On Shallow Grammar: African American English and the Critique of Exceptionalism

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Shallow grammar refers to any one or the set of written grammatical descriptions as well as the set of approaches to grammatical study shackled by received theoretical questions, methodologies, and inventories of human language grammatical features, all of which contribute to the overlooking of important grammatical features in the languages under study. African American English (AAE) studies offer prime examples of shallow grammar, in terms of research processes and resulting grammatical descriptions. As often noted, the AAE vernacular (AAVE, see below) is the most studied variety of English, outside the standard; yet, no grammar thus far produced even lays out the basic features—formatives and their interactions—of the verbal auxiliary system. Perhaps as many as a third of the auxiliaries in this system have either never been discussed in the literature or have been discussed in only a handful of writings (see Appendix). Nevertheless, unbridled theorizing on the history and nature of AAE forges ahead on the thinnest tissue of grammatical understanding. The phenomenon of shallow grammar also renders patently clear the premature and intellectually irresponsible nature of much theorizing on creoles and other contact languages. (In this chapter, I use *creole*, lower case, in reference to the group of languages called creoles. The term refers to a type of language, extensionally defined. When using DeGraff's [2005] term *Creole exceptionalism*, I will capitalize *Creole,* as he does.) The notion of Creole exceptionalism is, among other things, an artifact of shallow grammar.

DeGraff defines *Creole exceptionalism* as 'a set of beliefs, widespread among both linguists and nonlinguists, that Creole languages form an exceptional class on phylogenetic and/or typological grounds' (DeGraff, 2005: 533; see also DeGraff, this volume). DeGraff speaks of exceptionalism in relation to creole languages and focuses on Haitian Creole. Exceptionalism is also relevant in the study of AAE; I will return to this relevance shortly. As an AAE researcher and a creolist, I observe that the bottom line regarding Creole exceptionalism with respect to typology is that any creolist can define creoles typologically, as does McWhorter (e.g. 2001, and see the references in DeGraff, 2005) in a number of writings, if s/he manipulates membership in the group of languages called creoles. Membership manipulation makes typologically exceptionalist claims about creoles circular and therefore unfalsifiable. Phylogenetic exceptionalist claims, such as Bickerton's (1981) Bioprogram Hypothesis and others' revisions of it, have already been disproved (see the discussion in DeGraff 2005 and this volume). These hypotheses state essentially that creole genesis partially recapitulates phylogeny,

the birth of language as a human trait. Views of creole language genesis qua recapitulating phylogeny gave rise to the term *new languages* in respect to creoles.

From a sociohistorical perspective, Creole exceptionalism must be seen as an exercise, whether conscious or unconscious—it matters not, in the maintenance of white supremacist racism, a regime of truth, in the Foucaultian sense, whose logic requires (1) the continued debasement of Haiti (whose culture and Creole are discussed at length in DeGraff [2005] in retaliation for the Haitian Revolution's epistemological 'crime' against white supremacist racism, and (2) the continual intervention in and destabilization of sub-Saharan ('black') Africa, among other developing regions, whose material resources are indispensable for world industry. These resources are largely controlled by global capitalists in service to the world color order. It is of interest that all of the major recent (post-World War II) hypotheses on Creole exceptionalism were produced in the US, the world headquarters of white supremacist racism (Spears, 1999).

Some Background on AAE's Relation to Creoles

African American English (AAE) is not currently considered a creole by creolists or noncreolists who specialize in AAE study. It has, however, been labeled a *semi-creole,* or labeled by the equivalent and later term *partially restructured language* (Holm, 1992, 2004). Compare the term *restructured language* in reference to creoles. The use of either *semi-creole* or *partially restructured language* implies that AAE shares grammatical features with Atlantic creole languages, but not enough of them to be considered a full-fledged language of the creole type. This view can be taken as implying that creole languages either constitute a separate typological class or merely that there is a group of grammatical features that are commonly found in creoles. My view is the latter.

