 1987) and Bailey and Maynor (Bailey 1987; Bailey & Maynor 1987, 1989), we must separate the linguistic claims from the linguistic data supporting those claims, and both of these from the sociopolitical claims.

The linguistic claims of Bailey and Maynor are as follows: (1) BEV is diverging structurally from White dialects of English, especially in the South, and (2) it was formerly converging for many years, but "that convergence has ended" (Bailey & Maynor 1989:13). They went on to state, or contradicted themselves, depending on one's reading, by declaring that their fieldwork indicates "both BEV and the white vernaculars are undergoing a number of complex changes, some of them convergent and others divergent. But . . . the divergent ones are more widespread, fundamental, and recent, while the convergent ones are more restricted and began much earlier" (Bailey & Maynor 1989:19–20). We can bring consistency into their comments by assuming that by "convergence has ended," they mean convergence as the major trend in the evolution of white and black dialects has ended.

Bailey and Maynor also used the term *convergence* in a peculiar sense. To wit, in speaking of /I/ and /E/ neutralization before nasals, they stated that the oldest White and Black informants, as well as former slaves on the Library of Congress recordings, do not neutralize. Blacks and whites under 50, though, do neutralize. "Here BEV and the white vernaculars are converging" (Bailey & Maynor 1989:20). What they described in this case is actually parallel evolution, not convergence. For there to be convergence, speech behavior, with regard to some grammatical feature, must go from more different to less different.

The variable that Bailey and Maynor gave most attention to throughout their writings is invariant *be*, or *be*₂. However, they also discussed in less detail other variables. One of them, *r*-lessness, is claimed to be decreasing in white speech, while remaining steady in that of blacks. This, then, would be an instance of divergence.

Butters (1989:36–47) refuted their claim about *r*-lessness by adducing data from several studies in other areas, some of which are broader areas including smaller areas from which data were also culled (South Carolina; Charleston; the Atlantic Coastal South; Hillsborough, North Carolina; Philadelphia; and New York City). Butters's basic argument is that, when a broader sociolinguistic context is provided for Bailey's and Maynor's Brazos Valley Texas study, their results can be seen to be too questionable to be accepted as any kind of proof of divergence. Butters not only examined their data compared to data on the same phenomenon in other places, he also dealt with the data in terms of social class, language norms, and the rural/urban difference (not to say that Bailey and Maynor did not, simply that Butters did so in considerably more detail). Counterarguments on the basis of this

broader sociolinguistic context and flaws pointed out in Bailey's and Maynor's work add up to a convincing rebuttal.

With regard to invariant *be*, Bailey and Maynor (1987, 1989) also claimed divergence. This is the variable to which they have given the most attention. Their data show that in the case of three lower-class, black, Texan informants (11–13-year-old preteens, rural informants over 65 years old, and former slaves born between 1844 and 1865), there are structural differences between the speech of the children, on one hand, and the older adults and former slaves, on the other. That is, there is quantitative and qualitative variation. *Be*₂ in the speech of the children is primarily a marker of extended duration or, if not that, habitual aspect.¹ Whereas the older blacks used invariant *be* (i.e., *be*₂) before all predicates (except *gonna*, where it is never used), the children used it very frequently before V + *-ing* and only occasionally elsewhere. (Of the older blacks, the former slaves did not use invariant *be* before V + *-ing* at all [Bailey & Maynor 1989:15].) For the children, unlike the adults, *be*₂ “serves as a marker of durative and habitual actions” (Bailey & Maynor 1989:14), whereas zero and the conjugated forms of *be* are most often used for other tense-aspects. (This is truer of the urban children than the rural ones, so the authors did recognize an important urban/rural dimension.)

Butters made a number of remarks on the *be*₂ study, some of which cannot really be taken as counterarguments and should be taken as comments, suggesting counterarguments if developed further. A fundamental point he made concerns Bailey's and Maynor's claim that what has occurred with *be*₂ is a major development in the evolution of BE due to its bringing about a restructuring of the BE verbal system. Butters argued that whether the change is a matter of style shifting and/or age-grading, on the one hand, or grammatical restructuring, on the other, is “not so very easy to sort out” (Butters 1989:21). He came down on the side of style shifting/age-grading, which he felt to be plausible due particularly to *be*₂'s serving as a symbol of black identity, especially among younger Blacks. Whether conscious or not, “speakers use the ‘new’ rule as much to indicate membership in their cohort as for any pressing semantic reason” (Butters 1989:22). For his part, Wolfram (1990:130) suspected that there is both real time change and age-grading involved.