Some earlier views considered AAE a decreolized language variety, or post-creole—an erstwhile creole that had undergone gradual linguistic changes over time, becoming close enough in grammar to the ensemble of other American English varieties to be classified as a variety of English, albeit one with some few grammatical remnants of its creole past (Stewart, 1967, 1968; Dillard, 1972). (See Spears, forthcoming, for a fuller discussion of hypotheses on AAE genesis and evolution.)

I have recently demonstrated that AAE has many more creole-associated grammatical features (creolisms) than previously thought and explained why it does not have the high profile, conspicuous grammatical features typically used as diagnostics, such as, for example, the pronominal and verbal systems typical of creoles (Spears, forthcoming). As noted above, the term *creole language* has no air-tight linguistic or sociohistorical definition, *pace* McWhorter (2001). However, given that there is a set of grammatical features considered as typical of Caribbean creole languages, not all of which have been recorded for every single language traditionally called a creole, I advance the neocreolist claim that most varieties of AAE, leaving aside focal creolisms, can reasonably be termed creoles on the basis of *nonfocal* creole-associated grammatical features (Spears, forthcoming), which have hardly or not at all been

discussed in the literature. Focal creolisms, creole grammatical features frequently discussed in the literature, are largely absent from AAE today due to historical assimilationist pressures in the US and the much stronger history in the US of black formal education, relative to the Caribbean. In sum, we might label AAE a *creole-related* language.

Varieties of AAE

Before going further, it must be noted that two main varieties of AAE can be distinguished with reference to the notion of standardness: the nonstandard one, which, following recent literature, I will refer to as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and African American Standard English (AASE) (Spears, 1988, 2007b, forthcoming). Although standards are commonly considered as attaching to regional groups among others, they are not usually associated with specific ethnic or racial groups, e.g. African Americans. The term AASE implies that in the case of African Americans there is an ethnic standard variety that satisfies the conditions for standardness and also has distinctive grammatical traits associated with this ethnic group's variety.

The conditions for standard status are basically negative: a standard variety does not have certain grammatical features considered nonstandard, e.g. multiple negatives; *ain't* use; and double modals, as in (1):

 (1)   We might could do that.
         'Maybe we could do that.'

Note, though, that there is not a universally recognized set of features that make up the list of nonstandard features. One learns a variety of the standard by growing up interacting with its speakers or through education. Distinctively African American (or *Black*) grammatical features (DBGFs) occurring in AASE are not discussed in pedagogical and prescriptive grammars. Also, they are not recognized in the normal case by AAE speakers or other dialect speakers as being distinctively African American. These features have gone unclassified with respect to standardness by those who might want to label them as nonstandard because of their being distinctively African American and because of the low prestige often attached to any kind of speech labeled "African American" or "black." Were these features better known, we might well see efforts to classify them as nonstandard, i.e., to make them 'exceptional', simply because they are distinctive to AAE.

Creole and AAE Exceptionalism

I emphasize the observation that racist ideology is the buttress of shallow grammar (Alim and Baugh, 2007; Makoni *et al.*, 2003; Smitherman, 2000, especially Part Four; Spears, 1999), which in turn lends support to Creole and AAE exceptionalism. Exceptionalism begins with the racist ideological framework that produces an expected outcome—shallow grammar—which then confirms what were erroneous assumptions to begin with. The process is circular.

No parallel ideas of AAE grammatical exceptionalism are current among AAE scholars, practically all of whose research has focused on AAVE. However, its nonlinguistic implications, especially, 'that Creole languages are a "handicap" for their speakers, which has undermined the role that Creoles should play in the education and socioeconomic development of monolingual Creolophones,' (DeGraff, 2005: 533), often apply (*mutatis mutandis*) to AAVE in the minds of lay people—and shockingly, some linguists. (Many PhD programs in linguistics do not require students to take any sociolinguistics courses, where they would learn, minimally, about the rule-governedness and communicative adequacy of stigmatized language varieties such as AAVE. As recently as the late 1980s, National Science Foundation grant proposal evaluators erroneously asserted that a proposal to fund a study of African American children's acquisition of AAVE was unfundable because the children were not acquiring a full-fledged language; thus, the study, they thought, would be of questionable usefulness for acquisition research.)

Note that it is AAVE that is labeled as a handicap (few lay persons or linguists are aware of AASE). It, in comparison to the standard, is erroneously assumed to be grammarless, illogical, and communicatively deficient. (As observed above, American standard English is actually a group of standard varieties, classified on regional, ethnic, and other bases.)

One way of encapsulating one strand of the Creole exceptionalist view of creole grammar is 'Creole languages have the world's simplest grammars' (McWhorter, 2001). Note in this connection that it is one thing to state that a group of languages *appear, on the basis of our current state of knowledge*, to have the world's simplest grammars. It is another to make an unqualified assertion that they do. Regardless of the difficulties in defining what grammatical simplicity actually means in talking about the entire grammars of individual languages (Faraclas, 2006), taking into account solely the *dual* prosodic systems of a number of Caribbean area creole languages, one must conclude that we have significant research left to do before making claims about simplicity. Research over the last decade has demonstrated that several creole languages make use of *two* prosodic systems (stress and tone) to make lexical contrasts (Saramaccan, Ndjuka, Guyanese, Papiamentu, Jamaican (Gooden, 2003), Crucian, and Bajan (Barbadian), while their lexifier languages make use of stress alone. (See Faraclas, 2006 and Good, 2006 together for remarks on all of these languages.) In terms of prosody, then, these creoles are more complex than their lexifiers, because, unlike their lexifiers, they have both stress and tone. Stress refers to how prominent syllables are. For example, *produce* (fruit and vegetables) has stress on the first syllable. *Produce* (to bring into existence) has stress on the second syllable. Tone is the use of pitch to distinguish meaning in a precise way (as linguists would say, to signal semantic rather than solely pragmatic distinctions). Pitch ranges from high to low (think of musical notes). Pitch is called tone when precise meaning differences (semantic differences) are signaled by pitch. For example, tones differences in a syllable of a verb, in many West African languages change the tense of the verb (e.g. present, past, etc.).

Dual prosodic systems have been detailed since McWhorter's (2001) claims. We can be certain that other areas of grammar will be revealed to be more complex, given that shallow grammars are the norm in creole grammatical studies. This is to be expected since so much of the attention of creolists has focused on sociohistorical questions, and the in-depth study of creole

grammars is quite recent and constitutes a relatively small subfield of linguistics with few practitioners.

Shallow Grammar and AAE

There are several contributing factors to AAE shallow grammar. First, only a small group of grammatical features is studied in depth, primarily in a variationist framework, for example, copula absence and invariant habitual *be*. Copula absence refers to sentences in AAVE that do not have a form of the copula *be*, especially the singular, whose absence distinguishes AAVE from other American dialects, standard and vernacular. Copula absence is exemplified in (2):

(2) a. John Ø crazy. (AAVE)
     b. John's (John is) crazy. (AASE, other American dialects; parentheses in examples contain variants)

Invariant habitual *be* is an auxiliary verb form occurring in AAVE (but not AASE) that is never conjugated; it signals habitual aspect—the occurrence of an event or state over a significantly long period of time (length depending on the social context). Note the following examples and their glosses:

(3) a. She always be throwing my stuff away. (AAVE)
         'She always throws HABITUAL (is always throwing HABITUAL) my stuff away.'
     b. He be over at Grandpa house. (AAVE)
         'He is (HABITUAL) over at Grandpa's house.

In reality, there are a number of distinctively Black (i.e. African American) grammatical features (DBGFs) that have seldom been discussed in the literature, though this situation is being corrected (Spears, 1998, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b, To appear).

Second, few studies approach AAE grammar systemically, whether the whole system of grammar or subsystems, such as the auxiliary system we focus on here, but note Labov's (1998) and Green's (2002) efforts to address this problem.