My own view is that Bailey and Maynor have presented plausible support for their basic hypothesis as it concerns Brazos Valley, Texas. Observe that Butters took his data from several studies and places. How major a change in the BE verbal system this change represents is a matter of opinion in the absence of some evaluation metric for determining such things, perhaps one based on mutual intelligibility between dialects. Butters argued, correctly, that *be*₂ is not a full-fledged auxiliary because it lacks some of the properties associated with auxiliaries, for example, subject–verb inversion. How-

ever, it does have other properties, such as uninflectability and restricted occurrence in compound verbal constructions; so, it can be taken as a semi-auxiliary. Therefore, if Butters wanted to suggest that it is less significant because it is not a full auxiliary, his point is weakened because it is a semiauxiliary. My point is that, if we accept that *be*₂ is a new development, then we must accept that it is a restructuring of the verbal system, in the minimal sense that the system has added a new grammatical element (or semi-grammatical element, if you will). If that restructuring has come about because of this element's symbolic importance, then so be it. This also does not detract from its status as a restructuring, following Langacker's (1977) definition, which Bailey and Maynor used. Obviously, this restructuring, weighty or not, cannot be considered as consequential as, say, a change in the functioning of adpositions that accompanies word order change; but it is a restructuring nevertheless.

In reality, habitual invariant *be* represents more of a difference between Black and White dialects than anyone, to my knowledge, has recognized in print. Elizabeth Dayton has noted (personal communication and at conferences) that *be*₂ occurs with stative verbs. I have observed this repeatedly in speech also, for example, *They always be knowing the answer*. Thus, unlike *be + V + -ing* constructions in other dialects, certainly standard ones, it is not sensitive to stativity. It is, then, in this regard, a true habitual (unlike, I might add, the nonpunctual preverbal markers of many Atlantic creole languages, which can express habituality contextually but which do not normally occur with stative predicates).

In spite of the foregoing, Bailey and Maynor have not by any means demonstrated that the divergent trends are "more widespread, fundamental, and recent" (Bailey & Maynor 1989:19-20).

Perhaps the real issue is how generalizable Bailey's and Maynor's claims are outside of their research site. It needs to be made clear that some older blacks use *be*₂ in a habitual sense and frequently before *V + -ing*, the speakers being people that I talk to regularly, including neighbors and a recently deceased relative who would be in her 80s if still alive. Some of them I have never heard use *be* except as a habitual. Of course, one needs quantitative data in the final analysis; but I would say that it is totally unwarranted to conclude that habitual invariant *be* is a relatively recent phenomenon in the United States – in specific areas, maybe. This suggests that Bailey's and Maynor's argument for divergence may be wrong, but not necessarily. Even though older blacks use habitual invariant *be* in some (urban) areas of the United States, they may use it less than younger blacks. Additionally, as Bailey and Maynor claimed, urban areas may be the focal points for this feature's spread.

One of the major problems with the divergence hypothesis as espoused by Bailey and Maynor is that their data are much too limited to support such

a grand hypothesis about what is happening to BEV, that is, to BEV nationally. Their claims of divergence should be explicitly limited to the areas whose speech patterns they have analyzed.

Labov, to my knowledge, unlike Bailey and Maynor, has not claimed that convergence, as a major trend, has ended. In fact, he recognized that, "There is considerable evidence to support the view that the black vernacular is moving closer to other dialects" (Labov 1987:6), citing Vaughn-Cooke's (1976) research on the restoration of initial syllables as well as the research of other scholars. It seems, then, that actually we must interpret his view as being that there is not only convergence but divergence also. Unfortunately, this difference between Labov, on the one hand, and Bailey and Maynor, on the other, is not emphasized, as it should be, in Butters's book.

Labov's claims of divergence (1985, 1986, 1987) are based primarily on his claims that (1) Philadelphia blacks are not participating in vowel shifts evidence in the white vernacular, and (2) narrative *-s* is a new development in the black Philadelphia vernacular that whites do not share.

Among the vowel shifts are the fronting of the vowels in *too* and *code* and the diphthong of *house*. In this matter, Butters accepted Labov's research as pointing toward divergence, in Philadelphia at least. One interesting question is, why? Butters mentioned that there may well be extralinguistic barriers to blacks' participation in this vowel shift. Related to this I would note that in the fully segregated midwestern community in which I grew up many blacks, when imitating whites, would front vowels in addition to using the diphthong /ay/, often prolonging the offglide so it would be clear that the offglide was /y/ and not /I/ or /E/, both found in the speech of some blacks there. Later, while living in Chicago, I found blacks there did the same thing. Sometimes the fronted vowels were missing from the imitation; the diphthong, never. Where I grew up, normally, if a nonadult had used these features, he or she would have been either ostracized by peers or at least socially crippled, the extent being a function of sex, class, and other social variables. A few teachers used the diphthong, and they were criticized by people of all ages as "trying to talk proper" or "trying to talk" like they were white. (As these terms were used, one did not imply the other.²) In sum, there was obvious social pressure not to adopt speech features closely associated with Whites; this was true of speech, dress, walking, dancing – in short, most things. Such social factors no doubt play an important role in the maintenance of differences in black and white speech.