Third, there has been little attention to communicative practices (Morgan, 2002; Smitherman, 1977; and several publications of Spears are the major exceptions in this regard.) I have pointed out (Spears, 2007a, and below) that a number of grammatical features distinguishing AAE grammar are closely connected with distinctive African American communicative practices. Thus, if due attention is not paid to those practices, there is a strong likelihood that these grammatical features will be overlooked. (Disapproval markers are prominent in this regard, as we shall see below.)

Fourth, in terms of methodology, there is very little collecting and analyzing of speaker-initiated discourses, produced by speakers as they carry out real, everyday, socially situated tasks requiring speech, i.e. *naturally occurring speech*, ethnographically observed but with a focus on grammatical analysis. Studies have generally focused on researcher prompted speech outside the context of speakers' normal daily lives, for example, sociolinguistic interviews, researcher prompted narratives, and repetition tests.

By *ethnographically observed* speech, I refer to speech recorded or noted in its context of natural occurrence, by participant observation. The kind of *participant observation* I stress refers to researchers' studying the speech of communities of which they are members, as they go about their social business as members of the community. (Participant observers may also, of course, be nonmembers of the community.) Participant-member observation normally assumes native speaker ability in the language of interest, and native speakerhood can provide not only grammatical intuitions but also make possible participant observation and recollection—not just recordings—of socially situated, naturally occurring speech. The point here is that all work on AAE involving participant observation, except that of Spears, has been related to the study of communicative practices alone without accounting for grammatical analysis. More important, however, is that naturally-occurring speech, no matter how obtained, is key for observing grammar in its 'natural habitat.'

This leads to the fifth factor, which is that AAE grammar is rarely studied within the context of communicative practices and culture generally, that is, holistically; but, it should be in order to avoid the shallow grammar trap. Stated differently, linguists should always keep in mind *ethnogrammar* (my term, cp. *ethnosyntax* [Wierzbicka, 1979; Enfield, 2002]), the interconnections between the cultural knowledge, attitudes, practices of speakers, and the grammatical (including phonology) resources they employ in speech. Ethnogrammar stresses the interconstitutivity of culture and grammar, for example, cultural emphases and speech styles affecting the evolution of grammar (assuming that culture drives grammar more than vice-versa). It also stresses the ways in which grammatical items (constructions and function morphemes) encode cultural values and meta-discursive styles, for example, 'grammatical devices in Russian expressing "emotionality," "non-rationality," "non-agentivity," and "moral passion" (Wierzbicka 1992)' (Enfield, 2002: 3).

Ethnographically observed speech is critically important since, as will be explained below, (1) the incommensurate part of AAE grammar is mostly in evidence in naturally occurring speech, (2) the social situatedness of such speech allows better for detecting camouflaged forms, and (3) camouflaged forms are much more likely to occur in such speech. Additionally, forms involved in camouflage and grammatical incommensurability typically relate to important AAE meta-discursive styles, notably directness (Spears, 2001b).

Close attention to naturally occurring speech, through participant observation, has a snowball effect in bringing new grammatical features to the linguist's attention. A tacit understanding of this fifth factor is no doubt at work in the continual calls for producing more native speaker linguists, not only of AAE but also of the languages of other disadvantaged groups.

Obstacles to Understanding AAE Grammar

To move beyond problems with approaches to studying AAE and how they are implicated in the production of shallow grammar, two principal obstacles to understanding AAE grammar can be singled out: grammatical camouflage and grammatical incommensurability.

Grammatical camouflage refers to the phenomenon whereby AAE function morphemes and other grammatical features are misinterpreted as phonologically similar or identical items occurring in non-AAE dialects. *Grammatical incommensurability* refers to aspects of the grammar of a language x (e.g. AAE) that have no counterparts in language y (e.g. non-African American dialects). An example of grammatical camouflage is a feature occurring in AAVE and AASE called stressed BIN, as in (4), (uttered with pronounced stress [and high pitch in my dialect] and referring to events that began to occur long ago and still continue). (BIN is often written with capital letters in the literature to distinguish it from the past participle *been*.) Note that the AASE sentence includes the auxiliary (*-s* < *has*), while the AAVE one does not. Stated differently, the AASE sentence segmentally conforms to other standard American English dialects, while the AAVE sentence does not. (*Segmental* refers to vowel and consonant quality, without taking into consideration prosody, i.e. intonation, pitch, tempo, rhythm, stress, etc. In transcriptions of speech, segmentals are written on the line, while suprasementals, prosodic indicators, are written above consonant and vowel symbols. *Segment* is the cover term for consonants, vowels—and, of course, glides.)

(4)   a.   He's BIN gone. (AASE)

         b.   He BIN gone. (AAVE)

              'He has been gone for a long time and is still gone.'

Segmental conformity is opposed to suprasegmental, or prosodic, conformity. Prosody includes stress. The AASE sentence, then, segmentally conforms but does not suprasegmentally conform to its counterpart sentence in non-African American standard dialects. The AAVE sentence conforms neither segmentally, having no auxiliary, nor suprasegmentally. Segmental conformity is one of a few wide-ranging processes that produce grammatical camouflage, the grammatical result of historical assimilationist pressures on African Americans, pressures that constrain AASE grammar.

        Stressed BIN, as other distinctively African American grammatical features, is highly camouflaged (Spears 1982, 1990). If features are camouflaged, they are not normally recognized by the uninitiated as AAE grammatical features; they are mistakenly assumed to be equivalent to phonemically similar or identical features of non-African American varieties, ones having different meanings and sometimes different grammatical functions. Thus, BIN in AAE, a marker of remote perfect tense, is camouflaged with respect to other American dialects and is mistaken for the past participle of *be* that occurs in all English dialects. The existence of camouflaged forms such as BIN results from (1) general societal pressures on African Americans to assimilate, pressures that are the byproduct of the subordinate position of African Americans in American society, and (2) the continuing high level of racial segregation, which was lessened but not eliminated in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s through the 1970s.

        Some speakers who typically use AASE also use AAVE features, whereas some never do, except self-consciously for some metacommunicative purpose. Thus, the two forms of AAE exist separately, though some speakers deploy both varieties.

        One of the main factors leading to shallow grammar is the insufficient attention that linguists often pay to the incommensurability of grammars: languages and dialects have significant numbers of grammatical features that have no analogs in related languages and

dialects. As Dell Hymes, the eminent anthropological linguist, once put it, most of language begins where universals leave off (Hymes, 1974). The neglect of incommensurability stems significantly from widespread Chomskyan universals-oriented approaches to the grammars of languages. Linguists often take to the study of language a set of investigative predispositions based on (1) received theories and the questions they privilege, (2) received methodologies, and (3) received inventories of human language grammatical features, all of which contribute to their overlooking of important grammatical features in the languages they study. Consequently, they fail to find what they have not been open to discovering. Perhaps, the scholars most susceptible to the factors leading to shallow grammar are those who study nonstandard (vernacular) dialects of European languages and the creoles in whose genesis those European languages played a part.

Disapproval markers (DMs), which express varying degrees of negative evaluation, mostly disapproval and indignation, offer an excellent illustration of both grammatical camouflage and grammatical incommensurability. The semi-auxiliary *come* is one in a group of four; the others are *gone, gone-come,* and *be done* (the last in one of its three uses) (Spears, 1990, 2006b). The DM *come* expresses strong disapproval or indignation. Consider example (5a):

(5)   a.   He come (came) walking in the door.

(Remember that parentheses indicate another variant.) The *come* in this AAE sentence might be the familiar motion verb or the *come* of strong disapproval or indignation, unique to AAE. Segmentally (i.e. without taking prosody into account), there is no way to tell which item *come* is. In other sentences, however, the *come* can only be the disapproval marker (DM) *come* because the familiar motion verb cannot occur in the same context, e.g.:

         b.   She come (DM) being all friendly with me, after she been talking about me
                   behind my back.
                   'She had the nerve to be (act) all friendly with me… .'