Labov's claims regarding narrative *-s* were considered by Butters to be "suspect at best" (Butters 1989:91). Roughly the same opinion is held by others, such as Rickford (1987), Vaughn-Cooke (1987), and Wolfram (1987). This feature is quite similar to the Historical Present, found in standard English and white vernaculars, not to mention Samaná English, spoken by descendents of American blacks now living in the Dominican Republic

(Tagliamonte & Poplack 1988). Labov saw this BE feature as distinct, however, because (1) it does not occur with *say*, (2) it is not limited to third person singular, and (3) it is (variably) absent in conjoined clauses, after the first conjunct, for example, *this guy RUNS behin' me an' BEND down* (Myhill & Harris 1986:28).

Butters's approach is mainly to argue that a very similar Historical Present-like phenomenon occurs in non-black dialects and among blacks whose speech he studied in Wilmington, Delaware, in the early 1970s. Interestingly, he did not really deal with the claim that this *-s* is not limited to third person singular in narratives (Myhill & Harris 1986:27). The bottom line is that the necessary time depth data is missing; so the claim of divergence lacks support, whether one accepts narrative *-s* as a synchronic feature of BEV or not.

Wolfram (1990) stated that resultative *be done* (e.g., *I'll be done killed that motherfucker if he tries to lay a hand on my kid again*) is an important piece of evidence for Labov's (1987, not 1985, as Wolfram indicated) divergence hypothesis that Butters did not discuss in any detail. Actually, Labov observed that *be done* illustrates how BEV has "diverged and developed radically from its Caribbean relatives" (1987:7). No one, to my knowledge, has discussed this form with regard to the Black/White dialect divergence controversy (see Baugh 1983; Spears 1985, 1990, for further discussion of *be done*).

Butters made the important point that the supporters of divergence see it as a recent phenomenon. The implication is that divergence suggests something ominous about American ethnic relations, notably that the increasing segregation of blacks and whites in many areas of the United States has dragged in its wake a cultural – and more specifically, linguistic – divergence among blacks resulting from their social isolation.

As Butters recognized, the pro-divergence studies seem based on a simplistic social science. For one thing, there is no reason to believe that divergence is new, or that divergence cannot perfectly well co-exist with convergence, as Butters and others have pointed out. As I have noted (Spears 1987), not just language, but black culture as a whole, has historically been about more than assimilation alone, and this is typically the case with all oppressed groups, whose physical resistance to their oppression is always accompanied by psychological and cultural resistance.

Concerning these claims, one should note that no doubt all BE scholars admit the possibility of divergence; the question is whether the data presented in support of claims of divergence actually prove it. Butters (1989:181) claimed no, observing that the only features that stand any chance of being divergent are *be₂*, the pronunciation of the voiceless dental fricative as /f/ (rising among blacks), the possibly increasing use of verbal *-s* in white vernaculars, and the increasing fronting of back vowels in white vernaculars.

REASSESSING THE STATUS OF BLACK ENGLISH

My own view is that the data presented do not provide proof as such, but that a priori, given what we know in general about black and white language and culture in the United States, we should expect some divergence.

It seems that one-sided convergence – that is, decreolization – was assumed to be the result of mass media influence, language norms inculcated by public school education, and increased social interaction between blacks and whites resulting from school integration. In view of this assumption of one-sidedness in change . . . Labov's claim of divergence takes on a special importance. It says that the overall evolution of black culture . . . is about more than assimilation. It affirms what most black social scientists have been saying all along, in unison with some of their nonblack colleagues, that black culture is creative and transformative, taking from mainstream American culture as well as other American cultural traditions, but at the same time maintaining and evolving, if you will, its own distinctiveness. This is what we expect in all situations of contact. (Spears 1987:49)

NOTES

1. From all indications, the authors meant simply that the form is a marker of habitual aspect, which may contextually be durative, that is, uninterrupted, or iterative, interrupted. See Comrie (1976) for discussions of aspect using terminology that is now more common in treatments of aspect.
2. For example, "trying to talk proper," but not "trying to talk white," would be the appropriate label for the highly rhotacized speech of the proper-talking ladies, and sometimes gentlemen, who often made announcements in churches. In such speech, *judge* became *jerdge* and *such*, *serch*.

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ARTHUR K. SPEARS

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