(For simplicity's sake, I will not notice further variation involving the form *come*.) Note that *come,* the motion verb, cannot immediately precede a form of *be* thus, the ungrammaticality of **He came being all friendly to my door…, They came being well-dressed to my door… .* Note also, that *come* the motion verb cannot precede itself: **He come coming up to me.* However, we do get:

         c.   He come (DM) coming (MOTION VERB) up to me with all that fool talk…
                   'He had the nerve to come up to me…'

Note also that in some dialects of AAVE, the DM *come* is followed by a bare verb,

(6)   a.   She come (DM) come up to me with all that fool talk… .
                   'She had the nerve to come up to me with all that fool talk… .'
         b.   He come (DM) tell me I ain't got no sense.
                   'He had the nerve to tell me I ain't got no sense.'

Thus, in the case of the DM *come,* there are three degrees, so to speak, of camouflage. The first, involves sentences of the type in (7), the second sentences of the type in (8), and the third sentences of the type (9), which has the standard Simple Past verb form of the homophonous motion verb:

(7)   *come* (DM) V (bare verb)
(8)   *come* (DM) V+ing

(9)   *came* (DM) V+ing

In an instance of the first degree, example (7), the DM *come* can indeed be misinterpreted as the familiar motion verb of non-African American dialects; however, there is never segmental conformity with non-African American standards. With the second degree, there can be segmental conformity with non-African American nonstandard (but not standard) dialects, as in example (5a), if the *come* is used, which is homophonous with the nonstandard Simple Past verb form of the motion verb *come*. The third degree of camouflage is present when the pattern in (9) occurs, with *came,* which is homophonous with the standard Simple Past verb form of the motion verb. (Observe that for most AASE and AAVE speakers, the DM is uninflectable. A tiny minority of AASE speakers treat the DM as inflecting like the motion verb for tense: *Every time I see them, they come* (DM) PRESENT TENSE *badmouthing me* vs. *He came* (DM) PAST TENSE *telling me I was crazy*.)

Thus, the semi-auxiliary DM *come* (Spears 1982, 1990) is camouflaged in a number of grammatical contexts. It is easy to overlook it if one is not looking for it. Moreover, *come*, other DMs, other function words distinctive to AAE, and other distinctive grammatical features are quite unlike anything found in other dialects of English; it is in this sense that they are part of the incommensurable grammar of AAE. Grammatical incommensurability, it must be remembered, is an objective linguistic fact, but it takes on importance as a phenomenon owing to researchers' motives, predispositions, theoretical orientations, and ideological baggage, all of which make them insensitive or less sensitive to the incommensurate part of AAE grammar.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussions contain several implications for linguists and educators. Focusing on the former, I should note that most linguists do not deal with variation—inherent variation, present in the speech of all groups and in the speech of all individual speakers. Variation is principally the province of sociolinguists, anthropological linguists, and dialectologists. (These specialties have significant overlapping concerns, but their theories and methodologies are not fully equivalent.)

Above I have emphasized the existence of two major dialect clusters of AAE: AAVE and AASE. Observe, however, that within each of these two clusters there is much diversity. Some AAE speakers use regularly only one or two distinctively black grammatical features (DBGFs). Some speakers' AAE is such only on the basis of prosodic features—intonation, volume, tempo, rhythm, etc.—or the use of distinctive AAE vocabulary.

All sociolinguists know that there are no two speakers of a dialect who speak it exactly the same way. Each individual has her/his own personal *idiolect,* the term sociolinguists use. It must be stressed that this general sociolinguistic principle concerning idiolects applies to AAE speakers too. Each AAE speaker has his own idiolect of AAE. We do not want to overstress the diversity within AAE, but we do not want to understress it either. So, for example, teachers must not assume that they will find all or most of the grammatical features commonly discussed in the AAE literature among their AAE-speaking students. Teachers should be aware of all the features

of AAVE that they may encounter but focus on those they actually do encounter and use them to guide their teaching.

Educators must also keep in mind the importance of linguistic training for teachers—all teachers—because all deal to some extent with language arts. A great shortcoming of language arts teacher education especially is not requiring future teachers to have a grounding in core linguistics (grammar, including the study of sounds/ pronunciation) and sociolinguistics (the influence of society and culture on language).

To turn to all linguists as a group, I must emphasize that where there is unawareness of or a diminished sensitivity to grammatical camouflage and grammatical incommensurability, these linguists are more likely to produce shallow grammars and advance unsupportable claims based on them. (Note that all linguists are trained to carry out research on grammatical description and theory.) With such claims may come beliefs and claims that the languages of some oppressed peoples (e.g. creole speakers and AAE speakers) are simpler than those of their oppressors.

All linguists must be required to master the fundamentals of language in society and culture so that they will never embarrass the discipline by making uninformed statements about the grammatical adequacy or deficient simplicity of languages and dialects spoken by disenfranchised peoples.

Claims of greater grammatical simplicity do not logically imply inferiority. Nevertheless, taken within the context of white supremacist ideology as it dehumanizes exploited peoples of color and their languages, these claims become for all practical purposes supports for the debasement and exploitation of the speakers of these languages. Shallow grammar, then, seen in this light, becomes not simply a linguistic problem but a political one as well.

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Appendix: Some AAVE Auxiliaries

These auxiliaries express primarily tense, mood, and aspect. All three are complex concepts; however, a basic explanation of terms is included in the chart. The disapproval markers all have different meanings, which are too complex to differentiate here.

Auxiliary	Name	Meaning	Occurrence in Creoles	Occurrence in Other American English Dialects
be	invariant habitual *be*	habitual aspect – expresses a situation in effect, either repeated or continuing, over a significantly long period of time, as determined by social context	-	-
She think she be knowin 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* He be at Fred house *He's normally/ always/etc. at Fred's house*				
BIN [usually written thus]	stressed BIN	remote perfect – expresses a situation that began a long time ago and continues to the present	-	-
She BIN married *She has been married a long time and still is* I BIN know him *I've known him a long time* I BIN knowin him (= preceding example) *I've known him a long time* I BIN working on this paper *I've been working on this paper a long time*				
been [used by a small percentage of AAVE speakers]	unstressed *been*	anterior marker – similar to a past tense marker, but it marks past or past before the past (pluperfect) situations	+	-

But everybody thought she been had that house for years				
But everybody thought that she had had that house for years				
Somebody been broke the window				
Somebody broke the window				
I been know your name (Fasold (1981: 173)				
I knew your name (before/already)				
Larry been gone when I come (Mufwene 1994: 19)				
Larry had gone when I came				
I been sleeping when you come (Mufwene 1994: 19)				
I was sleeping when you came				
done	perfect *done*, auxiliary *done*	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	+ (however, its semantic range is different in subtle ways)	+ (its semantic range is most likely subtly different)
I done forgot my hat				
I've forgotten my hat				
He done told your game				
He sure exposed you				
STAY [written thus]	stressed *stay*	frequentative, iterative aspect – expresses a situation that occurs repeatedly and frequently	-	-
She STAY at Grandma house.				
She is frequently at Grandma's house				
He STAY flossin				
He is always well dressed				
gone (also *go*)	disapproval marker *gone,* past *gone*	disapproval (mood) marker – expresses the speaker's negative evaluation of a situation expressed by the sentence in which it occurs	+	-
Now why he go act like that				
Now why did he act like that				
And he gone raise the damn window				

And he had the nerve to raise the damn window				
come	*come* of indignation (or strong disapproval)	disapproval (mood) marker	+	-
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…*				
gone-come [the combination of the two is not a simple combination of the meanings of each]	*gone-come*	disapproval (mood) marker [treated as one bimorphemic word]	+	-
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…*				
be done (Baugh 1983*)	disapproval *be done* [to be distinguished from the other two *be done*s]	disapproval (mood) marker, also expresses a rapid reaction of the clause subject to the dis-approved situation	-	-
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*				

*The tense properties of *be done* were first observed in print by Baugh (1983); the modal semantic properties by Spears (1985).
(Sources: Baugh 1983; Spears 1980, 1982, <u>1985,</u> 1990, 2000, 2006a, To appear, unless otherwise indicated)